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Cooper leads Whatley in new polls as NC voters sour on economy

A new Opinion Diagnostics poll shows Democrat Roy Cooper with a 9-point lead over Republican Michael Whatley in the race for the state's open U.S. Senate seat as other polls indicate increased restlessness over the economy among the state's voters.

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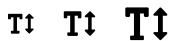
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By WRAL News staff reports



Democrat Roy Cooper continues to lead Republican Michael Whatley in the race for North Carolina's open U.S. Senate seat in new polls that indicate broader support for Democrats in other races across the state as economic sentiment sours.

Cooper led Whatley 50.4% to 41.4%, with 8.2% undecided, in a head-to-head poll released Wednesday by Opinion Diagnostics, a Boston-based polling company run by political advisors to Republican politicians in Massachusetts and North Carolina. The group surveyed about 830 North Carolina voters between April 21 and 24. The margin of error was about 3.5 percentage points.

Recent polling from High Point University, meanwhile, found Cooper leading Whatley 50% to 42%, with 6% undecided and 2% favoring another candidate. The race to replace outgoing Republican Sen. Thom Tillis will also feature Libertarian Shannon Bray. The High Point poll, which surveyed 800 registered voters between March 26 and April 6.

Both polls were in line with a [Catawba College poll](#) released in March that showed Cooper leading Whatley by 14 points — 48% to 34% — among likely voters, including voters who initially said they were undecided but lean toward a candidate. A [survey](#) released April 2 by Elon University, meanwhile, showed stronger name recognition and favorability for Cooper compared with Whatley.

Cooper's name recognition benefits from his long career in public office, serving as a state senator and later attorney general before his two terms as governor from 2017 to 2025.

Whatley, a longtime lobbyist and political insider who led the Republican National Committee, hasn't run for office prior to this election cycle. But he was endorsed by President Donald Trump in the GOP primary to succeed Tillis, and he cruised to an easy victory among the party base last month.

"There is still a long way to go in this race," Opinion Diagnostics said in its analysis of the poll. "While Cooper begins with a clear advantage, it likely reflects the current political environment and his time in public office, rather than a fully defined contest. A high-intensity campaign for and against both candidates could significantly reshape the race."

Republicans are expected to spend big in North Carolina this year to hammer Cooper's image and elevate Whatley's profile. The Senate Leadership Fund, a political action committee focused on electing Republicans to the U.S. Senate, plans to spend at least \$71 million to help Whatley's campaign. It plans to spend the money on ads that attack Cooper and boost Whatley.

Democrats see the state as one of several opportunities to flip from red to blue this November. Republicans currently hold a 53-47 Senate majority, so Democrats need to flip four seats to retake the chamber. They're eyeing North Carolina in addition to Maine, Alaska, Texas and possibly others. To that end, the Democrat-focused Senate Majority PAC told WRAL this month that it also plans to spend millions in 2026 to support Cooper's effort.

Winning over unaffiliated voters, who make up the biggest voting bloc in the state, is critical in close North Carolina races. The Opinion Diagnostics poll shows Cooper winning unaffiliated voters by 16 points.

Political analysts will be watching to see if middle-of-the-road voters are swayed by messaging that paints Cooper as more liberal as he was perceived when he was governor, or if Whatley benefits from his association with Trump, whose approval ratings have fallen.

"The big question in this race is simply going to be: what do people care more about?" said Patrick Sebastian, an Opinion Diagnostics partner.

In recent months, Cooper and Whatley have sought to [focus on economic issues](#) — particularly affordability. Sebastian said that candidates who focus on cost-of-living topics are likely to be rewarded. He predicted tax rates — particularly property taxes — would take center stage in other races.

"This is most likely going to be the key issue in our 2026 midterm elections," Sebastian said, "from the federal to the state level to the county level."

Support for Trump softens

Respondents to recent polls indicated softening support for Trump in North Carolina — particularly as opinions about the economy sour.

Trump carried North Carolina each time he ran for president, winning most recently in 2024 with 51% of the vote. About 43% of the respondents to the Opinion Diagnostics poll said they approve of the job Trump is doing, while 54% disapprove.

In the High Point poll, 42% of respondents approved of the way Trump is handling the job, while 55% disapproved and 4% were unsure. In the recent poll, fewer respondents were undecided and more were disapproving than a similar High Point poll in January. The January poll showed that 41% approved of the way Trump was handling the job, 48% disapproved, and 11% were unsure.

Approval of Trump's handling of the economy in general — including over gas prices, international trade, tariffs, inflation and worker protections — declined since January, according to the High Point polls. Trump saw improvement in tax policy and mixed grades on immigration. About 51% of respondents to the recent High Point poll disapproved of Trump's handling of military action in Iran, in line with the Elon poll.

If the election for president were today, 46% of likely voters who responded to the High Point poll said they'd vote for a Democrat, while 44% said they'd vote for a Republican and 8% said they weren't sure or would stay home. 50% of respondents who identified as likely voters voted for Trump in 2024.

Stein, other races

Democrats appeared to be favored in other races, according to recent polls. In a generic ballot for Congressional races, Democrats led by 9 points with 11% undecided. Recent special-election wins by Democrats in Georgia, Florida and Texas have emboldened national political groups to [invest in North Carolina](#) candidates with the hopes of flipping at least one Republican-held seat.

Generic ballots for governor and attorney general also favored Democrats. Those positions are currently held by Democrats.

The Opinion Diagnostics Poll found that 48% of respondents approve of the job Gov. Josh Stein is doing, while 35% disapproved. That's down from a September 2025 poll that showed Stein with an approval rating of 54% and 23% disapproving. Stein flexed bipartisan muscles during his first year in office, helping to approve disaster relief funding and voicing support for Republican-backed efforts to crack down on cellphones in schools.

"He absolutely had a really strong honeymoon," Sebastian said. "That's going down a little bit, but still being a plus-13 in this political environment is pretty solid."

The Republican-led state legislature also saw a decrease in approval — 29% approve of the job state lawmakers are doing, down from 31% approval in September. The poll found 42% disapprove of the job legislators are doing, up from 39% in September. The declines for lawmakers were driven largely by Republican and unaffiliated voters, data shows.

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