

The Upset

How Sapient Edge Turned a 4-Month Underdog Into a 21-Point Win

by Sapient Edge Strategies

The Stage

NC Senate District 18 is one of the most consequential seats in this year's North Carolina Senate elections. Covering northern Wake County and all of Granville County, a fast-growing area with agriculture, manufacturing, and suburban communities, the district was decided by just 128 votes in the 2024 general election. North Carolina has a well-documented history of ticket splitting, and District 18 is a textbook example. There are voters here who supported sending a Republican to the White House, returning Republicans to both U.S. Senate seats, and produced a split Council of State. All of this took place while Democrats held the Governor's Mansion for 30 of the past 34 years. Yet, in 2024, this State Senate seat was decided by 128 votes. This type of district doesn't stay blue on its own.

Democrats are quick to protect this seat. It sits in a group they must hold if breaking the Republican supermajority in the NC Senate remains an objective in 2026. Getting the right Republican through the primary mattered. The general election in this district could move the needle on who controls the Senate chamber in Raleigh.

21- Point Win

Winning Margin

Primary Election

4-Months

Duration

Primary Election

128 Votes

Margin

2024 General Election
Loss

A sitting Republican Wake County School Board Member announced her candidacy nearly a year ahead of the 2026 Primary Election, a tactic increasingly common among candidates who hope an early announcement will crowd out competition and render the primary a formality. It was our role to ensure that strategy didn't work.



The Right Candidate

Enter Chris Stock, a Wake Forest attorney who built his own practice from the ground up and spent time working in the North Carolina General Assembly, where he developed policy expertise alongside Republican leadership. Unlike candidates who arrive in Raleigh learning on the job, Stock already understood how the process works from the inside.

More importantly, he understood the district. Stock had been close to the issues that matter most to Wake and Granville County residents, including water availability, local infrastructure, and making sure that as North Carolina's economy evolves, the jobs that families in this district depend on don't disappear in Raleigh without a fight. Most candidates arrive at the General Assembly learning on the job. Stock already knew.

We launched his campaign in October, just four months before voting began. Against a candidate who had been in the field for nearly a year, that timeline would have buried most campaigns. With the right candidate and a disciplined strategy, it became proof that quality beats quantity.

4-Month Timeline



The Plan

Rather than spreading the message thin across a laundry list of issues, we focused the campaign around two core priorities that were hitting home across the district: lowering the cost of living and improving quality of life. As General Consultants, we worked directly with Stock to carry that message to business leaders, families, and Republican groups throughout Wake and Granville counties. We took the campaign directly to voters through door-to-door canvassing, because in a primary there is no substitute for a real conversation at the front door. Utilizing extensive digital communications also provided a tether for voters to connect with the issues.

Republican leaders noticed. NC Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler endorsed the campaign, signaling to the district's conservative base that Stock was the serious candidate in the race. With momentum building, our focus shifted to audience targeting and building the infrastructure needed to maximize contact during North Carolina's two week Early Voting window.

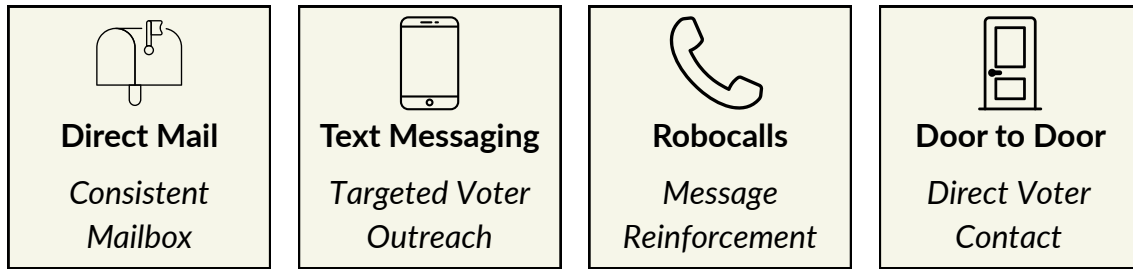


The Execution

Wake County is the most populated county in North Carolina, and the contested Republican primaries in high-stakes swing districts have a way of humbling campaigns that mistake activity for strategy. Most lose before they ever knock on a door, not because of bad messaging, but because they try to talk to everyone and end up reaching no one. We made the opposite call.

Our fundraising was strong, but other races across the state catching national attention were pulling money in different directions, which meant we had to trim our budget and stay laser focused. Every dollar spent went to precise and intentional voter contact matching our audience models. There was no room for waste and frankly we didn't need it.

The Contact Machine



Texts and robocalls let us stretch further, putting our message in front of lower propensity voters for a fraction of what another mailer would have cost. By the time someone walked into the polls, they'd heard from us more than once and across more than one channel. That kind of repetition sticks.

When Early Voting opened we were watching the data each day. We could see who was turning out and who had stayed home. As a result, we adjusted our texting on the fly to go after the voters we still needed. Most campaigns set their plan and execute it. We were making real decisions in real time, and that made the difference.

The Results

We won, by 21 points. In a race most people assumed was already decided.

We gained trust with reliable Republican primary voters and a segment of lower propensity voters who have recently re-engaged in the process. Everything worked together, the candidate, the message, the targeting, the door knocking, the data. Every piece had a purpose. At Sapien Edge Strategies we cut through the noise and let Stock focus on being a candidate while we kept everything else on track.

Stock heads into the General Election as the Republican nominee in one of the most competitive Senate districts in North Carolina, a race that could directly affect the balance of power in Raleigh.

Don't take our word for it. Look at the results.

The Bottom Line

Messaging Matters: Republicans had been avoiding the word affordability, treating it like opposition territory. We took it back. Cost of living, prescription costs, quality of life. These aren't partisan issues, they're kitchen table issues. We planted our flag there early, stayed disciplined, and never moved.

Spend Time Targeting: We didn't target the district, we targeted the right voters within it. That saved money, built frequency across multiple touch points, and put our message in front of people who actually decide primaries.

Budget, Budget, Budget: A great message with no money is a great speech nobody heard. We built a voter contact budget that stretched every dollar, creating a machine that put our message in front of the right voters through their mailbox, their phones, and their doors.

We built the name recognition. We ran the race.

When done correctly, paid voter contact makes the difference. Don't risk skipping it.

Ready to Run a Smarter Campaign?
Let's talk about what winning looks like for you.

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Sapient Edge Strategies is a political consulting and public affairs firm built on over 20 years of combined experience in political strategy, communications, and advocacy. We work with candidates, businesses, and associations, helping them understand the political landscape, communicate with purpose, and move their goals forward. We show up when it matters and we don't waste your time getting there.