

Political, economic turmoil marked '80s, analysts say

By F. ALAN BOYCE
Associated Press writer

RALEIGH — Political analysts say the 1980s was a decade of gains for blacks and Republicans and the economy, but one sociologist says blacks in North Carolina have been left behind.

There are still counties in North Carolina, most of them predominantly black, northeastern counties, where 15 percent to 20 percent of houses lack complete indoor plumbing facilities, says Craig Calhoun, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"That's eight to 10 times the U.S. average," he said.

But blacks have taken giant steps toward equality and recognition in the state during the '80s.

Richard Erwin became the first black appointed a federal judge in North Carolina in 1980. At the same time, the University of North Carolina system had agreed with the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (now simply the Department of Education) to erase the last vestiges of racism there.

In 1984, Henry Frye became

the first black elected to the state Supreme Court and in 1989 former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt was seriously considering a bid for U.S. Senate. And in 1983, Deneen Graham became the first black woman to be crowned Miss North Carolina.

The 1980s was a decade that featured the second Republican governor elected this century — Jim Martin — the first Republican lieutenant governor of the 20th century — Jim Gardner — and the GOP's biggest share of the General Assembly, with 46 of 120 House seats in 1988 and 13 of 50 Senate seats. But all of that came in a decade that began with Democratic Gov. Jim Hunt becoming the first governor ever to succeed himself in the office.

"The state has become a two-party state for real," said Thad Beyle, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "What the 1980s has shown is the decline of the Democratic Party, especially at the leadership level after Jim Hunt was defeated (for U.S. Senate) in 1984."

Hunt and U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms waged the most expensive U.S.

Senate campaign in history when they combined to spend \$25 million.

Meanwhile, the economy had its ups and downs, with an early recession, textile plant closings and the loss of some large corporations to buyouts and relocations. Yet things kept improving, said Cam Harvey of the Finance Group at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

"One thing that distinguishes this decade of the '80s from some other ones is that it has been characterized by robust economic growth," he said. "We're in this growth phase that just doesn't want to end."

"There were a lot of shocks that could have potentially derailed this growth, like the '87 stock crash, but no, the economy was resilient and was able to ride that out."

The buyout of RJR Nabisco, shortly after it moved its headquarters from Winston-Salem to Atlanta, marked a period of "takeovers of a scale that we had never seen before, never thought possible," Harvey said.

"Certainly North Carolina was affected by this in a big way with

the RJR takeover," he said. "It could have been potentially disruptive for the state's economy but it's turned out that it hasn't disrupted it in any significant way."

Even the decline in smoking nationally has not significantly hurt the tobacco state's economy, Harvey said, noting that tobacco companies have expanded into foreign markets and diversified their holdings.

Even the textile industry, which unsuccessfully sought protectionist legislation during its roughest times, bounced back.

"What helped a lot was the depreciation of the U.S. dollar," Harvey said. "These textiles that were cheap in the early '80s became expensive and there really wasn't as much a threat."

Calhoun agreed there had been a lot of economic expansion, but he said it had been largely confined to the Interstate 85 corridor.

"The basic picture is that the

state has in many ways been split, with some parts of the state showing unprecedented prosperity and having extremely good growth prospects for the future," he said. "But some other parts of the state have been completely left out of that picture."

Manufacturing plant closings outstripped openings by nearly a 5-1 margin, although there was a lot of publicity for the new companies, Calhoun said. Still, unemployment declined as the state's service sector grew faster than the national average.

North Carolina got a preview of things to come when it was discovered that polychlorinated biphenyls, toxic chemicals used in electrical transformers, had been sprayed along state roadsides. The state scraped the soil into trucks and, with much controversy, disposed of it in a landfill in a rural, predominantly black area of Warren County. Residents responded with weeks of protests

during which they blocked trucks and were voluntarily arrested in demonstrations reminiscent of the civil rights movement.

North Carolina was later chosen as the next host state to take low-level radioactive waste from eight Southeastern states — a decision sure to create similar protests. And in 1989 the state agreed to enter another compact to jointly handle hazardous wastes — an agreement that will mean building a hazardous waste incinerator and other facilities.

The Legislature, struggling under an increasing burden as Washington cut back its involvement in state issues, approved gasoline tax increases in 1981 and 1989. But lawmakers gave up the largest tax cut in state history in 1985 under Martin's prodding. The General Assembly, with considerable pressure from Washington, also agreed to raise the drinking age from 18 to 21 and approved mandatory seat belts.