

Virginia's gubernatorial election this year has been dubbed a 'toss up' — this is why
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In this year's governor's race, Virginia's Republican Party is harnessing an energy similar to that felt in the Democratic Party in 2017, and it has Democrats nervous.

Co-chair of Charlottesville's Democratic Party, Bekah Saxon, said she is concerned that some Democrats are less enthusiastic or energized about this election than the one last year that saw the ousting of former Republican President Donald Trump.

"People are tired after dealing with COVID and after four years of really divisive rhetoric," Saxon said. "People just want to sit and relax and we're trying to tell them 'sure you can do that but please go vote first?'"

Referred to as the "Blue Wave," the 2017 election ushered in Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam and the flip of several formerly Republican-held seats in the House of Delegates — allowing the Northam administration to make Virginia the "first state in the South" to accomplish a series of progressive policies.

A driving factor in the win was Democratic turnout at the polls, which was high one year after Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 presidential election.

"Anger motivates people more than anything," said Jessica Taylor, an analyst with Cook Political Report, an organization that has also labeled the Virginia governor race a "toss up."

Much like how President Donald Trump's win in 2016 angered and energized the Democratic base in Virginia, his loss in 2020 is also firing up Republicans. And the pattern is not new.

Over the past 20 years, whichever party won the White House, the opposite party won Virginia's governor's mansion.

The exception? Former governor and current Democratic candidate Terry McAuliffe. When he won his first term, he rode a wave of Democratic energy the year after former president Barack Obama won his second term. Now, McAuliffe is hoping he can do it again.

Albemarle County Republican Committee Chair George Urban thinks Youngkin could win, and that the result could have more to do with policy dissatisfaction than national speculation.

“Virginia holds gubernatorial elections the year after Presidential elections, so there is always an element of push back against the party that wins the White House,” Urban said. “That said, I don’t think Virginia voters are making their decision based on either [Joe] Biden or Trump. This election is about the future of Virginia and the push back against the radical policies pushed under one party Democrat control.”

While Democrats tout policies like decriminalizing marijuana, expanding voting access, investing in renewable energy, expanding Medicaid and supporting abortion access, Urban said there’s “radical” policies that Republicans take issue with. Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin has vowed to replace members of the Virginia Parole Board after it released violent criminals during the pandemic and Urban explained that Youngkin’s promise to protect right-to-work laws, pro-life stance on abortion, and hopes to reinstate voter ID laws are “resonating” with conservative voters.

However, the Republican Party is wrestling with sifting shades of red in its voter base and Youngkin could serve as a blueprint for Republican success in a post-Trump political landscape. The 2017 Republican gubernatorial candidate, Ed Gillespie, drew ire from Trump for not embracing him in his campaign and his loss ushered in the democratic gains in the state in recent years. Still, Urban said that this time around, Trump is less of a factor than McAuliffe thinks he is.

“There is a lot of Trump fatigue in the electorate, and now that he’s out of office, mainstream voters don’t want to hear about him,” Urban said. “So, I think the strategy may be backfiring for McAuliffe. Plus, the more Virginians get to know Youngkin they realize that he is nothing like Trump. Voters can see through hollow ad hominem attacks.”

Campaign strategies and shifting tides



Barack Obama speaks in support of Terry McAuliffe on Oct. 23 in Richmond. Credit: Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

Both candidates have run somewhat antithetical campaigns in recent weeks. McAuliffe has embraced stump speeches from high-profile figures while Youngkin has focused more on his policy proposals. Both have embarked on bus tours and made stops all around the state.

Though former Trump-related political figures like former Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley and former Vice President Mike Pence have campaigned for Youngkin previously, it’s the recent months of the election where Youngkin has shied away from high-profile stumping in favor of discussing his policy proposals and ending rallies by mingling with members of the crowd.

When Charlottesville Tomorrow asked about a tele-rally Trump promoted for Youngkin on Nov. 1, Youngkin’s campaign issued no statement and instead, linked to a tweet where Youngkin told an Axios reporter that he would not engage in the event.

Conversely, in recent weeks, McAuliffe's campaign has attracted democratic heavy hitters and celebrities like presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden as well as Pharrell Williams and Dave Matthews. Speeches highlight McAuliffe's past experience while attacking Youngkin for being "Trump in khakis."

At an Oct. 23 event in Richmond, Obama questioned Youngkin's integrity for leaning into popular concerns of the voter base, which includes people who supported or attended the mob at the nation's capital on Jan. 6.

"You can't run ads telling me you're a regular old hoop-playing, dish-washing, fleece-wearing guy, but quietly cultivate support from those who seek to tear down democracy," Obama said. "I don't know if he actually believes in the same conspiracy theories that resulted in a mob — or he doesn't believe or he's willing to go along with it to say and do anything to get elected. And maybe that's worse. That says something about character and will end up showing up when you're actually in office."

