

EDITOR'S PICK

# After midterm shellacking, SC Democrats point fingers, soul-search

BY ALEXANDER THOMPSON ATHOMPSON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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Supporters of Democrat Joe Cunningham and Annie Andrews react to results at The American Theater in Charleston on Nov. 8, 2022. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff  
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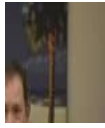
SUMMERTON – Patricia Pringle started to worry when she pulled up to the Summerton Precinct 1 polling place around 7 p.m. on election night. Outside the fire station that serves one of Clarendon County’s heavily White and Republican areas, a line of 60 to 70 people stretched out the door.

“That’s when I knew it was going to be close,” the county’s Democratic Party chair said.

When the votes were counted, despite Pringle’s months of hard work, it wasn’t close at all.

Republicans flipped a Statehouse and County Council seat there while Gov. Henry McMaster improved on his 2018 margin by 18 points in the rural, traditionally Democratic county. It was a rout.

MYRTLE BEACH NEWS



## South Carolina solicitor seeks to drum up bi-partisan support for judicial reform

BY RICHARD CAINES [RCAINES@POSTANDCOURIER.COM](mailto:RCAINES@POSTANDCOURIER.COM)

Clarendon County wasn't unique. Across the Palmetto State, Democrats took a shellacking in November's election, largely, as state data released Dec. 16 shows, because they failed to turn out Black voters, especially those in rural areas who vote overwhelmingly for Democrats.



Clarendon County Democratic Party Chair Patricia Pringle poses for a photo at the Clarendon County Administration Building in Manning on Dec. 19, 2022. On election night, she saw lines of voters at GOP-leaning districts and knew Democrats were in for a tough night. Alexander Thompson/Staff

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Republicans picked up seven state House of Representatives seats, four of which were considered upsets, relegating the party to superminority status in the lower chamber. On the same day, Joe Cunningham, the Democratic nominee for governor, pulled in 41 percent of the popular vote.

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The results, the latest in a series of disappointments in South Carolina's continued drift toward Republican election security, have compounded a sense of frustration among party members, setting off another round of finger-pointing among Democrats described as divided and directionless.

"At the end of the day, I'm responsible," South Carolina Democratic Party Chair Trav Robertson said. "We've got to go back and revamp every complete aspect from the precinct reorganization to the county parties and the role of the state party."

The party needs to find a way to hold its candidates responsible for the campaigns they run, he said.

