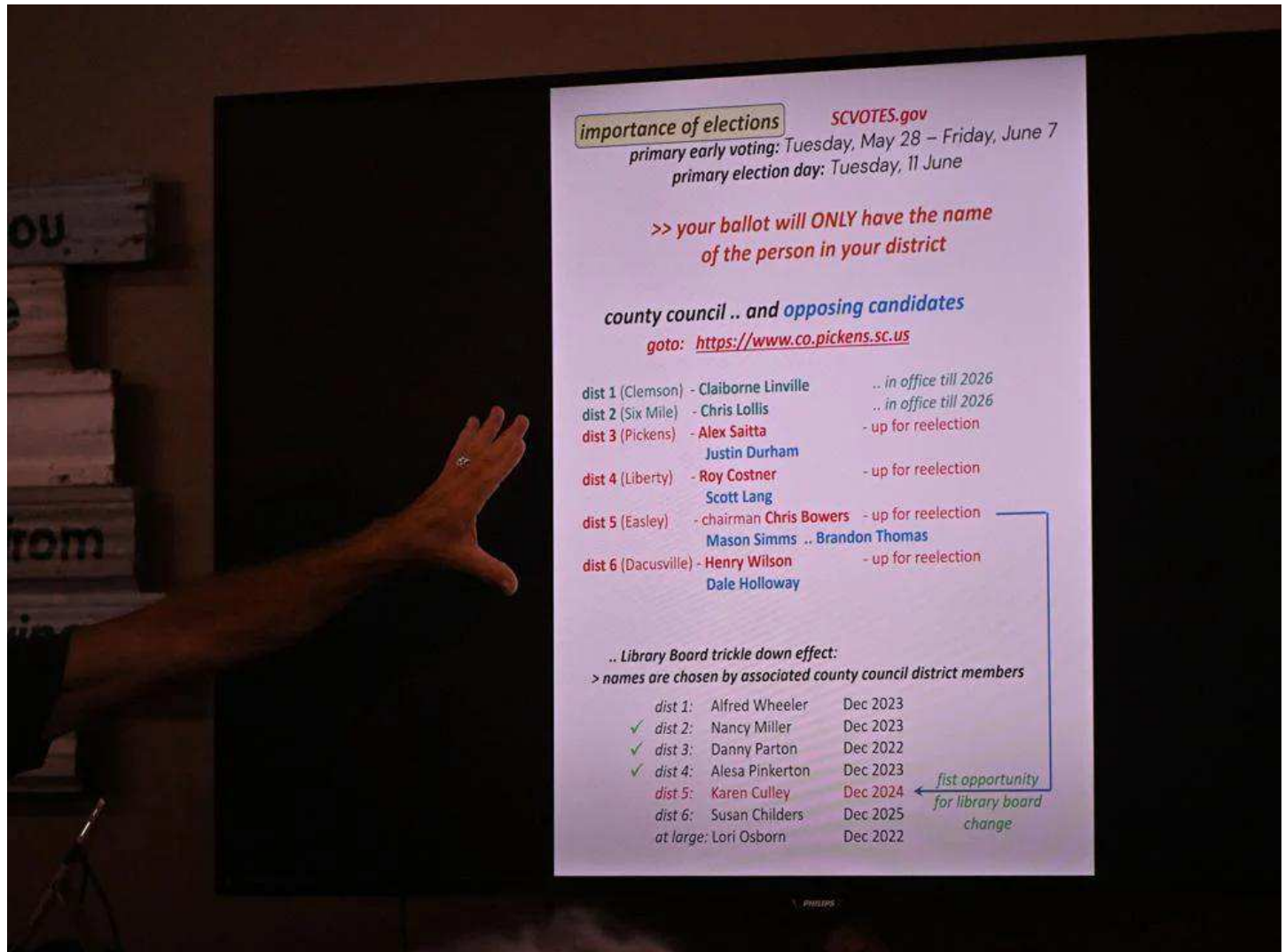


EDITOR'S PICK

# In this SC county, a Republican vs Republican feud is redefining who stays with the party

BY CAITLIN HERRINGTON CHERRINGTON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM BY MACON ATKINSON MATKINSON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM  
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Luke Campbell demonstrates how local elections and board appointments work at Cafe Connections in downtown Pickens, Thursday evening, May 2, 2024. He is part of a group tied to the county Republican party that promotes "library awareness," talking about books that they do not think are appropriate in the public library and who serves on the board.

TIM KIMZEY/SPECIAL TO THE POST AND COURIER

PICKENS — A bitter divide is emerging in the reddest county in South Carolina.