Watch any number of television ads or clips from debates and McAuliffe can be seen calling Youngkin a "Trump wannabe," saying he'll bring Trump values and policies to Virginia — a state that Trump lost by 10 points in 2020.

And Trump has repeatedly endorsed Youngkin — most recently issuing a statement that they "get along very well together and strongly believe in many of the same policies."

While Youngkin has not touted Trump's endorsement or campaigned with him, he has discussed policy platforms Trump and the Republican Party are rallying behind like election integrity and parent's choice in education.

Youngkin has called election integrity a "democracy issue," and proposed an audit of voting machines — the latter of which is already state law that McAuliffe signed in 2017.

"Youngkin can't step too far from the right because he still needs the Trump base to turn out," Taylor of Cook Political Report said.

Aside from national figures and topics surfacing in the race, both candidates do have policy platforms they've touted.

Youngkin's campaign website lacked an "Issues" page until he outlined his brief but succinct "Day One Game Plan" on his website in late August. McAuliffe's site, in contrast, includes over a hundred pages of detailed policy outlines.

At an Oct. 15 rally featuring First Lady Jill Biden, McAuliffe joked to the crowd: "You want to have a big night? You get yourself a candle going and a little red wine, and you fire up Terry For Virginia!"

His campaign website includes both one-pagers and full documents for each policy goal he plans to support while governor.

Meanwhile, Youngkin said he prefers a more narrow approach to get started.

"A lot of career politicians spend a lot of time trying to address 100 different topics. What business leaders learn is you've got to focus to get things done to deliver results," Youngkin said in an interview

with Charlottesville Tomorrow.

As such, the Youngkin administration would focus on a limited number of issues immediately after taking office in hopes of seeing immediate results.

But it's wedge issue talking points intended to divide both candidates' supporters that have become the centerpiece of both campaigns in recent weeks.

"It's hard to talk about policy when each side can paint the other as super extreme," said Saxon, co-chair of Cville Dems. "Now we're talking about whether or not books should be banned at schools and whether or not transgender people should have access to bathrooms. We aren't going to talk about things like the income tax, which we would probably always find a whole lot of common ground on."

Courting a spectrum of voters



Glenn Youngkin celebrates during a rally event near Richmond on Oct. 23. Credit: Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

Amid ongoing controversy in Loudoun County surrounding debates over critical race theory and investigations into sexual assault at two schools, Youngkin has promised to ban CRT from K-12 education and has called for more school resource officers in schools.

Since 2020, some school divisions around the country — including Charlottesville and Albemarle County — have voted to remove SROs. Meanwhile critical race theory is

a legal framework taught at the collegiate level that explores how systems and institutions have disadvantaged people based on their race. Local public schools have said that they do not teach it, but area parents say local anti-racism policies and programs stem from it.

The conversation around parental rights and CRT has also emerged in a previously uncontested Albemarle County school board race.

Polls between the gubernatorial candidates have remained tight in recent weeks. A Suffolk University poll indicated a tie between Youngkin and McAuliffe at 45% each. However, it also indicated that a margin of 50% - 39% of voters think parents should have more influence on school curriculum than school boards. Youngkin — whose political action committee is funding Republican House of Delegates candidates and local candidates around the state— reminded rallygoers recently to vote in their school board races too.

Urban, from Albemarle's GOP, noted that Youngkin has been able to appeal to parents dissatisfied with education policies at both the state and local level.

"It goes beyond any one hot button issue, and more to the fundamental question of how much say parents should have in their kids' education or should it be dictated by far-away policy makers," he said.

Youngkin had already been advocating for parental choice — with plans to create more charter schools in the state — and a recent campaign ad tapped into growing concern over parent's voice in education

by featuring a familiar one from 2013.

Northern Virginia parent Laura Murphy opposed her son's advanced placement reading material in 2013 and by 2016 and 2017, McAuliffe had vetoed legislation that would give parents the option to opt-out of explicit subject matter for their children. Though some school divisions had already followed that practice, the legislation would have made it state law rather than local policy.

The book in question was "Beloved," a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Toni Morrison that violently explores the psychological effects of slavery. Following the ad, McAuliffe gave away copies of the novel at a recent campaign event.

Saxon feels the debate is not just about education, but about how people think about politics when they understand history and representation.

"If we are teaching our students the accurate — in my mind — story of the U.S. and how at every turn we have subjugated Black and brown people, and to a large extent women of all races from the power, it's going to dramatically change how laws get made, what gets passed and who people are willing to vote for as we create a more diverse legislature," she said. "When the legislature is more representative of people instead of just wealthy white men, it will change what laws get passed and how we think about [those laws]."

Another contentious issue has been abortion, and it's one that McAuliffe defended during his term as governor.