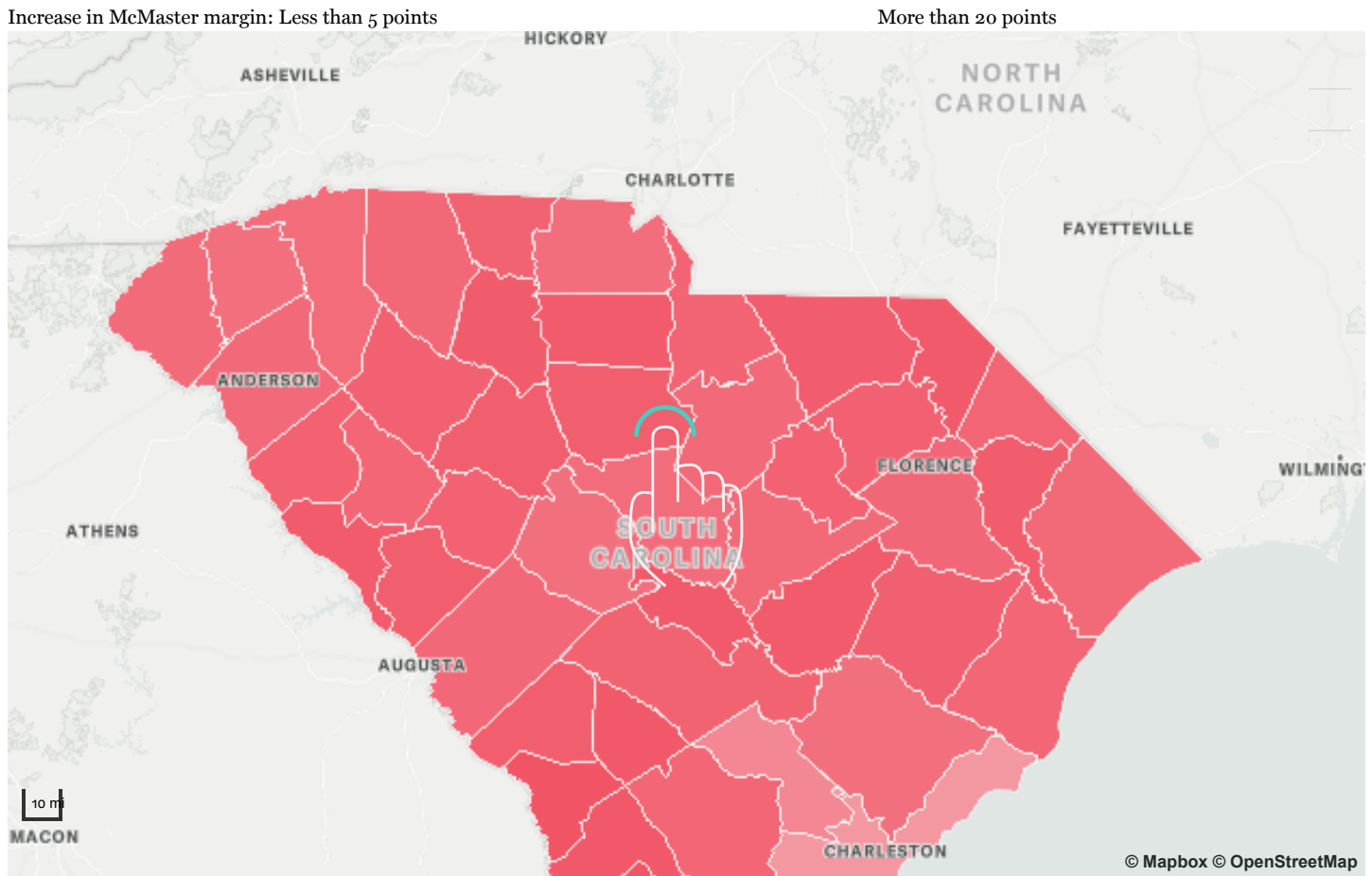
Robertson, who has served as chair since 2017, appears to retain the support of most county party chairs and operatives who say he’s done his best to modernize the party. Still, there are rumblings of discontent.

State Sen. Darrell Jackson, D-Richland, said the state party has failed to aggressively enunciate a convincing economic message to voters and a “major leadership shakeup” is required.

“If we were the USC Gamecocks or we were the Clemson Tigers, and over the last several seasons our record had been what the South Carolina Democratic Party is now, do you think the coaches would still be there?” Jackson asked.

### RED SHIFT: STATE SWINGS TOWARDS GOP IN MIDTERMS

McMaster grows his margin over Democratic challenger between 2018 and 2022.



SOURCE: RIP MEDICAL DEBT | [BRANDON LOCKETT](#) | THE POST AND COURIER

Nearly all Democrats agree they lost because they did not turn out Black voters, their base. This year, about 35 percent of nonwhite voters cast ballots, while 51 percent of White voters cast ballots, meaning nonwhite voters represented 22.7 percent of the electorate, according to S.C. Election Commission data released Dec.

16. Thirty percent of the Palmetto State's registered voters are nonwhite and nonwhite people made up 34.5 percent of the state's population in the 2020 census. In 2018 and 2020, 28 percent of the South Carolina electorate was nonwhite.

