

Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

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Virginia Governor: Old Dominion, New Election

By Jacob Rubashkin

It has been a quiet year for elections so far, with a handful of special congressional races producing status quo outcomes that barely registered in the political consciousness.

But that quiet could be coming to a close as Virginia gears up for November, when it will host the most expensive gubernatorial contest in the state's history. Last Tuesday's Democratic primary finalized November's matchup. On one side, a ferocious fundraiser and Democratic impresario. On the other, a political newcomer who could be Republicans' best chance at staunching the party's decade-long hemorrhaging in the commonwealth.

The Virginia race will be the biggest contest of the Biden era to date.

For Republicans, it presents an opportunity to demonstrate the party can not only hold together the Trump coalition without former President Donald Trump on the ballot, but win in places Trump couldn't and send a message that "blue states" aren't going to be off-limits in the 2022 midterm elections. For Democrats, the race will be a proving ground for how to hang a still-unpopular Trump around the neck of non-Trump Republican candidates.

It is also a chance for Democrats to figure out how to win an election as the party in power. Democrats have full control of Virginia for the first time since the 1990s, and have enacted an ambitious legislative agenda over the past two years. They'll have to defend that record to voters, in addition simply to running *against* the GOP.

In a way, it's a precursor to the challenge national Democrats — in full control of Washington for the first time in a decade — will face in next year's midterm elections. Virginia could offer the party a lesson on how to blend governing achievements with the anti-Trump messaging the party still believes is effective.

The Lay of the Land

Despite dominating the state's politics at the turn of the century, Virginia Republicans are entering the 2021 gubernatorial election at their political weakest since the 1960s, when the state was a brick in the Democratic Solid South.

Democrats currently hold all five statewide elected offices, both houses of the state Legislature, a majority of the state's Congressional delegation, and just won the state's 13 Electoral College votes. The last time all that was true was in 1964.

Republicans have not won a statewide race in the last decade. That's a far cry from when Virginia was supposed to be a launching pad for future presidents George Allen and Bob McDonnell.

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2022 Governor Ratings

Battleground

Democratic-held (6)

Kelly (D-Kan.)
Mills (D-Maine)
Whitmer (D-Mich.)
Sisolak (D-Nev.)
PA Open (Wolf, D)
Evers (D-Wisc.)

Republican-held (5)

AZ Open (Ducey, R)
DeSantis (R-Fl.)
Kemp (R-Ga.)
MD Open (Hogan, R)
Sununu (R-N.H.)

Solid Democratic (10)

Newsom (D-Calif.)
Polis (D-Colo.)
Lamont (D-Conn.)
HI Open (Ige, D)
Pritzker (D-Ill.)
Walz (D-Minn.)
Lujan Grisham (D-N.M.)
Cuomo (D-N.Y.)
OR Open (Brown, D)
McKee (D-R.I.)

Solid Republican (15)

Ivey (R-Ala.)
Dunleavy (R-Alaska)
AR Open (Hutchinson, R)
Little (R-Idaho)
Reynolds (R-Iowa)
Baker (R-Mass.)
NE Open (Ricketts, R)
Noem (R-S.D.)
DeWine (R-Ohio)
Stitt (R-Okla.)
McMaster (R-S.C.)
Lee (R-Tenn.)

2021 RACES

Likely Democratic

CA Recall (Newsom, D)
VA Open (Northam, D)

Solid Democratic

Murphy (D-N.J.)

Abbott (R-Texas)
Scott (R-Vt.)
Gordon (R-Wyo.)

CALENDAR

| | |
|----------------|--|
| June 22 | New York Mayoral Primaries |
| July 27 | Texas' 6th District Special Election |
| Aug. 3 | Ohio's 11th & 15th District Special Election Primaries |

Ohio 15 Special: Clash Near Columbus

By Jacob Rubashkin

When GOP Rep. Steve Stivers announced he would quit Congress just a few months into his sixth term to take a job as the head of the Ohio Chamber of Commerce, he reduced House Republicans' ranks by one, and created a vacancy in his Columbus-area congressional seat that will be filled via a special election this November.

Stivers is the latest of several business-friendly Republican politicians from Ohio, including Rep. Pat Tiberi and Sen. Rob Portman, to bow out of Washington in recent years, as former President Trump's influence extends further down the ballot. A former chairman of the NRCC who oversaw the party's steep losses in the 2018 midterm elections, Stivers was one of just a few dozen House Republicans to vote against objections to the Electoral College count on January 6. A member of the Main Street Caucus instead of the Freedom Caucus, Stivers had previously spoken out against Trump's "Muslim Ban" in 2017 and GOP Rep. Steve King's positive comments about white supremacy in 2018.

Ohio is arguably Ground Zero when it comes to Trump's continued impact on the GOP. Its most recent former governor (John Kasich) was pushed out of the party by Trump; its current governor (Mike DeWine) has drawn Trump's wrath and now faces a primary challenge from a Trump-inspired candidate; a former rising star in the congressional delegation (Anthony Gonzalez) is one of the top primary targets for Trump and his allies next year; and its wide-open Senate race features a passel of candidates tripping over themselves to align with the former president.

The special election in the 15th District will be the fifth special congressional election of the Biden presidency. The previous four — in Louisiana's 2nd and 5th, Texas' 6th, and New Mexico's 1st — saw largely status quo results, with no change in partisan control. Democrats overperformed their 2020 mark slightly in New Mexico, and Republicans overperformed 2020 in Texas.

Notably, the 15th District contest will be only the second Democrat vs. Republican race of the bunch. So although Republicans are heavily favored due to the district's partisan lean — it is rated Solid Republican — the results could still serve as a useful barometer of the national environment come November.

The Lay of the Land

The 15th District includes the southern portion of Columbus and a block of counties to the state capital's southeast stretching to Athens; it also stretches to include Clinton County to the southwest. CityLab's density index classifies it as a "Rural-suburban mix."

The district has a decided — though not overwhelming — Republican bent. In 2020, President Donald Trump carried it by 14 points, 56-42 percent, over Joe Biden, similar to his 15-point victory in 2016 over Hillary Clinton, 55-40 percent.

