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The GOP candidate quality problem has a name: Michael Whatley

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The last week has seen a bevy of bad news for the GOP with regard to 2026's Senate contests. The Cook Political Report shifted Iowa and Texas to toss-up status. President Donald Trump's national approval rating sits at 33% according to *Reuters/Ipsos* polling. Nate Silver now gives Democrats a 51% chance of retaking the Senate.

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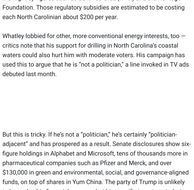
Where did it all go wrong? Ignore the historical trends about the first midterm elections of an administration and consider that one big problem appears to be unvetted candidates who mostly got their nods off the back of personal loyalty to Trump.

North Carolina is ground zero for this predicament. There, **Michael Whatley**, Trump's handpicked choice to replace retiring Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC), is struggling. The former Republican National Committee and North Carolina GOP chairman is running 8.5 percentage points behind Democratic former Gov. Roy Cooper, according to *RealClearPolitics*. But what's hurting Whatley isn't just stubborn inflation and voters tiring of Trump. It's his own resume. While Whatley has been in line with Trump on the question of post-2020 "election security," he hasn't exactly been a MAGA policy stalwart overall.

As North Carolina GOP chairman, Whatley aggressively pushed for COVID-19 prisoner releases, lining up with the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union. He also aggressively pushed mail-in voting and personally defended it. In **July 2020, his state party mailed out absentee ballot request forms**, urging target voters to vote early. Neither the **2020** nor the **2023** state party platform, both adopted on his watch, contains language opposing North Carolina's no-excuse absentee voting law. At the RNC, he became one of the party's loudest advocates for early and mail-in voting: **"Do I care how they vote? No, I do not,"** he told reporters. The RNC's "Bank Your Vote" program, built out under his leadership, has normalized the very voting methods Trump himself distrusts.


President Donald Trump watches while Republican Senate candidate Michael Whatley speaks to the troops on Friday, Feb. 13, 2026, in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. (AP Photo/Matt Kenney)

Whatley, who started off in 1984 as a volunteer with Sen. Jesse Helms's reelection campaign, later joining 2000 Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush's Florida recount team and becoming his deputy assistant secretary at the Energy Department, came to the North Carolina gig after a career as a Senate staffer and as a lobbyist.

Having worked as chief of staff to former Sen. Elizabeth Dole, who, like Tillis, hewed to the left of the party on green energy, it was perhaps no surprise that Whatley subsequently became an energy lobbyist who advocated a boatload of green energy causes. But while that might have sold in the 2006-2008 incarnation of the GOP, the 2026 edition is different. Tillis found this out when he decided to oppose Republicans' One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which, among other things, slashed Biden-era green energy subsidies.

Lobbying disclosures show that Whatley lobbied for Exxon Mobil and General Electric while both were publicly pushing Congress for mandatory carbon caps and cap-and-trade. In 2008, he became executive vice president of the Consumer Energy Alliance. Environmentalists portray the group as a fossil-fuel front, but the CEA notably spent years pitching solar and wind on its website and praising the Obama White House's rooftop solar panels. In 2022, the **CEA said it was "pleased"** with the Inflation Reduction Act, calling then-President Joe Biden's signature climate law **"a sign of progress."** Whatley also backed regulatory ethanol subsidies that were originally advanced on environmental grounds and championed by none other than then-Sen. Barack Obama, while having been broadly opposed on the Right by figures such as Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and the Heritage Foundation. Those regulatory subsidies are estimated to be costing each North Carolinian about $200 per year.

Whatley lobbied for other, more conventional energy interests, too — critics note that his support for drilling in North Carolina's coastal waters could also hurt him with moderate voters. His campaign has used this to argue that he is "not a politician," a line invoked in TV ads debuted last month.

But this is tricky. If he's not a "politician," he's certainly "politician-adjacent" and has prospered as a result. Senate disclosures show six-figure holdings in Alphabet and Microsoft, tens of thousands more in pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer and Merck, and over $130,000 in green and environmental, social, and governance-aligned funds, on top of shares in Yum China. The party of Trump is unlikely to begrudge his financial success, but his specific investment choices may serve to raise some eyebrows.

None of this is likely where Whatley ever saw himself as a child. A childhood transplant from Michigan, he earned a master's degree in religion from Wake Forest University, then went to the University of Notre Dame for a master's in theology in 1994 and a law degree — his Wake Forest dissertation focused on "effects of Roman occupation on Judaisms of Palestine."

Whatley still remains active in his church, serving as treasurer of St. Mark's Episcopal in Gastonia, a self-described "progressive parish" more in line with the Archbishop of Canterbury than breakaway Anglican congregations.

Of course, that more establishment bio could appeal to the slices of the Right who miss steadying figures such as the Doles. There's certainly an argument to be made that the clean-up of the party in the aftermath of former Rep. Madison Cawthorn, 2024 gubernatorial nominee Mark Robinson, and Rep. Chuck Edwards's (R-NC) alleged sex scandals is overdue.

That said, a raft of North Carolina Republican detractors have criticized Whatley for failing to clean house, including where one major fundraiser convicted of sex crimes involving minors was concerned, when he was the state party chairman.

One thing in Whatley's bio that does suggest he could outperform saggy polls is his evident willingness to grind it out, even in the most trying of circumstances. Republican veterans who remember the Dole Senate office during its final few years rate Whatley's ability to work under the most hellish circumstances and to simply survive and keep going. That is certainly an asset in politics.

But overall, Whatley's record doesn't quite feel geared for the current iteration of his party, or American politics. That may commend him as a party elder for some, if not a future senator.

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