



RURAL REPRESENTATION IN N.C. ELECTION DISTRICTS

PREPARED BY
Dalton Bailey
Research & Data Manager

Rural Representation in North Carolina Election Districts

The redistricting process and shifting populations can significantly change the demographics of a given election district. One element of change to consider is the rural representation within a given district. In this brief report, the changes in rural representation of districts is investigated.

Methodology

Data for this analysis was retrieved from General Assembly statistical reports provided for all election districts. Estimates in these reports are based on the most recent population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. These reports outline the estimated number of people representing a district who live in a particular county. For example, during the 2020 elections, House District 28 was comprised of portions of two counties: Harnett and Johnston. The statistical report from the General Assembly indicates the estimated population for District 28 was 83,431 people, 5,681 who lived in Harnett County (6.8 percent) and 77,750 who lived in Johnston County (93.2 percent).

This data was combined with the NC Rural Center classification of counties to estimate rural representation for all districts. The NC Rural Center classifies counties as either rural, suburban/regional city, or urban based on county population density using the most recent Decennial Census population estimates. There are 78 rural counties with an average population density of 250 people per square mile or fewer. There are 16 suburban/regional city counties, with an average population density between 250 and 750 people per square mile. Finally, there are six urban counties, with an average population density of 750 people per square mile or more.

When these classifications are included in the analysis, an estimate of rural representation can be derived. Returning to the District 28 example, Harnett County is classified as rural and Johnston County is classified as suburban. So, our analysis would determine that 6.8 percent of the District 28 population was rural (rural representation) and 93.2 percent of the population was suburban.

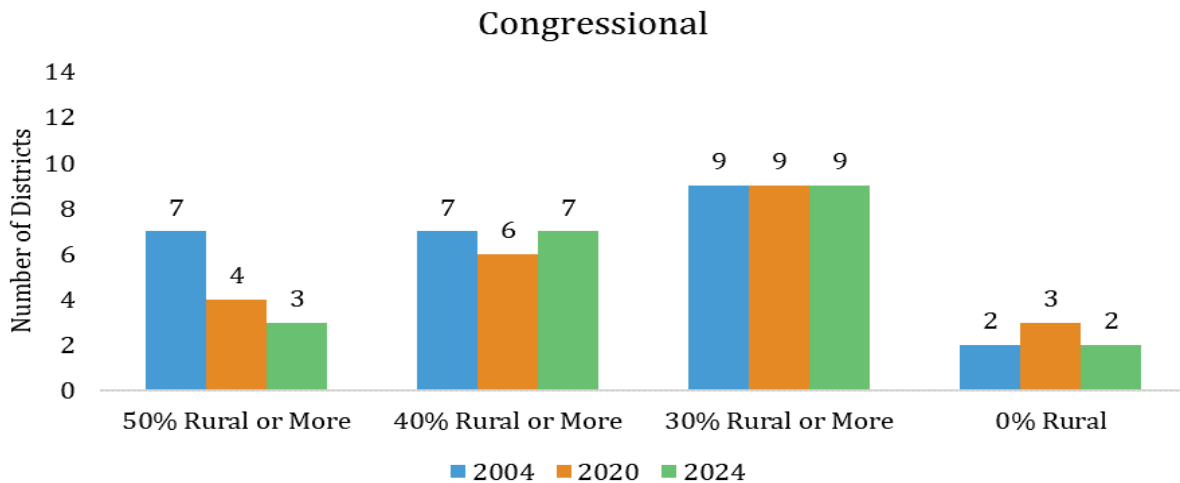
This analysis was conducted for all Congressional, state House, and state Senate districts for election years 2004, 2020 and 2024. It was determined the number of districts that had rural representation of 50 percent or more, 40 percent or more, 30 percent or more, and 0 percent and how representation changed over time.

Results

Congress

The 2024 election will have 14 congressional districts. During the 2020 and 2004 elections there were 13 election districts, but North Carolina gained a district because of its growing population. This change was first implemented in the 2022 elections. Rural representation in congressional districts has shifted, especially in the number of districts with high (50 percent or more) rural representation. During the 2004 elections, there were seven districts with high rural representation. The 2020 elections had four districts with high rural representation. For the upcoming 2024 elections, there are only three. When looking at lower levels of rural representation (40 percent or more and 30 percent or more), there was not much change. The same is true for districts with no rural representation.