President Barack Obama also lost the district twice, albeit by a much smaller 6-point margin, 52-46 percent, to both John McCain in 2008 and Mitt Romney in 2012. In 2018's gubernatorial contest, Republican Mike DeWine carried the 15th by 8 points over Democrat Richard Cordray.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, a Democrat, actually carried the district 50-48 percent over Republican Jim Renacci in his 2018 re-election campaign. That's an improvement from 2012, when he lost the district 49-46 percent to Republican Josh Mandel (all data according to *Daily Kos Elections*).

The district is 88 percent white, according to American Community Survey data, and just 5 percent Black. Nearly 35 percent of residents — slightly more than the national average — have college degrees, a figure boosted by the presence of Ohio University in Athens.

The Republicans

Eleven Republicans are running to replace Stivers in the August 3 primary election, though local sources say the field falls into two tiers.

The top tier consists of four candidates: state Rep. Jeff LaRe, coal lobbyist Mike Carey, and state Sens. Stephanie Kunze and Bob Peterson.



Jeff LaRe

The bottom tier consists of the other seven candidates.

LaRe, 45, has served in the state legislature since 2019, when he was appointed to the chamber by a panel of state House Republicans. He is the executive vice

president at a security contractor, and previously worked as a corrections officer with the Fairfield County Sheriff's Office — he has made public safety the centerpiece of his campaign.

Stivers, the outgoing incumbent, endorsed LaRe to succeed him — and in an unusual step, Stivers dipped into his own leftover campaign

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funds to air TV advertisements announcing his endorsement of LaRe.

When Carey received an endorsement from Trump, he became an instant top-tier candidate, as the former president remains highly popular with the GOP base. Carey has had a long career lobbying for the coal industry, including a 13-year stint as the president of the Ohio Coal Association, and is currently the vice president for government affairs at ACNR, the fourth-largest coal company in America.

This is Carey's fourth run for office — the first three were all unsuccessful. In 1996 and 1998, he lost close contests for the state House to future Democratic U.S. Rep. Charlie Wilson, by 5 points and then by 7 points. And in 2007, he ran a brief campaign against U.S. Rep. Zack Space, a Democrat, in Ohio's 18th District before dropping out.

Kunze, of Hilliard, is a moderate GOP state senator who was targeted by Democrats in 2020 and won re-election by just 116 votes in a district that voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020. She has served in the state legislature for 10 years, first as a representative and then as a senator, and was the mayor of Hilliard, Ohio (pop. 28,435) before that, and also serves on the Ohio state GOP central committee.

Peterson, 59, comes from a family of farmers (he owns 3,000 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat and livestock) and was the president of the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation in the mid 2000s. He was a Fayette County Commissioner, and then a state representative and eventually state senator — a career in public service beginning in the 1990s that leaves him well connected in state politics.

In the state Senate, Peterson served two and a half terms as president pro tempore, the second-highest ranking position in the chamber, and has racked up endorsements from local leaders, as well as the two men who represented the Columbus suburbs in Congress before Stivers: Steve Austria and Dave Hobbs. Peterson is positioning himself as the candidate with the most governing experience.

Former state Rep. Ron Hood, most known nationally for sponsoring a bill that would require doctors to "reimplant" ectopic pregnancies — medically impossible — or face murder charges, is running. He has represented three different districts in the Ohio state House over the last 25 years, and ran for the Columbus-area 7th Congressional District in 2008 but lost the GOP primary to Austria, the eventual general election winner.

Ruth Edmonds is a former director of church outreach at the Center for Christian Virtue. The only Black woman in the race, Edmonds has made combating Critical Race Theory — a decades-old academic school of thought that Republicans have appropriated as the latest front in the culture war — central to her candidacy.

Waverly golf club owner Thomas Hwang is not expected to be a factor, but is the only candidate on broadcast TV, spending more than \$112,000 of what is likely his own money on a poorly produced introductory ad.

Hilliard city councilman Omar Tarazi, former Perry County commissioner Thad Cooperridder, licensed nurse practitioner Eric Clark, and chemical manufacturer John Adams are running as well, but not expected to compete for the nomination.

The Republican Primary

The primary will be a low-turnout affair, and with several credible candidates, that creates some uncertainty. And without a runoff provision, a candidate could win with far less than 50 percent of the vote.

Carey's primary task will be to inform voters that he was endorsed by Trump. He is the only top-tier candidate on TV, with a \$42,000 buy on Fox News (local cable) that highlights Trump's endorsement. He is also

the only candidate advertising on Facebook, where he has spent \$11,000 promoting endorsements from Trump and former Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski.

He may also get a boost when Trump comes to Ohio on June 26 to hold a rally in Cleveland that will likely include Carey as well as 16th District candidate Max Miller, according to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. While Trump won't be in Columbus, the event should draw real news coverage as the first rally the former president is holding since leaving office.

Local sources say Peterson is well-liked from his time in office, and has the capacity to raise significant funds for the race. He's also been



Stephanie Kunze

in government the longest of any of the candidates, and his scores of endorsements from local politicians are a testament to his deep political relationships in the district. That could be an area of attack for other candidates, but he will

likely fall back on his farming business to deflect charges of careerism.

LaRe got an early boost when Stivers went up on the air with an ad announcing his endorsement. Data from Kantar/CMAG indicates that Stivers has booked more than \$250,000 worth of air time in the Columbus media market for a spot that extols LaRe as "a strong conservative leader who's fought to make our communities safer." But while Stivers is relatively popular in the district, it's not obvious just how much weight his endorsement carries for LaRe.

Still, in a low-turnout election with a wide field, any boost counts.

Carey, LaRe, and Peterson are all ideologically aligned on the issues GOP primary voters tend to care about: abortion, the Second Amendment, border security, etc. Kunze stands slightly apart: She was notably the only Republican in the state Senate to vote against an bill that imposed criminal penalties on doctors who don't inform patients of a controversial "abortion reversal" therapy in 2019. She also has just a 42 percent rating from the NRA. And while that might give her a leg up in the more moderate suburbs in her home base of Upper Arlington and some of the other close-in Columbus suburbs, several Ohio GOP consultants say it likely caps her support in a more ideological special primary electorate.

