

PA PAC Questionnaire for N. C. General Assembly Candidates - 2018

Please return this completed form along with your resume or a brief biographical statement describing your education, work history, community service, and prior political experience as soon as possible, but by **March 9**, at the latest.

You may e-mail your responses to Tom Miller at tom-miller1@nc.rr.com or you may send a printed copy of your responses to Durham PA-PAC c/o Tom Miller, 1110 Virginia Avenue, Durham, NC 27705

Please note that following the March 9 deadline, the Durham People's Alliance PAC may publish your responses to this questionnaire and your resume.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire and your willingness to serve the people of Durham.

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When responding to this questionnaire, type your answers in italics, bold, or a different font to distinguish your answers from the questions. Please do not use colors. You may explain your answer to every question, but please be concise. If possible, limit your answer to each question to no more than 350 words. If you use words or ideas from another person, please attribute your source.

Why You Are Running

1. Of all the issues confronting the State of North Carolina which single issue is most important to you and why? What would you do about it if you are elected?

Gerrymandering is the single most important issue, as it is profoundly undemocratic, and leads to less competent government. Once removed, a competitive marketplace for ideas will gradually lead to improved policy – in some cases compromises, in many cases, solutions we have not yet considered. Durham is fortunate to have had highly competent government under Mayor Bill Bell despite not having competitive general elections. But, this outcome will not be sustained forever, and it is important to the city for there to be a two-party system. The record of the state legislature under both parties speaks for itself.

I believe it is critical for centrist voters like myself to become active in both parties, both to pull them toward the center, and to pressure them to create a redistricting commission whose charge is to maximize the competitiveness of Congressional and legislative races.

Politics and Voting Rights

2. Do you support or oppose placing state legislative and U. S. Congressional redistricting in the hands of a non-partisan commission?

Support. Democracy is the political analog of a free market economy. It only functions when there is competition. Gerrymandering is the antithesis of democratic competition. When the electorate is placed into districts in which the outcome is pre-ordained, then the only votes that count are those motivated to participate in the dominant party's primary, and this group is highly unrepresentative. Furthermore, the resulting government ends up being arbitrary and uninterested in creative and well-thought-out solutions. It also attracts a lower caliber of political candidate. The result is chaos and incompetence, both in Raleigh and Washington.

The Environment

3. Should state agencies charged with the management and protection of our environment have the authority to make standards and rules which exceed federal standards?

Yes. There is no reason to view federal standards as an upper bound; rather, they are a lower bound. Federal standards rarely are based on upper bound estimates of damages from activities that cause environmental harm (or negative externalities, as economists would put it); moreover, it is quite possible that patterns of population density and the nature of the ecosystem in parts of North Carolina would be such that the federal standards would understate damage here.

4. Has the state created laws and regulations adequate to protect North Carolinians from the potential harmful impacts of fracking?

I think the answer must be NO because very little has been created. But, I'm not an expert on the health consequences of fracking and haven't read the epidemiological literature, and would need to do so before taking a stand as to whether additional laws and regulations are needed.

5. What tools would you support in the clean up of GenX, coal ash, and other pollutants in the state's streams, lakes, estuaries and sounds, and water supplies?

The standard response by economists is that polluters should be taxed an amount equal to the marginal value of the damage they create. But, that only related to pollution flows. As for clean-up of already damaged bodies of water, I would support public efforts to clean up the bodies to the point where additional expenditures yielded estimated benefits of equal or greater value. I would also strongly support efforts at cost recovery from the original sources of pollution.

Educating Our Children

6. What measures, if any, do you believe are necessary to improve public education in North Carolina?

This is a difficult question. Viewed from a distance, NC schools appear to be underfunded in terms of teacher salaries, provision of books and materials, and support for extracurricular activities. At the same time, education spending can become a bottomless pit if it is not carefully monitored.

I support charter schools but am acutely aware of their potential for cream-skimming...that is, attracting students who can be educated relatively inexpensively, while discouraging those who, generally through no fault of their own, are costly to educate. I am a big believer in experimentation and – if the field is truly level – competition. Both charter and non-charter schools can be used for experiments, but these need to be carefully designed, with “control” schools and pre-determined measures of performance.

The school evaluation system that now exists does not account for varying cost in educating different types of students, so one ends up with a fraudulent system that rewards already well-to-do systems full of children who are relatively easy to educate. There are ways to handle this – there is lots of research in this area – but there needs to be a commitment by the State Legislature to do so in an unbiased fashion.

Healthcare

7. Are you satisfied with the current system of providing healthcare to North Carolina residents? Explain. If you are not satisfied, what changes would you make?