Figure 1: Rural Representation for Congressional Districts

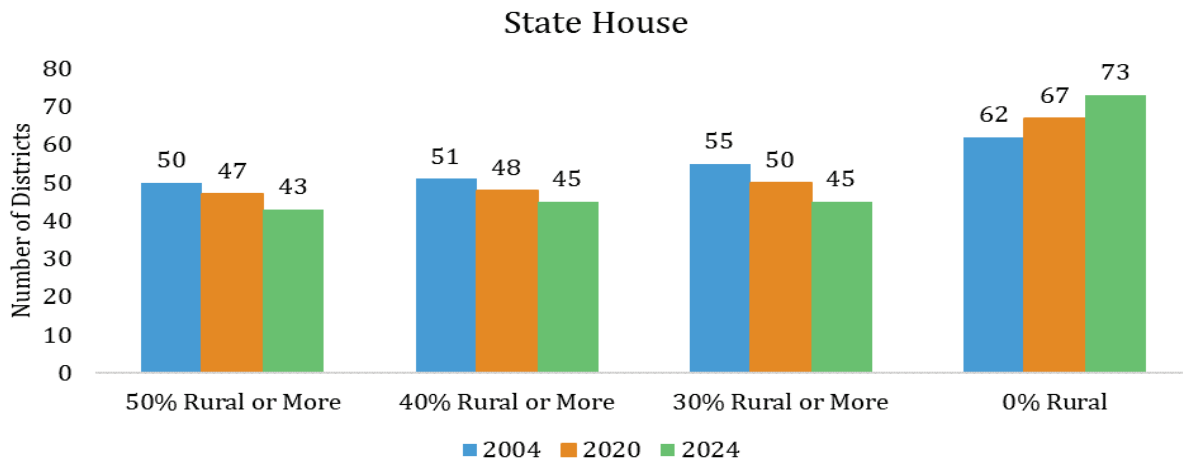


Note: There were only 13 congressional districts in the election years 2004 and 2020. There are now 14 congressional districts in the state. Comparisons between the election years should take this into consideration.

State House

There are 120 state House districts for every election year, including the upcoming 2024 election. There is a trend of decline for all levels of rural representation. In 2004, there were 50 districts with a rural majority representation. For the coming 2024 election cycle, there will be 43 such districts. There is also a growing number of House districts with no rural representation - 73 districts in 2024 will have no rural representation, an increase from 62 in 2004.

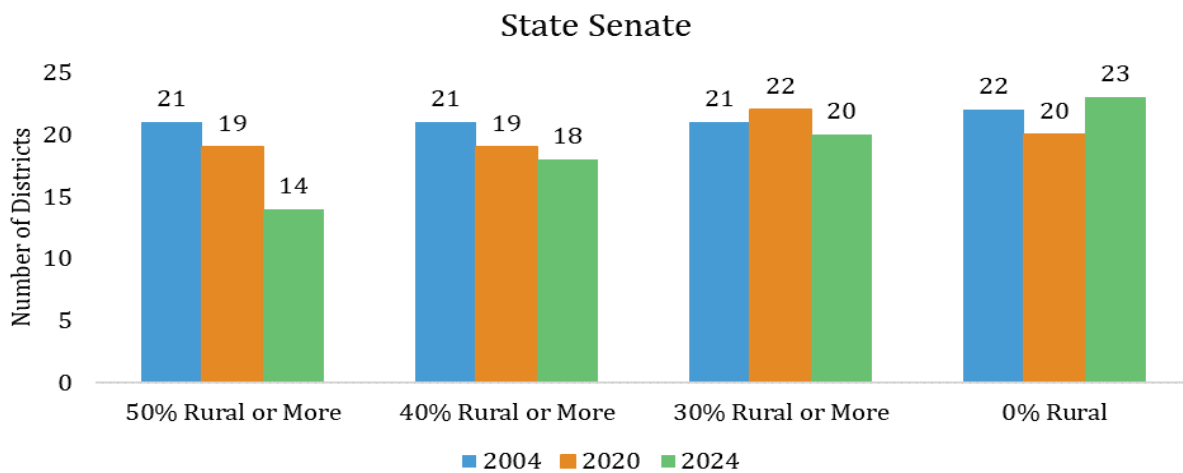
Figure 2. Rural Representation for State House Districts