Kunze could also derive some benefit from her heavily contested election last fall, when she and her allies including the state Chamber of Commerce spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on TV and digital advertising in the Columbus media market.

But Carey clearly begins this race with a clear advantage given his support from Trump.

The all-party primary in the Texas 6 special election demonstrated the power of a Trump endorsement among GOP voters.

An Inside Elections analysis found that Republican Susan Wright's share of the Election Day vote (after she was endorsed by Trump) was 8 points higher than her share of the early vote (before the endorsement), while her two main GOP opponents' vote shares dropped a combined 9.1 points on Election Day compared to the early vote. All other candidates' shares were largely unchanged. And the shift among just the

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GOP electorate was even greater. Wright received 25.5 percent of all early Republican votes, and 38.3 percent of all Election Day Republican votes.

The Democrats

Two Democrats filed for the seat: state Rep. Allison Russo and retired Army colonel Greg Betts, though local sources say Russo is the more formidable candidate.

Russo, 44, has represented the suburbs to the west of Columbus since 2019, most recently winning re-election by 16 points. She holds a masters in public health from University of Alabama, Birmingham, and a doctorate of public health from George Washington University and works as the policy research director at a health care consulting firm.

Democrats like Russo's policy background, and her life story: she was born poor in rural Mississippi to a teenage single mom who worked as a union carpenter. Russo is also a military spouse. Her husband is a retired Air Force officer and his service took them across the country, and for several years to Europe.

Her campaign points to her 2018 win, when she flipped a suburban seat that had voted for Romney in 2012 (and for Hillary Clinton in 2016), as evidence of her bipartisan appeal and ability to win over independent and GOP-leaning voters because she outperformed Democratic gubernatorial nominee Richard Cordray, receiving 1.5 percent more of the vote than he did.

In that run, she was endorsed by EMILY's List and former President Obama.

Russo's campaign team includes media consultants Justin Barasky and

Raghu Devaguptapu of Left Hook, pollster Kevin Akins of ALG, JVA Campaigns for direct mail, digital strategy firm New Blue interactive, and campaign manager Matt Schoonmaker.



Allison Russo

Courtesy Bob Peterson



Bob Peterson

the very favorable national environment for Democrats just a few months later in November, but even with a 2018-style environment and a \$4 million fundraising haul, Democrat Danny O'Connor was not able to pull off a win.

That's the feeling among several national Democratic strategists who are watching the race but skeptical that it will develop. Local and national Republicans watching the race are confident about this race regardless of which candidate emerges from the primary.

Don't expect much national involvement in the race unless something significant changes. The major congressional players — the DCCC and the NRCC, and Super PACs House Majority PAC and Congressional Leadership Fund — have largely steered clear of special elections so far this year. If any of them do start to spend money here, that would be a sign the race is getting a little more competitive. (In this month's New Mexico 1 special election, Republicans talked a big game about their candidate and messaging but never committed resources to help him; the GOP nominee lost by 25 points).

Notably, national Democrats did not expend any resources or substantive effort in the Texas 6 special election, and Trump only won that district by 3 points, compared to his 14-point win in Ohio's 15th.

The group 314 Action, which seeks to elect Democratic candidates with STEM backgrounds to office, has endorsed Russo and helped her campaign with its organization and launch but hasn't put a dollar figure to its level of independent expenditure support (which is what really matters). And EMILY's List, which supports pro-choice women, previously endorsed Russo in her state legislative election but hasn't weighed in on the congressional race yet.

The Bottom Line

Republicans begin this race heavily favored, due to the partisan lean of the district and the tendency for the party that controls the White House — in this case, the Democrats — to face political headwinds.

Russo's campaign believes that the pieces are there to pull off an upset: a credible Democratic candidate, a messy, potentially fractured GOP field, and strong local issues for Russo to run on.

But with partisan polarization at historic highs, none of that may matter if the national environment isn't favorable to Democrats come November. At the moment, the limited information we have from other special elections as well as national polling indicates that not much has changed from November 2020, when Democrats came nowhere close to winning this district.

IE

Gubernatorial Updates

ARIZONA. Open; Doug Ducey (R), term-limited. Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, the highest ranking elected Democrat in the state, is running to succeed Ducey in what will be one of 2022's most competitive gubernatorial contests. Hobbs, who saw her national profile grow in the wake of the state GOP's "audit" of Maricopa County's ballots, is a top-tier candidate in a state that already has a history of electing women governors and is growing more comfortable voting for Democrats. Former Nogales mayor/chief of staff at U.S. Customs and Border Protection Marco Lopez is the other Democrat in the race.

State Treasurer Kimberly Yee announced her campaign for the Republican nomination last month — if elected, she would be the first East Asian woman to serve as governor in American history. So did former Rep. Matt Salmon, who narrowly lost the 2002 gubernatorial election to Janet Napolitano. Salmon picked up an endorsement from the anti-tax Club for Growth just hours after he jumped in the race. Rounding out the current field are former KSAZ-TV news anchor Kari Lake, who drew controversy last year for sharing misinformation about Covid-19, and Karrin Taylor Robson, a member of Arizona's Board of Regents, which oversees the state's public university system.

Other Republicans including former Ducey chief of staff Kirk Adams and 2014 gubernatorial/2016 congressional candidate Christine Jones could run. State Attorney General Mark Brnovich is running for Senate instead. Battleground.

CALIFORNIA. Gavin Newsom (D), elected 2018 (62%). The recall election targeting Newsom is moving forward after organizers secured more than enough signatures to put it on the ballot. The latest step of the process was a report from the state's Department of Finance estimating the administrative costs of the election at \$215 million. Due to ambiguities in the state recall law, it's not obvious when the race will actually take place, with dates ranging between August and November floated by local politicians. Thanks to a combination of public and private arm-twisting by Team Newsom, no noteworthy Democrats have announced they'll stand as a candidate in case the governor is recalled.

