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Tillis Steps Down: North Carolina's 2026 Senate Race Now Wide Open

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RALEIGH – North Carolina's political scene shifted dramatically on Sunday when U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis announced he will not run for reelection in 2026.

Tillis, who has served in the Senate for 10 years and spent more than two decades in public office, said he no longer felt driven to campaign for another term.

"I haven't exactly been excited about running for another term," he said. "This is not a hard choice."

His departure opens the door to what is likely to become one of the most competitive and closely watched Senate races in the country.

President Donald Trump quickly celebrated the announcement. “Great News! “Senator” Thom Tillis will not be seeking reelection,” Trump posted online. Just days earlier, Tillis opposed a major Trump-backed bill, drawing the president’s anger.

A long list of Republican candidates is expected to enter the race. Among the most talked-about is **Lara Trump**, the president’s daughter-in-law, who grew up in Wilmington. According to NBC News, people close to the Trump family say if she runs, she would quickly become the frontrunner.

Other possible Republican candidates include

- **Mark Robinson**, the former lieutenant governor known for controversial comments.
- **Dan Bishop**, who wrote North Carolina’s 2016 “bathroom bill.”
- **Pat Harrigan**, a former Green Beret and business owner.
- **Tim Moore**, former Speaker of the state House, now a congressman.
- **Jeff Knott**, a former federal prosecutor, was elected to Congress last year.
- **Michele Morrow**, a nurse and conservative activist who ran for state superintendent.

Democrats also see an opportunity. **Wiley Nickel**, a former congressman who worked for President Obama, has already launched his campaign.

Many Democrats hope **former Gov. Roy Cooper** will enter the race. Cooper served two terms as governor and 16 years as attorney general. He has not announced his plans, but party leaders consider him their strongest possible candidate.

This Senate race will be the first major test of Trump’s influence since returning to the White House. With Republicans holding a slim majority in the Senate, North Carolina could play a critical role in determining which party controls Congress.

Over the next year and a half, voters can expect an expensive and intense campaign that will draw national attention and set the tone for 2026.