State Senate

There are 50 state Senate districts every election year, including the upcoming 2024 election. There is a trend of decline in the number of districts with a population at least 50 percent rural. In the 2004 election, 21 districts were majority rural. For the upcoming election, that has declined to just 14. The decline is not as pronounced in districts that have 40 percent rural population or less.

Figure 3. Rural Representation for State Senate Districts



Discussion

These findings support the idea that rural representation in election districts is declining. There could be several factors influencing this trend. First, many rural areas are losing population while urban areas are growing. From 2010 to 2020, rural counties in North Carolina experienced an average annual population decline of -0.03 percent. Although this decline is small, during the same period suburban counties grew on average 1.25 percent and urban counties grew on average 1.92 percent.² The COVID-19 pandemic has seemingly influenced these trends. From 2020 to 2022, rural counties annually grew on average 0.82 percent, suburban counties grew on average 1.43 percent, and urban counties grew on average 1.36 percent.³

Despite this recent rural growth, suburban and urban counties are still growing at faster rates than rural counties. There are also 22 rural counties that declined in population from 2020 to 2022. Altogether, this means that a growing proportion of North Carolinians are living in urban areas. If this trend continues, more election districts could lose rural representation.

Another related factor could be redistricting. Election districts are drawn so that each one has approximately the same population. As urban areas become more populous and several rural areas lose population, it could affect how these districts are drawn. Predominantly rural districts may need to increase in size - and encompass more rural counties - to achieve a reasonable district population. This could consolidate more rural counties into fewer districts, creating a handful of “rural super districts” but diminishing rural representation in other districts.

N.C. Senate Districts 45, 46, and 47 offer an example of how this can happen. During the 2020 elections, all three of these districts were 100 percent rural. For the 2024 election, however, redistricting has altered this. Many parts of Districts 45 and 46 were redistricted to District 47, changing their rural composition significantly. While District 47 remains 100 percent rural, District 45 is now approximately 27 percent rural and District 46 is now approximately 66 percent rural. These three rural districts have largely been consolidated into one “rural super district.”

Another example of diminished rural representation is Congressional District 2. In 2004, this district was comprised of portions of nine counties: Chatham, Cumberland, Franklin, Harnett, Johnston, Lee, Nash, Sampson, Vance, and Wake. It was predominantly rural in 2004, with 51 percent of the population living in a rural county. For the 2020 elections, the district was comprised of only a portion of Wake County (100 percent urban). This district will still be

solely comprised of a portion of Wake County (100 percent urban) in 2024. Even though redistricting can affect rural representation, it is still tied to a shifting population. As a greater proportion of our state's population is found in urban centers, it could continue to diminish overall rural representation. Even if districts were redrawn with the explicit purpose to create more districts with more than 50 percent rural representation, a smaller rural population would make this much more difficult.

Sources

North Carolina General Assembly. *Legislative and Congressional Redistricting*. <https://www.ncleg.gov/Redistricting>

N.C. Office of State Budget and Management, State Demographer. *Population Growth 2010-2020*. <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/facts-figures/population-demographics/state-demographer/countystate-population-projections/population-growth-2010-2020>

U.S. Census Bureau. *County Population Totals and Components of Change: 2020-2022*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-counties-total.html>

Appendix A: Data Tables

Table 1: Congressional District Rural Representation

District	2004	2020	2024
1	91.2%	83.9%	100.0%
2	50.7%	0.0%	0.0%
3	62.9%	68.9%	49.7%
4	2.6%	22.4%	5.5%
5	60.6%	69.8%	64.6%
6	33.1%	0.0%	5.7%
7	62.5%	49.3%	44.0%
8	36.5%	32.2%	35.6%
9	0.0%	47.2%	44.5%
10	53.8%	34.5%	5.0%
11	52.3%	53.0%	48.3%
12	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
13	28.5%	38.1%	50.6%
14	NA	NA	35.5%