On the Republican side, gimmicky candidates such as 2018 nominee John Cox (who's taken to touring the state with a 2,000 pound live bear) and reality TV star Caitlyn Jenner (who seems to regress with every interview she gives and now says she wants to build a wall on California's southern border) have sucked up all the oxygen in the race. That's to the detriment of establishment GOP favorite Kevin Faulconer, the former mayor of San Diego, who is struggling for attention, as well as former Rep. Doug Ose, a Sacramento politician who is the fourth notable candidate in the race.

In a California recall, voters are presented with two questions. The first asks if they want to remove Gov. Newsom from office. The second asks whom they want to replace him (Newsom cannot be an option on the second question). All available public polling shows the recall question trailing, often by double digits. Even a recent GOP internal survey from Moore Information for the Faulconer campaign found the recall trailing by 6 points among registered voters, 50-44 percent (though a *highly* favorable likely voter screen put the recall ahead by 3 points).

With Covid-19 cases dropping, vaccination rates rising, and the state largely re-opened for businesses, Newsom's position is only getting stronger. By the time the election rolls around, it will have been nearly

a year since the governor was embarrassed by photographs of him flouting his own regulations at fancy restaurant French Laundry (an incident that gave the recall effort a major boost of energy). It doesn't hurt that Newsom plans on sending out \$600 stimulus checks to the state's residents too. Likely Democratic.

FLORIDA. Ron DeSantis (R), elected 2018 (49.6%). State Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried, Florida's only statewide



Nikki Fried

Democratic elected official, announced her much-anticipated gubernatorial candidacy on June 1. She joins Rep. Charlie Crist — who served a single term as governor in the 2000s as a Republican, and then narrowly lost the 2014 gubernatorial

race as a Democrat. Crist is in his third term in Congress representing the St. Petersburg-based 13th District.

State Sen. Annette Taddeo, who represents part of Miami-Dade County and was Crist's running mate in the 2014 election, also says she is considering a run for the top spot. Much to the delight of national Democrats, Rep. Val Demings is running for Senate against Marco Rubio rather than throwing her hat in the ring to take on DeSantis. The last three gubernatorial elections have been decided by an average of 1 percent. Battleground.

GEORGIA. Brian Kemp (R), elected 2018 (50.2%). Kemp looked vulnerable to a Trump-inspired primary challenge from his right flank earlier this year, but the fracas over the state's new voting law appears to have stabilized his position within the party. Perhaps the greatest potential threat was from former Rep. Doug Collins, who Trump publicly encouraged to run against Kemp. But Collins says he won't run for anything in 2022. That leaves former Democratic state Rep./2008 Senate candidate Vernon Jones, who rebranded last year as a Trump supporter and announced his party switch at the Jan. 6 "Stop the Steal" rally on the Mall, as the only announced challenger to Kemp. Stacey Abrams, who has remained nationally prominent since her 2018 run, is the likely Democratic nominee. Battleground.

IDAHO. Brad Little (R), elected 2018 (60%). Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin will challenge Gov. Brad Little in the GOP primary in 2022 (the lieutenant governor is elected separately in Idaho). McGeachin, who has expressed doubt about the existence of Covid-19 and attended a mask-burning rally at the state capital, has attacked Little over his response to the pandemic, including his declaration of a state emergency. Recently, McGeachin took advantage of Little's brief absence from the state, which left her as acting governor, to issue an executive order banning mask mandates. Little promptly rescinded the order upon his return. Solid Republican.

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MARYLAND. Open; Larry Hogan (R), term-limited. The Democratic field in this open race continues to grow, though it will not be as expansive as initially expected. Former U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King and former state Attorney General/2014 gubernatorial candidate Doug Gansler both made their bids official. So did former nonprofit executive/Army veteran/bestselling author Wes Moore. In a surprise, former Prince George's County Executive/2018 Democratic gubernatorial primary runner-up Rushern Baker said he is running, too, but his social media accounts are still dormant and his website is not yet set up.

Prince George's County Executive Angela Alsobrooks is running for re-election to her current post and not for governor, as are Howard County Executive Calvin Ball, Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski, and wealthy U.S. Rep. David Trone.

Former U.S. Labor Secretary/DNC chairman Tom Perez just took a job at Venable LLP, but reportedly may still run. The biggest question mark is Rep. Anthony Brown, the former lieutenant governor who went into personal debt during his lackluster 2014 campaign for governor but has since resuscitated his political career as a member of Congress. Maryland insiders say Brown has gone back and forth about launching another run.

On the Republican side, Lt. Gov. Boyd Rutherford confirmed he would not run to succeed Hogan. That leaves state Secretary of Commerce Kelly Schultz and former state Del./Washington Wizards heckler/gadfly Robin Ficker as the only notable Republicans in the field. Battleground.

NEW JERSEY. Phil Murphy (D), elected 2017 (56%). 2021 election. The matchup is set for New Jersey's November election: the incumbent Democrat Murphy will face former state Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, who also ran for governor in 2017 but lost in the GOP primary to Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno (who went on to lose to Murphy). Ciattarelli was the consensus frontrunner for the last six months, but in the final weeks of the race he started spending money to attack a minor candidate in the race, Hirsh Singh.

Singh, who narrowly lost the GOP primary for Senate in 2020, was assailing Ciattarelli for being insufficiently loyal to Trump, and Ciattarelli responded with a \$2.3 million barrage of cable and radio ads burnishing his conservative credentials. Singh also released an internal poll conducted by former Trump campaign manager Brad Parscale that found him leading Ciattarelli, and the Democratic Governors Association, seeing an opportunity to have some fun, polled the race as well, finding Ciattarelli ahead of Singh by just six points, 29-23 percent.

In the end, Ciattarelli won with 49 percent of the vote. Pastor Phil Rizzo, who was not even invited to the primary debate, placed second with 26 percent, while Singh finished third with 22 percent. While Singh had run a Trump-focused effort — so much so that Trump's team had to clarify that the former president hadn't endorsed him — Rizzo's campaign centered on Murphy's anti-coronavirus lockdown measures. His ads, done by the same firm that made viral spots for House candidates including Kim Klacik and Joe Collins, featured business owners tearing up fines they received from the state government for violating lockdown rules last year.