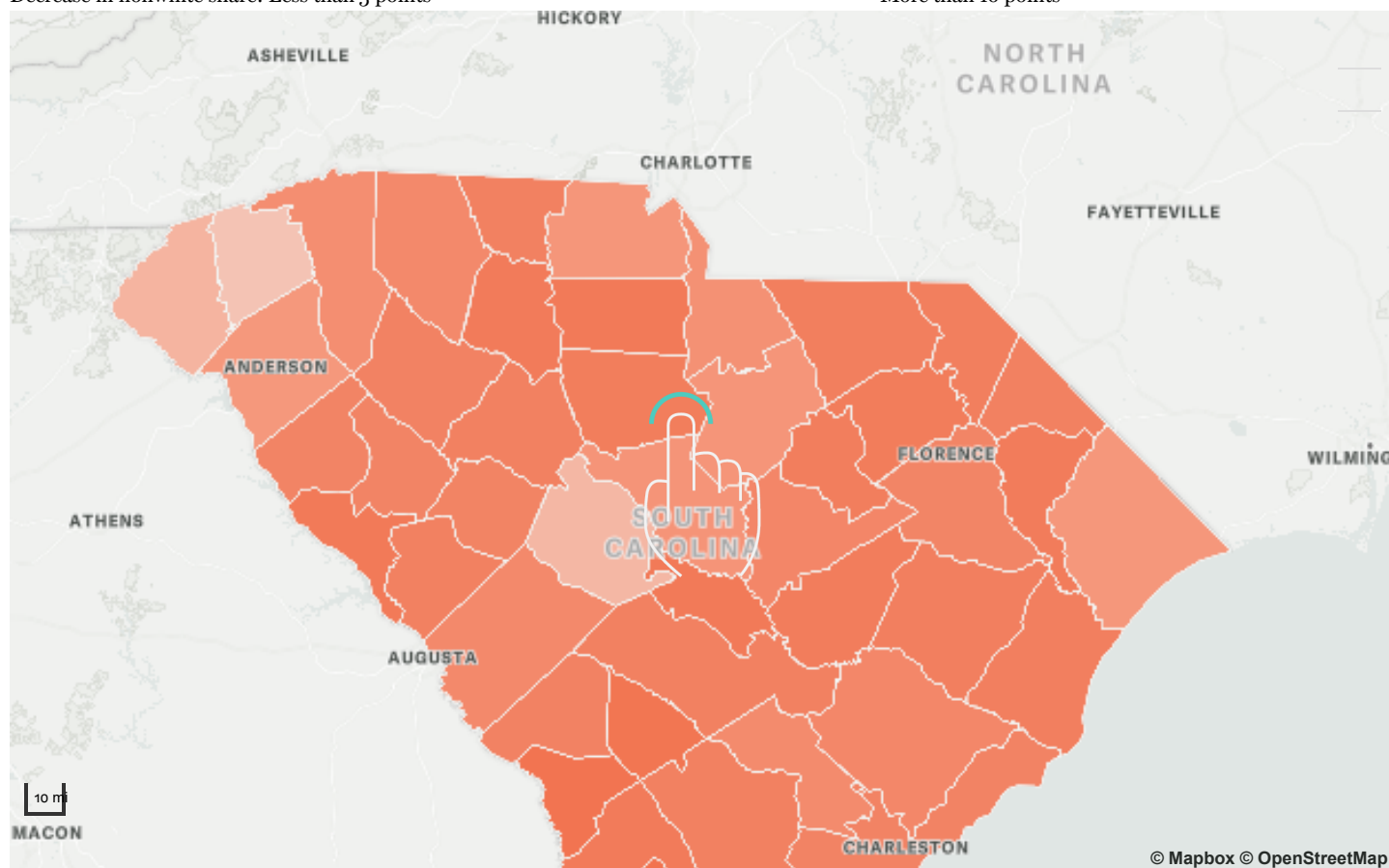
"Holy moly," said Lachlan McIntosh, a Charleston-based Democratic consultant. "I can tell you without a doubt, someone who's been doing this for 30 years in this state, that that's the lowest I've ever seen."

## NONWHITE TURNOUT FALLS ACROSS THE STATE

Decrease in the nonwhite share of the electorate between 2018 and 2022.

Decrease in nonwhite share: Less than 3 points

More than 10 points



SOURCE: S.C. ELECTORAL COMMISSION | [BRANDON LOCKETT](#) | THE POST AND COURIER

While the swing toward the GOP was more restrained in metropolitan areas around Columbia and Charleston, the bottom fell out for Democrats in rural Black-belt counties running from Marlboro on the North Carolina border to Hampton on the Georgia border. As proof: the nonwhite share of the electorate declined between six and nine points, McMaster improved his margin by double digits, and Republicans cleaned dozens of Democrats out of local offices in those counties.

Meanwhile, Democrats worry demographic trends over the horizon are moving strongly against them, especially among conservative retirees pouring into the state.

The Rev. William T. Johnson, pastor of Taw Caw Missionary Baptist, one of Clarendon County's largest Black churches, said there was simply a lack of enthusiasm among Black voters this cycle.

"[Democrats] perhaps need to convert back to some of their old methods of really reaching out personally," Johnson said. "They kinda just need to get back down in the trenches."



The Rev. William Johnson stands outside the historic Taw Caw Missionary Baptist church in Summerton on Dec. 19. He said Black rural voters were not enthusiastic about the midterms and Democrats did not do enough to engage them. Alexander Thompson/Staff

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One of the voters Democrats missed was Charles Marrow. He voted for President Joe Biden in 2020 "especially with Trump in the chair" but did not vote this November, he said as he sat watching his wash spin at the Quickmat Coin Laundry in Summerton on a recent afternoon.