Health care in North Carolina, as in most of the United States, is a point of shame. Americans live shorter, unhealthier lives than do our peers in developed countries. At the same time, we pay far more for health care than those in other rich countries. What this means in effect is that those who are fortunate – to be wealthy, to live near good hospitals and clinics – have the best care in the world, while others not far away have conditions characteristic of, at best, middle-income countries. This is apparent in North Carolina as well: life expectancy at birth for white residents of Chatham County is nearly 84 years, while for white residents of Robeson County it is under 75 years...and just over 72 years for Robeson’s black residents. www.schs.state.nc.us/data/lifexpectancy/2014-2016/2016%20State%20and%202014-2016%20County%20Life%20Expectancies%20at%20birth.html In other words, Chatham County residents have the same life expectancy as citizens of Japan (#1 in the world) while Robeson County residents are comparable to the citizens of Libya or El Salvador. It is crazy that we tolerate this – and crazier still that our legislature and previous governor declare that obvious health improving measure like extending Medicaid are “too expensive.”

Ultimately, health improvements require a free, basic health care system that is available to all, paid for by general government revenues. Supplemental private insurance should then be available for purchase on top of that. A viable goal for North Carolina is to catch up to the poorest Canadian province within 10 years.

Incidentally, while it represented an improvement in many respects, the ACA (Obamacare) is deeply flawed. In particular, it represented an additional tax on young, working Americans and a large subsidy for their parents. A more equitable system from an inter-generational perspective would be to have universal healthcare coverage financed in large part by taxes on wealth and inheritance. Not holding my breath for that, though...

State Revenues

8. Is the current system of state and local taxes and fees fair and adequate to meet the needs of North Carolina residents? What changes should be made, if any? Please cite specific examples.

The current system is not wildly unfair, though my sense is that some of the exemptions are aimed at coddling special interests rather than working people (for example, as I understand it, the sales tax cap does not apply to mobile homes, though it does apply to pleasure boats). The bigger issue is that the federal tax reform is likely to have large, negative consequences for North Carolina state government revenue, and that needs to be addressed. These are very complex topics.

I tend to favor progressive income taxes, property taxes, and inheritance taxes over sales taxes. I am also concerned about the tax burden facing young adults, who often have large debts and few assets. It seems to me that they have been the victims of both Democratic and Republican tax and health plans at the national level in recent years. However, productivity growth is associated with an influx of skilled, educated young adults – it is in North Carolina’s interest to design a tax system that is attractive to this group.

9. State and local governments provide substantial economic incentives for corporations to relocate to North Carolina or to expand their operations in the state. What is your position on the use of economic incentives for private business?

*I wouldn’t say “never” but generally this is a bad idea if aimed at **specific** businesses. Job and wealth creation is largely driven by thriving small businesses that grow, and these never get the sort of favorable breaks that large corporations do. Government should not be in the job of picking winners. Improved infrastructure and education for all, and generally business-friendly environments will be a better way of ensuring state economic growth. The exceptions to this statement would be when it can be demonstrated (by an objective rather than cherry-picking, biased analysis) that a project will generate more benefits than costs, and especially if it were to do so in a depressed area in a way that will hire local people who are currently unemployed or outside the labor market.*

Civil Rights

10. Would you support legislation designed to protect gay, lesbian, and transgender people from discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodation, and access to government benefits and services?

Yes

Crime, Law Enforcement, Courts and Racial Justice

11. What, if anything, should be done about gun violence and the proliferation of guns in North Carolina?

Longer waiting periods and background checks seem worth considering. More critically, I would push for the free market solution of making weapons’ producers legally liable for damages caused by their products. This will lead to the emergence of insurance markets (makers won’t sell guns to people who do not have liability insurance), and that in turn will lead to additional features like fingerprint locks and seller-mandated background checks. Guns are like

automobiles in many respects: if car manufacturers and drivers faced no liabilities, we would have far fewer vehicle safety features.

It is also important to understand that gun violence is concentrated in certain regions, so that a one-size-fits-all set of rules is likely inappropriate. Just as teenagers on farms can get restricted driving licenses in most states, restricting rural teenagers' access to guns to solve a largely urban problem will do little or no good.

12. Should state and local government law enforcement agencies have the discretion to decide the extent to which they cooperate with U. S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement with regard to detainees and programs such as Secure Communities and the 287(g) program?

Yes

I should add that I am a strong supporter of creating a path to residence legalization and ultimately citizenship for DACA "dreamers."

13. Do you support or oppose the recent statutory changes that discourage North Carolina judges from waiving court fines and fees for indigent defendants? Why or why not?