A certified public accountant, Ciattarelli is running as a straight-talking businessman who can put New Jersey back to work. He's

giving special focus to the state's high property tax rates, and leaning into his persona as a born-and-raised Jersey boy, a contrast with the Massachusetts-raised, globe-trotting Murphy, who made a fortune as a Goldman Sachs executive. But Ciattarelli is walking a political tightrope. The results of the primary — in particular Rizzo and Singh's strong showings — indicate that much of the GOP energy in the state is still centered on Trump and on anti-lockdown fervor. While both of those things excite the GOP base, they are broadly unpopular among New Jersey's general electorate. Most voters dislike Trump and approve of Murphy's handling of coronavirus. Ciattarelli can't win by just turning out the base in this overwhelmingly Democratic state, and he can't win by shooting for the middle and leaving the base out in the cold, especially when he's at the top of the ticket.

Ciattarelli is a credible candidate for Republicans, but New Jersey is unfriendly territory for the party, and Murphy begins this race the clear favorite. Though the governor had some stumbles early on in his tenure, the coronavirus pandemic was an opportunity for him to strengthen his hold on his own fractious party in Trenton and improve his standing with voters. According to Monmouth Univ., his approval rating sat at 41 percent approve/38 percent disapprove in September 2019, shot up to 71 percent approve/21 percent disapprove in mid-2020, and has since settled at 57 percent approve/35 percent disapprove this May. Solid Democratic.

Rutgers-Eagleton, May 21-29 (RVs)— General election ballot: Murphy over Ciattarelli, 52% - 26%.

Change Research (D) for Project Ready, May 15-20 (A)— General election ballot: Murphy over Ciattarelli, 47% - 36%.

OHIO. Mike DeWine (R), elected 2018 (50.4%). Jim Renacci, the former congressman who unsuccessfully challenged Sen. Sherrod Brown in the 2018 Senate race, announced he would run against Gov. Mike DeWine in the Republican primary next year. DeWine has drawn the ire of some conservatives in the state for the aggressive public health measures he took during the coronavirus pandemic, and earned himself a spot on former President Trump's naughty list after he acknowledged that Joe Biden had legitimately won the presidential election. So Renacci certainly has an opening in the GOP primary electorate. But Renacci's lackluster performance in 2018, when he lost to Brown by 6 points even as every other GOP statewide candidate won, left Republicans in DC unimpressed with his political skills. This is a race where a Trump endorsement could make a major difference, but also where Trump's

reticence to endorse candidates he thinks will lose could also come into play.

On the Democratic side, Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley is the only officially announced candidate and is busy building up a campaign operation and



Nan Whaley

institutional support. She recently received endorsements from EMILY's List, which backs pro-choice Democratic women for office, and 314 Action, which backs candidates with science backgrounds, and she is

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also tallying up endorsements from state legislators. Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley has been raising money for a run for most of this year and recently said that he is “of course” running for governor, but hasn’t actually rolled out a campaign yet. Solid Republican.

RHODE ISLAND. Daniel McKee (D), assumed office 2021. McKee ascended to the state’s top office after Gov. Gina Raimondo was confirmed as Joe Biden’s commerce secretary, and is likely running for a full term. But the former Cumberland mayor won’t have the field to himself — term-limited Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea is running as well, and actually had more cash in the bank at the end of March than McKee (\$546,000 to his \$450,000). Several other current and former elected officials could jump in as well. Not among them: Reps. Jim Langevin and David Cicilline, after Rhode Island surprisingly retained both its congressional seats in the decennial reapportionment. Solid Democratic.

SOUTH CAROLINA. Henry McMaster (R) assumed office 2017, elected 2018 (54%). Republicans are still waiting for businessman/2018 candidate John Warren and state Senate Majority Leader Shane Massey to decide if they want to challenge McMaster in the GOP primary. On the Democratic side, former Rep. Joe Cunningham, the attorney and engineer who won a surprising Lowcountry upset in

2018 but lost his re-election in 2020 by fewer than 6,000 votes, is running for the nomination. But he won’t have the field to himself. State Sen. Mia McLeod, who represents parts of the Columbia suburbs, is running as well, and would be the first Black woman governor in American history. Solid Republican.

TEXAS. Greg Abbott (R) elected 2014 (59%), 2018 (56%). Abbott officially launched his bid for a third term, complete with an endorsement from former President Trump. Also competing in the GOP primary is former real estate developer/former state Sen. Don Huffines, who lost his Dallas-area seat to a Democrat in 2018 and is attempting to run to Abbott’s right. State Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller is talking himself up as a potential candidate, and Allen West, the former Florida congressman who recently finished a stint as the chairman of the Texas Republican Party, is also hinting he may run. Abbott had more than \$38 million in the bank at the start of the year and will be hard to beat in a primary or general election. Democrat Beto O’Rourke, the former congressman/2018 Senate nominee/2020 presidential candidate continues to float a potential run, though recent polling suggests he’s not that popular statewide. And take rumors about Matthew McConaughey running with a grain of salt. The actor won’t even say which party’s flag, if either, he’d run under, and, oh, he’s also in the midst of a book tour and thriving off of all the free press coverage. Solid Republican. **IE**

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Democrats’ victories in the back half of the decade are noticeably larger than in the early 2010s. In 2012, President Barack Obama won by 4 points while Tim Kaine won the Senate race by 6 points. In 2013, Terry McAuliffe won a narrower-than-expected 48-45 percent victory over Ken Cuccinelli in the gubernatorial race, and in 2014, Ed Gillespie nearly pulled off a shocking upset in the Senate race, losing to Sen. Mark Warner by just 1 point.

But in 2016, Clinton carried the state by 6 points, in 2017 Ralph Northam won by a 9-point margin over Gillespie in the gubernatorial contest, and in 2018 and 2020 Sens. Kaine and Warner each won by double-digits (16 points for Kaine, 12 points for Warner) while Joe Biden won the state by 10 points.

The state’s leftward march relative to the nation is clear. In the 2008 presidential election, Virginia voted 2 points to the right of the nation. In 2012, it voted right in line with the national margin. In 2016, it voted 3 points to the left of the national margin. In 2020, it voted 5.5 points to the left of the nation.

