

All the big jobs are up for grabs in the Palmetto state

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GENTEEL and friendly is the image of South Carolina—until the political season rolls round. Then no holds are barred. This year, all the highest statewide offices are up for grabs: the governorship, both US Senate seats and all seven seats in the House of Representatives. Such bounty is unusual, and South Carolinians are rubbing their hands.

The bonanza has happened because Jim DeMint resigned his Senate seat in 2013 to head the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank, in Washington, DC. The state's Republican governor, Nikki Haley, appointed Tim Scott, then a congressman, to fill the seat pending a special election.

Mr Scott, South Carolina's first black senator, is one of only two blacks in the Senate. Although the state's Republican voters are mostly white, he is wildly popular with them. "He is the living, breathing embodiment of our conservative values," explained Wes Climer, a local Republican official, at an early-morning pow-wow last week at the Rock Hill-York County airport featuring doughnuts, coffee and Mr Scott, who is touring the state to kick off his election campaign.

Mr Scott has only token opposition in the Republican primary in June, and should win handily in November. Still, he does not please everyone. "A ventriloquist can always find a good dummy," said the Rev William Barber, president of the North Carolina NAACP, a black lobby group, in January. Mr Scott, he suggests patronisingly, is just a pawn for the extreme right.

South Carolina's other senator, Lindsey Graham, hopes to be re-elected to his third term in November. First, however, he must fend off six Republicans to the right of him in the primary on June 10th. A seventh would-be challenger, an ex-police officer called Dave Feliciano, recently tried to draw blood by claiming that the senator is "ambiguously gay". Mr Graham, who is single, insists that he is not homosexual, but the charge has dogged him for years. Having made it again, Mr Feliciano decided not to enter the race.

A thoughtful conservative and a foreign-policy hawk, Mr Graham has more than \$7.6m to spend and no strong Democratic opposition, so his seat is probably safe. His supporters point out that this is a good thing: he is one of the few Republicans left in the polarised Senate who will occasionally work with the Democrats.

In the governor's race, there is likely to be a rematch this autumn between Mrs Haley, South Carolina's first female and first Indian-American governor, and Vincent Sheheen, the well-regarded Democratic state senator who lost narrowly to her in 2010. Mrs Haley, a Tea Party favourite, endorsed Mitt Romney early and once hoped to serve in his administration. Instead she is facing Mr Sheheen again, who is running a cleverer campaign this time. Her approval ratings are in the mid-40s, and every taxpayer in South Carolina remembers that the biggest theft of taxpayer data in American history took place on her watch in 2012, when all South Carolinian taxpayers who had submitted their tax returns online for the previous 14 years had their Social Security numbers and other sensitive information stolen by unknown hackers in Europe.

An upset by Mr Sheheen is therefore possible, but difficult in such a reliably Republican state. Mrs Haley has refused, for example, to expand health-insurance cover for the poor under Obamacare, is staunchly anti-union and recently signed legislation allowing licensed gun-owners to carry concealed handguns into bars and restaurants that serve alcohol—as long as they do not drink booze and the bars and restaurants let them in. This delighted the state's many gun-lovers, who had earlier been thrilled by the photo she posted on her Facebook page of the 9mm Beretta Px4 Storm pistol that her husband gave her for Christmas.