While his opponent has been transparently pro-life, and as the topic of abortion has emerged as a national talking point in the state race, a video surfaced where Youngkin said that he couldn't "go on the offense" until he was governor because he needed to court independent voters to win. The topic of abortion began trending nationally after Texas recently passed a law that bans abortions where a heartbeat can be detected (usually six weeks), makes no exceptions for rape or incest, and allows for healthcare providers or transportation providers to be sued for helping patients have an abortion.

Youngkin has since pointed to where he would actually support abortions.

"I do believe in exceptions in the case of rape or incest or when the mother's life is in jeopardy, but I also was very clear that the Texas bill, which has got everybody's attention, isn't a bill that I could sign," he told Charlottesville Tomorrow in an interview.

And Youngkin is not alone in a lack of clarity on a stance either. McAuliffe's stance on qualified immunity — a legal doctrine that protects law enforcement officers from most civil lawsuits — has been inconsistent. Despite previously stating he'd end qualified immunity, he later asserted that it would not be eliminated under his administration.

When asked by Charlottesville Tomorrow if there were any adjustments he would consider making to qualified immunity, McAuliffe said that while he supports it for officers "acting in good faith," he wouldn't support it for officers found to have violated constitutional rights.

"I've been very consistent on qualified immunity. It's called 'qualified immunity' for a reason — it's qualified," McAuliffe said. "If law enforcement officers are out doing their job and acting in good faith, they get 100% of protections of the commonwealth of Virginia. If someone goes out and breaks the law

and infringes on constitutional rights, then they'll lose that immunity."

Unknown factors and a national barometer

For some voters, a stance on abortion, law enforcement, COVID-19 or education may be all they need to know, and those stances, like anger, can drive people to the polls.

Charlottesville resident and lifelong Democrat-turned independent voter Julia Thompson said she's got her eye on Youngkin this year. His Christian faith speaks louder to her than anything else and it's what inspires her to vote for him.

"The thing I like about Youngkin number one is his faith. I believe that most of humanity's problems are really spiritual if you tease them out," Thompson said at a Sep. 24 rally for Youngkin in Harrisonburg. "Politics is man's best effort to right the wrongs."

The event, like his others, opened with prayer and a pledge of allegiance to the American flag. McAuliffe events, meanwhile, remain largely secular or reference the fact that Virginians have many faiths.

Judi Hendrick, a Democrat at a Henrico County event on Oct. 15, said she early voted for McAuliffe mostly because she believes he will help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and she's concerned with the education policies some Republicans have embraced. As a former teaching assistant at a private school, she said the curriculum glossed over historical moments like the era of slavery or the Civil Rights movement.

"I believe he did a good job and he will build on the groundwork he laid last time," she said.

Third party candidate Princess Blanding, has been excluded from both political debates and most polling.



Credit: Credit: Kate Thompson for Princess Blanding for governor

"I wish she were included in more polling," Taylor, of Cook Political Report, said. "I think everyone on the ballot should be included."

Taylor explained that while third party candidates have traditionally not won statewide races, their polling margins can indicate dissatisfaction with the two-party system or with one of the party candidates.

For example, she referenced McAuliffe's winning 2013 campaign where he and Ken Cucinelli were almost 3 points apart while Libertarian candidate Robert Sarvis held 6.5% of the votes.

She suspects that Princess Blanding could attract some of what could have been McAuliffe's voter base due to her "more liberal stances."

Blanding said she is running to "break up the political duopoly."

Blanding is the sister of Marcus-David Peters, a Black man killed by law enforcement in 2018 whose name lives on in state legislation that she contributed to creating. Dubbed the "Marcus Alert," state law

now outlines how mental health experts can be involved in responding to emergency calls — including limiting law enforcement's role in responding to certain calls.

Still, Blanding feels the legislation got “watered down” by partisan compromises. As governor, she said she would ensure that policies are crafted with more input from the people most impacted by them. Her other policy goals include climate resiliency, state contributions to affordable housing, bolstering funding to education and Medicare expansion.

“We are breaking down every barrier they are putting in front of us,” Blanding said of qualifying for the ballot despite her exclusion from debates. “The diversity of people who have joined the movement for liberation is continuously growing.”

Sandwiched between a presidential election and congressional midterm elections, Virginia is often seen as a bellwether for political pundits when it elects its governor every four years.

In recent elections, Republican candidates have had to either embrace or distance themselves from Trump, while he's been “democrats' most effective tool,” Taylor said. Biden also has seen a dip in approval ratings in recent months.

This gubernatorial election serves as a barometer of American politics to outsiders looking in, and how national issues can also be local.

“McAuliffe is hampered by the national environment and Youngkin still has a Trump problem,” Taylor said.

The question is, “which one will outweigh the other?”