At the root of Republicans’ troubles is the suburban shift toward Democrats. The wealthy, populous region around Washington, DC — Arlington, Loudon, Fairfax, and Prince William counties and Alexandria — have all sped away from Republicans, a trend that began before Trump’s election but has only accelerated since. Even as rural counties in the west and south of the state, once Democratic strongholds, have gravitated toward Republicans, the GOP has been unable to make up for its losses in the DC metro area, as well as in Richmond and Virginia Beach.

This dynamic is also evident in Virginia’s U.S. House races. In 2018, Democrats flipped three seats in Virginia: one carried by Clinton in Northern Virginia (the 10th), and two carried by Trump, one in the Richmond area (the 7th) and one in Virginia Beach (the 2nd). Two years

later, even as the national environment worsened for Democrats and the party lost 12 seats in the House around the country, all three Virginia freshmen won re-election, and Biden carried all three districts.

Yet in the face of all the bad news, Republicans are optimistic they have the candidate to break the losing streak.

The Democratic Nominee

McAuliffe, 64, previously served as governor of Virginia from 2014 to 2018. Born in Syracuse, he came to the DC area to attend Catholic



Courtesy McAuliffe Campaign

Terry McAuliffe

University, graduating in 1979. His long career as a political financier took off soon after that, when he served as a fundraiser for President Jimmy Carter’s ill-fated re-election bid.

After the Carter campaign, McAuliffe went to

law school and embarked on a successful career as a businessman in the DC area, in fields including banking, construction, real estate, and telecommunications. Along the way, he made himself an integral part of the national Democratic Party’s fundraising apparatus, including as finance director for Dick Gephardt’s 1988 presidential campaign.

After linking up with Bill Clinton following the 1994 midterms, McAuliffe became the top fundraiser for the party, putting together \$275 million for Clinton’s various political efforts, and hosting the biggest single-night political fundraiser in history for Al Gore in 1999 (raising \$26 million).

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McAuliffe was the chairman of the 2000 Democratic National Convention, and served as chairman of the Democratic National Committee from 2001 to 2005, after which he served as co-chair of Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign.

In 2009, he ran his first campaign for governor. Despite leading in early polling and lapping the field in fundraising, McAuliffe lost out on the coveted *Washington Post* endorsement and lost decisively to state Sen. Creigh Deeds, 50-26 percent.

In the 2013 race for governor, he ran unopposed for the Democratic nomination and faced GOP nominee/state Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli and Libertarian nominee Robert Sarvis in the general election. McAuliffe spent a then-record \$38 million, nearly double Cuccinelli, but despite having a comfortable lead in polling only won by 2.6 points. Sarvis, the Libertarian, took 6.5 percent of the vote.

After leaving office, McAuliffe wrote a book about his experience as governor in the wake of the deadly neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Va., that captured national attention. He briefly flirted with running for president in 2020 but stepped back when Biden entered the field, and it became clear soon after that he had his eye on returning to the governor's mansion in 2021. He officially announced his candidacy on December 8, 2020.

The 2021 Democratic primary featured five major candidates: McAuliffe, state Sen. Jennifer McClellan, former state Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, and state Del. Lee Carter.

McAuliffe led the field in polling and fundraising from the outset. There was some trepidation among Democratic activists about nominating a middle-aged white man with a history in politics, and some excitement about the potential to nominate a Black woman (either McClellan or Carroll Foy) to be chief executive of the former capital of the Confederacy. But McAuliffe's high popularity within the Democratic electorate, and his opponents' inability to consolidate around a single anti-McAuliffe candidate, made the primary a sleepy affair.

On June 8, McAuliffe won a decisive victory over the field with 62 percent of the vote; Carroll Foy, the second-place finisher, was more than 40 points behind, with 20 percent. McAuliffe carried all 133 counties and municipalities in the commonwealth.

Since he entered the race in late 2020, McAuliffe raised \$12.8 million, and had \$3.7 million in the bank up to May 27, a week before the primary election.

McAuliffe's campaign team includes media consultant/former Democratic Governors Association Executive Director Elisabeth Pearson of Magnus Pearson Media, Hart Research Associates for polling, and Moxie Media for direct mail.

The Republican Nominee

Rather than hold a traditional primary election, Virginia Republicans chose to select their nominee at a convention on May 8. It was no ordinary convention, either. Covid-19 restrictions and a lack of prior planning forced the party to hold an "unassembled" convention all across the state using ranked-choice voting.

Emerging as the victor was Glenn Youngkin, a former co-CEO of the Carlyle Group, a private equity firm, who is a longtime GOP donor but has never run for office before.



Youngkin campaign ad: "A New Day"

It took Youngkin six rounds of ranked-choice balloting to defeat several more established political figures: former state House speaker Kirk Cox, state Sen. Amanda Chase, and 2013 lieutenant governor candidate Pete Snyder. He won the final round 55-45 percent over Snyder.

Youngkin, 54, was born in Richmond and grew up in Virginia Beach, attending the Norfolk Academy, Virginia's oldest private school. The 6-foot-7 Youngkin played basketball at Rice Univ., where he graduated in 1990, and then attended Harvard Business School, graduating with an MBA in 1994.

He joined Carlyle in 1995, working his way up the ranks of the company, eventually being named co-CEO in 2018 along with Kewsong Lee — an arrangement that Bloomberg News termed "awkward, and increasingly acrimonious" and that lasted for less than three years. Along the way, he became a regular GOP donor and was an early supporter of Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan. Youngkin kicked his donating into a higher gear in 2012 when Ryan was the GOP vice presidential nominee and began writing 5-figure checks to party committees, continuing to do so over the past decade.

After leaving Carlyle in 2020, Youngkin founded the Virginia Ready Initiative, which seeks to provide job training for Virginians who became unemployed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the GOP convention, Youngkin beat out a more moderate candidate (Cox), a candidate more closely aligned with Trump (Chase), and a candidate from Virginia's conservative establishment (Snyder).

Youngkin, whose net worth is estimated by *The Washington Post* to be \$300 million, has largely self-funded his campaign so far with a \$12 million loan (he has raised an additional \$3.7 million). He reported \$4.4 million in the bank on May 27.