Four years after [Donald Trump won the presidential results here](#) by 75 percent, hard-right conservatives galvanized by the MAGA movement are upending decades of political tradition to weed out incumbent officials deemed not conservative enough.

Several Republicans with a combined 20 years — from County Council to the Legislature — lost their seats to ultra-conservative primary challengers. In each contest, the newly elected officials sought to undercut funding for local libraries over concerns of alleged pornographic materials while one of the last S.C. House Republicans with a moderate stance on abortion was kicked out.

Though not all conservative voters support the purist purge, the tension is particularly palpable in Pickens County, where there's an ever-present suspicion around who is truly Republican and who's using the title for political gain.

# Pickens County



[BRANDON LOCKETT/STAFF](#)

The bitter small town battles are a window in the fight for the future of the GOP across the nation.

In Pickens County, in the hilly northwest corner of South Carolina, those skirmishes have raged for a long time, said Neal Collins, a state representative from Easley with a reputation as a moderate policymaker.

“We’re so conservative in our area, nobody’s conservative enough,” he said.

## Clubs are splitting

**Pickens County** is where the Carolina foothills give rise to the Blue Ridge Mountains, topped off by South Carolina’s highest peak, Sassafras Mountain. Its 130,000 residents drive through rolling farmlands on their daily commutes, passing orange and purple signs for three-time national football champion Clemson University, located near the county’s southern border.

With attractions like Table Rock State Park and Lake Jocassee, the county is a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts and tourists. The county seat of Pickens, where the main drag has only five traffic lights, [is where Trump held a campaign rally in](#)



Cafe Connections in downtown Pickens, Thursday evening, May 2, 2024. Pickens is the seat of Pickens County located in the northwest part of South Carolina.  
TIM KIMZEY/SPECIAL TO THE POST AND COURIER

**2023.** Downtown is home to local institutions like 65-year-old Brock's Department Store and Bivens Hardware Store, est. 1923, as well as 13 bronze turtles, a public art project courtesy of Pickens Middle School.



**PALMETTO POLITICS**

**SC Freedom Caucus takes down 2 GOP House leader allies. But sides largely stalemate.**

BY ALEXANDER THOMPSON AND NICK REYNOLDS NREYNOLDS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM ATHOMPSON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Pickens is where S.C. House Majority Leader Davey Hiott **led the Statehouse abortion ban charge** in 2023 and where **the local school district made headlines** for banning "Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You," a book about America's history of racism. Meanwhile, some public library board members' livelihoods have been openly threatened.

It is former Cherokee tribal land with a relatively low cost of living and areas that still lack reliable internet access. With proximity to major cities such as Atlanta and Charlotte, it increasingly draws new residents from across the U.S. Many are retirees from places like Ohio and New Jersey moving into pricey lakefront subdivisions with clubhouses, marinas and 18-hole golf courses.

That population growth has brought in fresh ideas, disrupting longstanding local political power dynamics and propelling new debates about what it means to be a Republican.

When Bob Fetterly moved to Pickens County from Idaho 11 years ago, he was dismayed by the state of local politics. Despite controlling the overwhelming majority of state and local government, Republicans weren't doing enough to lower taxes, protect Second Amendment rights and abolish abortion, he thought. Never mind that **South Carolina is cutting its top income tax rate** from 7 percent to 6 percent, and the **state adopted a law in March** backed by the National Rifle Association to allow open carry of handguns with only limited requirements.

"There's no shortage of reasons that people — what I'll call 'real Republicans' — are disgusted with the current Republican Party," Fetterly said.

Fetterly wanted change, so he joined the local county GOP in 2020, which he now chairs. There, he found Tea Party supporters and like-minded constitutionalists who believe in limited government and individual rights. Many joined the MAGA movement during Trump's presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020.

"Mr. Trump and I have some differences, but I would say they're very small, and I absolutely support him to win this election," Fetterly said.

But the depth of unwavering support for Trump has been a line in the sand for more open-minded Pickens County conservatives who consider themselves dyed-in-the-wool Republicans yet found themselves on the outs after the 2020 presidential election.

"If you are a person with political ambitions in Pickens County and you're not a Republican, you have to pretend to be one to get elected," said Rick Tate, who left the county party to lead a new group.



Pickens County Republican Party Chairman Bob Fetterly (right) tallies votes from the June 11, 2024, Republican primary race.

[FILE/CAITLIN HERRINGTON/STAFF](#)

## MAGA candidates battle for primary victory

That schism transformed this year's primary elections into a struggle for power.