The 49-year-old factory worker had a lot going on and could not recall receiving any Democratic campaign materials, much less any canvassers, he said.

"Come talk to me, that'd be a good thing," he said.

Democrats almost universally acknowledge they ran nowhere near the statewide ground game they needed to turn out their base this cycle. There wasn't enough money, they say.

**NATIONAL AND WORLD NEWS****New speaker will lead vastly different South Carolina House**

BY JEFFREY COLLINS ASSOCIATED PRESS

The statewide candidates “failed to go to those small rural cities that we have in the backwoods,” said Florence County Democratic Party Chair Isaac Wilson.

“Democrats keep missing the mark.”

Cunningham’s campaign, in particular, has come in for criticism for its get-out-the-vote efforts that some say dragged on down-ballot candidates.

**PALMETTO POLITICS****SC House reshuffling leaves 1 Charleston-area committee chair and no Democrat in charge**

BY SEANNA ADCOX SADCOX@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

“Their primary strategy was to go on a brewery tour and invest in digital,” said Greenville County Democratic Party Chair Amanda McDougald Scott, referring to Cunningham’s habit of micropub stops. “You’ve got to be able to get to the doors.”

Tyler Jones, a Charleston-based Democratic consultant who ran Cunningham’s campaign bristles at the critiques. The campaign was considerably outspent by McMaster, and after Jaime Harrison still couldn’t win after his record-breaking fundraising in the 2020 U.S. Senate race, donors had a defeatist attitude about South Carolina, he said.



Democrat Joe Cunningham delivers his concession speech to supporters at The American Theater in Charleston on Nov. 8, 2022. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff  
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Some Democrats say Cunningham's struggles with Black voters were due just as much to his message as the money. While abortion rights are broadly popular with Black voters, Cunningham's focus on legalizing marijuana and sports betting and eliminating the state income tax, which many low-income people don't pay, didn't resonate with Black voters, critics say.

Others fault Cunningham for not naming a Black running mate, and for advocating for age limits on politicians, which rubbed several Black elected officials the wrong way, including U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., who is 82.

Jones argued the issues Cunningham ran on have broad popular support in polls and that depressed African American turnout was a problem for Democrats across the South.

Brandon Upson, chairman of the South Carolina Democratic Party's Black Caucus, pointed out that the party has only nominated a White man for governor in recent cycles.

"Us running the same profile with a different name isn't working," he said.

The debacle was even worse in the Statehouse races where Democrats lost four seats the League of Women Voters had rated, even after redistricting, to lean Democratic.

“There’s just no excuse for losing them,” McIntosh said. “They ran awful campaigns.”



**PALMETTO POLITICS**

SC Founding Father’s Constitution controversy swirls in key Supreme Court case

BY ALEXANDER THOMPSON ATHOMPSON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

The arguments highlight increasing rifts over how to move forward.

“There are too many people who want to be the smartest person in the room,” said Bryanta “Bre” Maxwell, a Columbia-based Democratic National Committee member. “We don’t have a true strategy.”



The Summertown water tower rises above downtown on Dec. 19, 2022. Democrats failed to turn out voters in rural, heavily Black areas of the state like Summertown, dooming their electoral chances. Alexander Thompson/Staff

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“I have never seen South Carolina Democrats as divided and dysfunctional as we are at this moment,” Jones said. “Most people are more interested in who to blame than how to win.”



County chairs and party leadership say they are still going over the results to develop a plan for how to move forward, and there seems to be a growing consensus that the party needs to start small, focusing on recruiting better local candidates, improving those candidates' fundraising operations, and winning back the four seats Republicans flipped in upsets.

There are factors that make Democrats hopeful. They believe that if South Carolina does become the Democrats' first in the nation presidential primary, it will bring an influx of resources and talent to the state. Others point out that the state is slowly diversifying and the suburbs are bluer than they used to be.

*Caitlin Byrd of The Post and Courier staff contributed reporting.*



**PALMETTO POLITICS**

GOP's Nancy Mace, Tom Rice join Dems in vote to protect same-sex, interracial marriage

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Alexander Thompson covers South Carolina politics from The Post and Courier's statehouse bureau. Thompson previously reported for The Boston Globe, The Christian Science Monitor, and local papers in Ohio. He spent a brief stint writing for a newspaper in Dakar, Senegal.