Youngkin's campaign team includes general consultants Jeff Roe and Kristin Davison of Axiom Strategies, Poolhouse for paid media, and pollsters Chris Wilson and Amanda Iovino of WPA Intelligence. Axiom is also handling direct mail, and the campaign manager is Mark Campbell.

How It Plays Out

Republicans have not won a statewide contest in Virginia in 12 years, since Bob McDonnell led a sweep of the state's three constitutional offices.

Virginia Republicans believe that Youngkin's profile gives them the best chance to win in years. So far, Youngkin has centered on two pillars of positive messaging: that he's a fresh face and not a politician, and that he's a successful businessman. His campaign ads often feature Youngkin

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standing out among mindless droves of indistinguishable middle-aged white men who represent the political establishment (Youngkin, it should be said, is a middle-aged white man himself, as is McAuliffe).

Youngkin has also seized on McAuliffe's primary opponents' attacks on the nominee as a figure of the past, rather than the future, cutting an ad composed of clips of Carroll Foy attacking McAuliffe as an old, failed leader.

Seeking to capitalize on Trump's surprising strength with minority voters, Youngkin's campaign is highlighting its various coalition efforts, especially among Black and Hispanic voters; Republicans also hope that the diversity of the GOP ticket, with Winsome Sears, a Black woman, running for lieutenant governor and Jason Miyares, a Cuban American, running for Attorney General, will help the party appeal to those voters.

Republicans also view schools as a key weapon in their messaging arsenal and a potential wedge issue to win back suburban voters in Northern Virginia that have drifted toward Democrats over the past decade. Potential lines of attack range from questions about accelerated math courses, to the right of a Loudoun County teacher to not use a student's preferred pronouns, to the spectre of "Critical Race Theory" (a graduate-level academic school of thought that has been appropriated by conservative media as an existential threat to the country).

Democrats, for their part, aren't fazed, and see concerns over student curricula — particularly relating to Critical Race Theory — as the latest in a series of culture war fronts that have failed Virginia Republicans over the past decade, including Gillespie's invocation of Central American gang MS-13 during the 2017 race and Corey Stewart's fixation on Confederate statues in the 2018 Senate contest. One Democratic strategist following the race said that they were more worried about attacks on "Defund the Police," because those are easy to understand, than Critical Race Theory.

Whether schooling is the issue that drives Northern Virginia back into the GOP fold remains to be seen. But it is notable that initially, Republicans thought their winning issue was the lack of in-person schooling due to Covid-19, and planned to make that a centerpiece of the campaign against the Democratic state government. Now that Covid-19 is more and more in the rearview mirror, and school is likely to be open full time in the fall, that issue has given way to these new concerns.

Winning back suburban voters is integral to Republicans' chances of success. There are simply not enough votes in the more rural areas in the southern part of the state to overcome the massive advantage Democrats have built up in Fairfax, Prince William, and Loudoun counties, even when the GOP holds their own in the more conservative Virginia Beach areas.

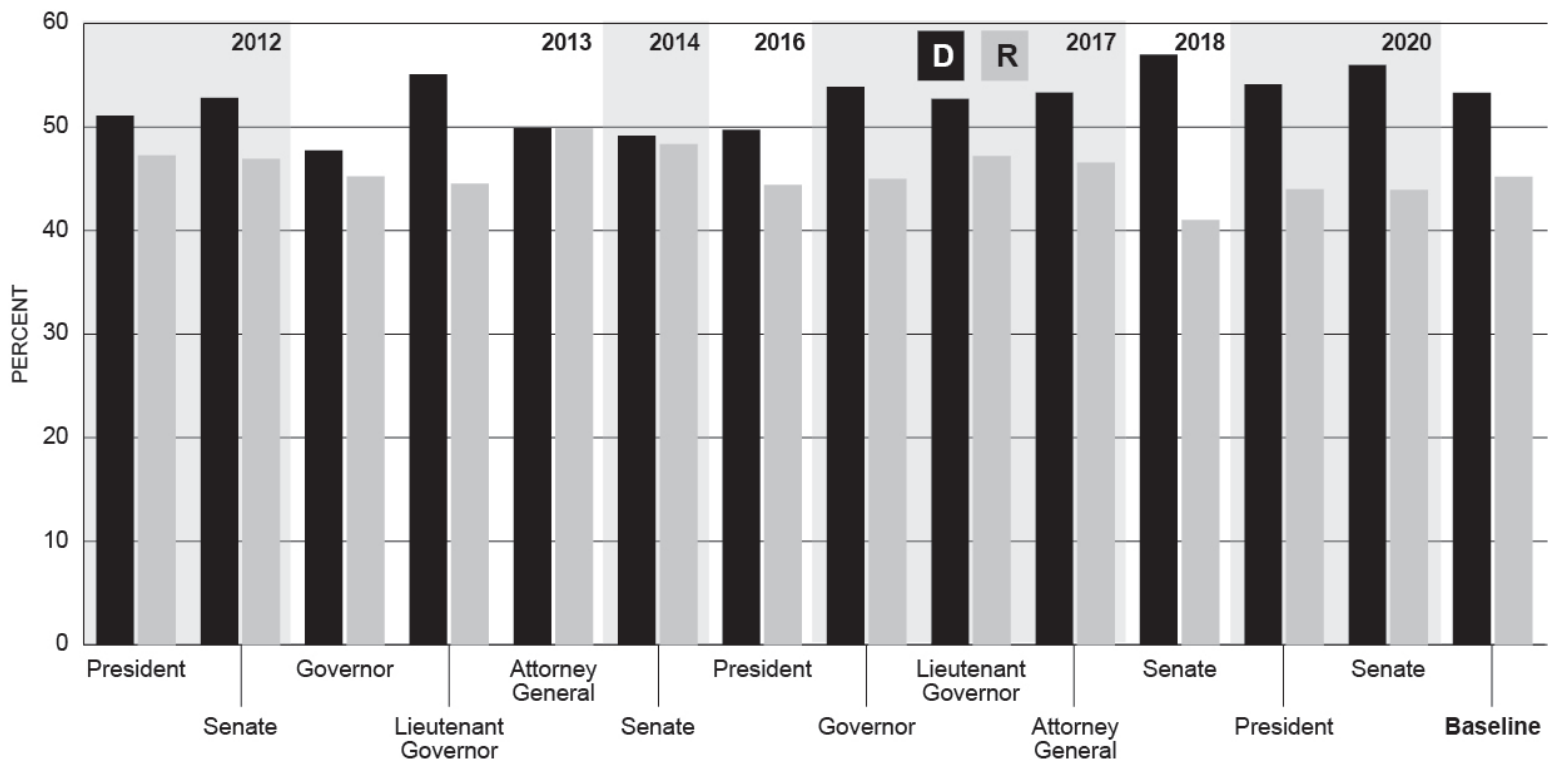
McAuliffe has zeroed in on an economic message, touting the reduction in unemployment and the economic growth the state experienced during his previous tenure as governor. His TV and digital advertising have generally focused on economic recovery, implicitly and explicitly tying McAuliffe's leadership post-Great Recession to the ongoing post-Covid-19 recovery.