Three hard-right county council candidates prevailed in the June primary under the banner of protecting personal property rights and Pickens County's children. Another seat went to a runoff before the more moderate incumbent was able to narrowly stave off a challenger.

Ahead of the June 11 primary, county council incumbents were working on **issues like rewriting development guidelines and road improvements** to manage the county's rapid growth. The new electees, however, came in more focused on cultural issues.

Local library budgeting, for example, is on the chopping block after a group of parents and activists challenged library leadership over providing books to children that they deemed inappropriate, like "Gender Queer," a memoir about what it means to be nonbinary and asexual, and "Let's Talk About It," a teenage sexuality and relationship guide.

The library got a \$4 million budget this year, a \$681,000 increase born of the county's increasing property values. But conservative County Council members want to remove the library's dedicated revenue stream and instead lump it into the general budget where it will compete for funding with other items like emergency services and utility upgrades.

In the Statehouse, hardline conservatives also ousted moderate retiree Rep. Jerry Carter in favor of **Phillip Bowers**, a former Pickens County School Board member. Carter faced backlash in the district for voting against the state's six-week abortion ban in



Pickens County Republican party members and parents pray before their meeting at Cafe Connections in downtown Pickens, Thursday evening, May 2, 2024.  
TIM KIMZEY/SPECIAL TO THE POST AND COURIER

2023.

With a 54 percent vote tally, Bowers wasn't a sweeping victory. But it was enough to send a message to others looking to run: get in line or pay the price.

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Collins, another moderate Republican, found himself squarely in ultraconservative crosshairs after opposing a school voucher expansion bill in the Statehouse. He managed to fend off a primary challenge from 37-year-old customer service representative Brandy Tarleton, another candidate who had the county party's backing.

Fetterly said it was his duty as chairman to recruit candidates to run against incumbents. "Even if it wasn't, I am completely dissatisfied with many levels of government in South Carolina, so I would be doing this anyhow," he added.



PALMETTO POLITICS

Hardliners defeated among internal SC Republican Party feuds

BY NICK REYNOLDS NREYNOLDS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

## Political divide not just in Pickens County

Pumpkintown resident Heather Mitchell was excited to get involved in local politics back in 2020. As a precinct chair, she was tapped to represent a group of five Republicans within the county party in their small town named in the 1800s for yellow gourds growing along the Oolenoy River.

But after a disagreement over who should be the next county chairman, new members appeared in her small group seemingly overnight.

The next thing she knew, she was voted out of leadership.

The experience left Mitchell shaken. The county party has pushed away great candidates and great minds with its all-or-nothing mentality that repels any ideas that don't perfectly align, she said.

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"Most people right here don't even recognize the Pickens County Republican Party anymore," said longtime state Rep. Davey Hiott, who represents Dacusville, Liberty and Pickens.

For Mitchell, who serves as the Pickens County chair for Moms for Liberty, being a Republican means agreeing on the party's big picture issues and facilitating political discourse to find solutions for everyday life.

"We all want to make a difference," she said. "That's what people come to the Republican Party for or get involved in local politics for. When it becomes something that's toxic, people don't have time for it."

She wasn't the only one to leave.

Pickens resident Clay Counts, 31, has served as Hiott's campaign manager since his high school days of just a few years ago.

Counts describes himself as a "very conservative" big tent Republican who believes county chapters should platform a variety of perspectives. He soon realized his views didn't align with a group that preferred to pick winners and losers over facilitating a conversation.

In 2023, he left to chair a new auxiliary group: the Pickens County Republican Club headed up by Tate and another local Republican, Allan Quinn.

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By May 2024, the club's ranks swelled to 400 members. Funded by donations, most of its money goes toward voter education. Since January, the club has hosted six separate candidate forums from Congress to the local school board.

While he disagrees with the county party's "MAGA or bust" approach, Counts said he doesn't see them as "evil."

"People are frustrated with what's going on in Washington," he said. "They're channeling that in the wrong way."

That frustration isn't exclusive to rural parts of South Carolina. The ultraconservative, pro-MAGA mindset has swept to all four corners of the state. Just 20 miles or so from Pickens, the Greenville GOP — the state's largest county chapter — has become a movement based on unflinching loyalty to Trump and fighting South Carolina's political establishment. Their leader, Jeff Davis, went as far as to run for state party chair in 2021 (unsuccessfully) against incumbent Drew McKissick.



Clay Counts (left) moderates a Pickens County Republican Club forum for Pickens County Council primary candidates in May 2024.  
FILE/CAITLIN HERRINGTON/STAFF

Go 20 miles in the other direction, and the far-right upstart group Oconee County Conservatives just elected their candidates for majority control on county council.