Oppose: it is unethical to differentially penalize people for being poor. It is also inefficient: anything that increases the likelihood of chronic destitution is going to end up costing the state money.

14. At times, both political parties have suggested moving from the election of judges to some form of "merit selection". What do you believe is the best way to select independent and qualified judges?

There are problems with electing judges, but "merit selection" as it would be implemented by either major political party seems like an even worse idea. I would also note that reduced gerrymandering is likely to result in an increased pool of judges seeking office.

Yes or No

15. Please answer the following questions by circling (or underlining) YES or NO. You may explain or qualify your answer to any question, but *please use no more than 40 words.*

a. Should North Carolina voters have to present some sort of identification in order to vote?

YES or **NO**

There is no evidence of massive fraud – or virtually any fraud. Maximizing citizen participation ultimately will maximize the quality of candidates from both parties.

b. Do you support increased state funding for a crisis pregnancy center?

YES or **NO**

c. Should North Carolina have a paid sick leave law?

YES or NO

d. Should cities and counties have the authority to use inclusionary zoning to promote affordable housing?

YES or NO

There is ample potential for abuse in this area, but we need to rely on a competitive electoral system to remove politicians who go too far.

e. Should cities and counties have the authority to control rents to promote affordable housing?

YES or NO

This is not only inefficient, it also represents confiscation of property, in effect.

f. Do you support or oppose requiring a supermajority city council vote in re-zoning cases when qualified neighbors file a protest petition?

YES or NO

I believe zoning rules should be set at the local level, so I can't answer yes or no to this. It's very difficult to balance the interests of intensely-affected neighborhoods with those of a broader region, especially when the neighborhoods may have a different demographic make-up than the broader region.

g. Under what circumstances should polluters be exempt from fines and civil penalties imposed by the state?

YES or NO

This isn't a yes or no question as phrased. The standard economic principle is that polluters should be liable for the costs of damages they impose on others. But, that is a static principle. If someone moves into a new structure next door and complains of odors emanating from a longstanding farm, then it seems reasonable to argue that the property (and pollution) rights lie with the farmer. And, moreover, the famed Coase Theorem suggests that the parties themselves will design an efficient outcome. But, none of this is related to damage done to longstanding, unsuspecting parties – in that case, there should be no exemption.

h. Should magistrates or other government officials be excused from performing their lawful duties because of their religious beliefs?

YES or NO

Probably not. I haven't thought this through carefully enough to make a blanket statement. But when applied to non-heterosexual marriage that does not violate state law, religious belief does not seem to override the state interest in promoting marriage that reduces the state's liabilities (since married couples take care of each other in ways that reduce government transfer and services' costs).

i. Should the death penalty in North Carolina be abolished?

YES or NO

Probably yes, because there seems to be some evidence that mistakes have been made, and executing an innocent person is a crime against humanity. Executing the mentally ill or otherwise impaired also strikes me as unethical. If we do keep the death penalty, I'd advocate extending it to certain white collar crimes and mandating that a certain proportion of executions be for white collar crimes. Just because the victims may not have been individually targeted does not mean that white collar crimes – willful violation of environmental safety laws, or massive fraud, for example – do not destroy many more lives. And economic theory suggests that the deterrent effect would be greater in these cases. To be honest, if powerful people had even the slightest notion they might be at risk, I think that the death penalty would disappear in all but the most egregious cases.

j. Do you support the Jordan Lake and Falls Lake rules?

YES or NO

Concerning You

16. Have you ever been convicted of any criminal offence other than a minor traffic offense? Have you ever been charged with a felony (without regard to the disposition of the charge)? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, please describe the charge or charges, the circumstances, and the outcome. **NO**

17. For whom did you vote in the 2012 and 2016 general presidential elections?

- Barack Obama
- Hillary Clinton

These choices may seem odd for a Republican candidate. However, both – especially Clinton – were the overwhelming choices of economists, the tribe with which I identify most strongly.

Thank you and please don't forget to send us your resume or biographical statement.

Biographical Statement

Charles Becker has been a resident of Durham since 2003 and works as a Research Professor of Economics at Duke University. He teaches urban and real estate economics among other topics: his favorite course focuses on the economic development of and real estate market in Durham. He has many research areas: of particular relevance is his interest in manufactured housing and trailer parks, and their role in meeting affordable housing needs. For 7 years he directed the American Economic Association's Summer Program aimed at increasing minority representation in academe and research positions in economics and related areas.

Becker has lived in all four time zones, is married, and has two adult sons. He is a fan of the Durham Bulls, Duke football, country music, and bicycling, and is a reasonably avid vegetable gardener. He reads trashy crime novels and spy thrillers in Russian for relaxation.