Table 2: State Senate District Rural Representation

District	2004	2020	2024
1	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
2	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
3	53.07%	100.00%	100.00%
4	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
5	61.18%	11.27%	22.31%
6	6.46%	5.40%	0.00%
7	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
8	100.00%	97.71%	87.31%
9	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
10	100.00%	67.07%	0.00%
11	100.00%	50.39%	100.00%
12	22.11%	92.16%	100.00%
13	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
14	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
15	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
16	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
17	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
18	58.31%	33.07%	30.75%
19	19.25%	0.00%	0.00%
20	0.00%	0.00%	37.89%
21	0.00%	25.58%	45.75%
22	100.00%	54.39%	0.00%
23	23.15%	32.19%	29.37%
24	15.23%	0.00%	100.00%
25	100.00%	100.00%	21.17%
26	54.41%	76.02%	43.01%
27	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
28	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
29	100.00%	14.58%	86.32%
30	100.00%	100.00%	20.18%



Table 2: State Senate District Rural Representation

District	2004	2020	2024
31	0.00%	21.47%	20.67%
32	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
33	0.00%	30.44%	29.85%
34	21.09%	19.41%	0.00%
35	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
36	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
37	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
38	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
39	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
40	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
41	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
42	0.00%	19.42%	0.00%
43	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
44	100.00%	52.90%	49.01%
45	100.00%	100.00%	26.66%
46	100.00%	100.00%	66.12%
47	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
48	11.40%	17.87%	41.87%
49	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
50	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 3: State House District Rural Representation

District	2004	2020	2024
1	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
2	100.00%	100.00%	43.08%
3	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
4	76.72%	74.33%	100.00%
5	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
6	63.87%	100.00%	100.00%
7	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
8	38.44%	0.00%	0.00%
9	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
10	100.00%	90.78%	100.00%
11	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
12	100.00%	77.95%	100.00%
13	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
14	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
15	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
16	28.71%	100.00%	70.75%
17	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
18	33.67%	0.00%	0.00%
19	0.00%	37.23%	50.59%
20	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
21	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
22	45.95%	100.00%	100.00%
23	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
24	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
25	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
26	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
27	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
28	26.73%	6.81%	0.00%
29	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
30	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%



Table 3: State House District Rural Representation

District	2004	2020	2024
31	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
32	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
33	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
34	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
35	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
36	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
37	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
38	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
39	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
40	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
41	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
42	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
43	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
44	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
45	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
46	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
47	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
48	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
49	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
50	36.43%	29.33%	26.35%
51	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
52	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
53	100.00%	100.00%	51.19%
54	80.08%	77.15%	100.00%
55	54.45%	35.32%	26.60%
56	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
57	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
58	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
59	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
60	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Table 3: State House District Rural Representation

District	2004	2020	2024
61	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
62	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
63	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
64	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
65	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
66	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
67	87.90%	62.93%	100.00%
68	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
69	36.02%	0.00%	0.00%
70	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
71	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
72	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
73	0.00%	50.33%	0.00%
74	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
75	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
76	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
77	0.00%	49.60%	88.19%
78	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
79	54.62%	100.00%	100.00%
80	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
81	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
82	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
83	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
84	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
85	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
86	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
87	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
88	52.07%	0.00%	0.00%
89	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
90	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%



Table 3: State House District Rural Representation

District	2004	2020	2024
91	100.00%	100.00%	53.69%
92	85.35%	0.00%	0.00%
93	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
94	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
95	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
96	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
97	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
98	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
99	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
100	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
101	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
102	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
103	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
104	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
105	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
106	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
107	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
108	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
109	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
110	29.66%	28.96%	44.56%
111	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
112	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
113	71.62%	66.10%	71.68%
114	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%
115	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
116	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
117	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
118	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
119	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
120	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