Along the coast, the Myrtle Beach chapter of the Horry County GOP has been marred by infighting as hard-right conservatives grapple for control in one of the state's political hotbeds.

And in Lexington County, a Columbia suburb, the once-moderate GOP party — formerly one of the state's largest and most influential — has split in half as Trump loyalists seized power.

While Trump is not necessarily the root cause of such schisms, "I think he may have exacerbated underlying divisions," said James Wallner, a Clemson University political science professor and senior fellow at [think tank R Street Institute](#).

"I do think that the frustration is emblematic of the fact that nothing ever seems to change," he added.

Fetterly, the Pickens County party chair, echoed the sentiment.

"We're not getting what we pay for, and we're driving around on pothole-ridden roads to get there," Fetterly said.



A group of concerned parents and Republican activists met together at Cafe Connections in downtown Pickens, Thursday evening, May 2, 2024. The group, including conservative activist Johnnelle Raines with the Pickens County Republican Party, center, discussed upcoming elections and “library awareness,” talking about books that they do not think are appropriate in the public library.

FILE/TIM KIMZEY/PROVIDED

## Conservative activists find new battlegrounds

Pickens conservatives have seemingly found their greatest battleground in the most unlikely of places: their local library.

Activists like Pickens County Republican Party member Johnnelle Raines believe the library has given children access to sexually inappropriate material without their parents’ consent.

A group led by Raines keeps a list of books rated for obscenity. With a goal to challenge a new book every month, their current list of worst offenders numbers 88 titles. It includes “All Boys Aren’t Blue” by George Johnson, an essay series about Johnson’s experience growing up as queer Black man, and young adult fantasy novel “A Court of Thorns and Roses” by Sarah J. Maas.

Their calls for action have mobilized hundreds of residents to push for removing certain titles from library shelves — and, though he doesn’t have the power to do so, for Gov. Henry McMaster to erase criminal liability protections for libraries, opening librarians to lawsuits for providing “obscene” materials to minors.

South Carolina law exempts employees and trustees of public libraries, museums and schools from prosecution for distributing obscene material if they are acting within the scope of their employment. But the group started a petition to make public libraries exempt from those protections. At the end of May, the petition had 3,986 signatures.



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Pressure on their local state senator, Rex Rice, paid off. In June, the **S.C. Legislature adopted language** requiring libraries to restrict access to certain books appealing to children’s “prurient interest” in order to be eligible for state funding. Prurient interest is defined as “shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex or excretion” by the Supreme Court.

Raines and other activists said that is not enough.

“It’s porn,” Raines said. “This (budget proviso) is a good step, but what we really want is what our petition says.”

And with hardline conservatives now in control of the governing Pickens County Council, officials are moving to stifle library funding to send a message to the local library board and staff.

“You can clearly see that it’s going to happen (next year),” County Councilman Henry Wilson warned the library board June 17. “It’ll give you another year to adjust to the fact the political landscape has changed.”

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A group of concerned parents and Republican activists in Pickens County, including Kathleen Campbell (left) met together at Cafe Connections in downtown Pickens, Thursday evening, May 2, 2024. The group discussed upcoming elections and “library awareness,” talking about books that they do not think are appropriate in the public library.

FILE/TIM KIMZEY/PROVIDED

## No signs of slowing down

Those in the middle of the culture wars never imagined they’d be caught in the crossfire.

When Lori Osborn was encouraged to join the library board in 2021, she gladly accepted the appointment. Now, members of the public are calling the grandmother and retired teacher a pedophile and child groomer.

After Osborn said she wouldn't vote to pull books from library shelves, activists have called for her removal at library board and county council meetings.

County council members have largely taken a passive role in the conflict, simply urging those who have concerns to speak with Osborn directly.



**NEWS**

SC expects another million residents by 2042. Most will be coming to these few counties.

BY DAVID SLADE DSLADE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Collectively, all these actions leave questions about how the new balance of power will change Pickens County and South Carolina. There is the chance that fringe mindsets will be moderated by their party, said David Woodard, a political science professor at Clemson University, who added a future moderate president or nationwide crisis could reunite widely divided Americans.

But neither seem forthcoming.

“People are going to have to decide how much of this they want to stay on,” Woodard said. “If Trump wins the election, it's a remaking of the Republican Party because you can't afford to be off the reservation.”

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Follow Caitlin on Twitter/X @CatHerrington

**MORE INFORMATION**

What to watch for as South Carolina Republicans head to national convention in Milwaukee

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