

Introduction ^[1]

The nearer we come to the present, the more difficult it becomes to write history. When we consider events of a hundred years ago, we can evaluate their long-term impact. But the events of the last ten or twenty years are still raw; we don't know their consequences yet. In fact, we often can't even say which events are most important, because we don't know how it all turns out. For example, historians look at certain elections as turning points in the political history of the United States. Franklin Roosevelt's election in 1932, for example, ushered in an era of Democratic rule that lasted until the late 1960s. But historians and political scientists disagree about when that "party system" ended, or whether it has ended yet. Did the election of 1968 change American politics? What about 1980, when Ronald Reagan became president? Or 1994, when Republicans re-took Congress for the first time in nearly half a century? We're still trying to figure out whether any of those events marked a long-term change. As a result, recent history can be something of a grab bag of topics. We've tried to bring order to the events of the last thirty years, but you won't find the sweeping themes and neat packaging of, say, the "Gilded Age." We simply haven't figured out what they are yet. What's more, because recent history is still personal, it's also difficult to find primary sources for a project like this. That might seem strange, given the incredible quantity of *stuff* that Americans have produced over the last few decades. But nearly all of the sources created in the last forty years are still owned by somebody who's still alive, or whose children are. For this module of our resource, we don't have quite the variety of primary sources we had for some earlier modules. We do have oral histories, though, which give wonderful personal accounts of historic events. We also have detailed census data, which allows us to get the "big picture" more easily than we could in earlier eras.

Key questions

As in the rest of this resource, you'll have the opportunity to explore the experiences of various people firsthand, through a variety of primary sources -- oral histories, newspapers, maps, photographs, and census data. From these raw materials and background readings, you'll answer questions like these:

- What has been North Carolina's role in the U.S. and the world since the 1970s?
- What personalities and issues have shaped the state's politics?
- How has the state's economy and industry changed, and what impact have those changes had on North Carolinians?
- How have North Carolinians fought to protect the environment?
- What has been the impact of natural disasters like Hurricane Floyd?
- How has immigration and increasing diversity changed North Carolina?

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