He will also run on the successes of his and Northam's administrations in social policy: McAuliffe's restoration of voting rights to 173,000 people with felony records, Northam's repeal of the death penalty, and the state's 2018 expansion of Medicaid.

McAuliffe's campaign will also highlight Youngkin's social views — he's pro-life, pro-Second Amendment, and campaigned in the primary as a conservative Christian — which McAuliffe's team believes are unpopular in key parts of Virginia. McAuliffe staffers also like to note that, while the former governor has produced pages and pages of policy stances and proposals, the only policy issue on Youngkin's website is "Election Integrity," which Democrats contend is a dog whistle for

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Statewide Election Results in Virginia



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Trump’s conspiracy theories about the 2020 election.

Both McAuliffe and Youngkin will be sure to dig into each others’ histories — Youngkin’s as the leader of one of the world’s largest private equity groups, and McAuliffe’s as an uber-connected political operative and businessman with involvements in an electric car company and a Rhode Island estate planning scheme that both went belly-up. One Virginia Republican noted with frustration that the party was not able to fully litigate McAuliffe’s history in 2013 because Cuccinelli was such a flawed candidate, while one Virginia Democrat said that Youngkin would have to own “every single layoff Carlyle made” during his time there.

It Comes Down to Turnout

Looming over the race is Trump, the former president who owns a golf course in Northern Virginia and who is unpopular in the state. In Virginia and across the country, political observers are asking if the historically high levels of voter engagement and turnout they saw during the Trump presidency will persist even with Trump out of office. It’s a question with implications for both parties. Will Republicans be able to turn out Trump’s coalition without the president on the ballot? Will Democrats be able to preserve their gains among suburban voters with a college degree, and keep their base motivated, without Trump occupying headlines every day?

The conventional wisdom heading into the Democratic primary was that interest in the governor’s race was down significantly compared to 2017, when the early days of the Trump administration sparked massive organizing efforts in the party. But when the dust settled, turnout in the Democratic primary clocked in at 91 percent of 2017’s turnout (that year had a much more competitive contest for the gubernatorial nomination), exceeding Democrats’ expectations and calming party strategists’ nerves. Unfortunately, because Republicans chose their nominee by convention rather than primary (as in 2017), there is no apples-to-apples comparison to be made on turnout.

Democrats will also try their hardest to tie Youngkin to Trump, already highlighting Trump’s endorsement of him and a few favorable things Youngkin said about the former president in interviews. In any other year, running against a former president would likely be a losing strategy in Virginia; one Democrat who worked on Creigh Deeds’ losing campaign in 2009 said they attempted, unsuccessfully, to make the race about George W. Bush. But Trump’s insistence on remaining not just part of the political landscape but the leader of the Republican Party creates an opening for Democrats.

One thing’s for sure: this race will be pricey, likely the most expensive in Virginia history. Back in 2017, Northam and Gillespie combined to spend \$66 million. Between Youngkin’s vast personal resources and commitment to spending whatever it takes, McAuliffe’s long career as a professional Democratic Party fundraiser, and Virginia’s lack of campaign contribution limits, observers anticipate spending in this race will exceed \$100 million.

The Early Polling

Just two surveys of the race have been released so far, compared to 17 polls testing Northam vs. Gillespie at a similar point in the 2017 cycle. A June 2-6 poll of likely voters conducted by WPAi for the Youngkin campaign found McAuliffe with a slight lead over Youngkin, 48-46 percent, with 5 percent undecided. The poll release did not include

crosstabs or recalled 2020 presidential vote (in order to examine whether the sample was significantly more Republican compared to last November).

And a June 9-12 poll of likely voters conducted by JMC Analytics for *CNalysis* (and crowdfunded by dozens of donors including *Inside Elections*) found McAuliffe ahead 46-42 percent, with 12 percent undecided and a projected electorate that voted for Biden by 8 points, 50-42 percent, in 2020 (he won by 10 points, 54-44 percent). Youngkin’s camp points to their poll as evidence the race is anyone’s game. But it’s not surprising to see the Republican in the low 40s — after all, Trump won 44 percent of the vote in 2016, and the last two gubernatorial nominees each won around 45 percent of the vote.

But 45 percent is not enough to win, and Youngkin’s challenge will be to show that the votes are out there to get to 50 percent. Even Youngkin’s own survey indicates only 5 percent of voters are undecided; that’s a limited amount of room to grow within the electorate.

The Bottom Line

As the only game in town this November, the Virginia race is going to attract its fair share of attention and dollars from party officials, activists, donors, and pundits alike, each looking for clues about what messages work, which voters are up for grabs, and who’s set up for success in the midterms. That’s certainly what happened in 2017. But don’t let the hubbub lead you to believe that this is a toss-up race. McAuliffe begins the contest with some serious advantages, and Virginia is simply not the red-tinged swing state it once was. While Youngkin does have a path to victory, the burden of proof is squarely on Republicans to show that they can not only compete in but win the state.



| 2022 Senate Ratings | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| BATTLEGROUND | |
| Democratic-Held (4) | Republican-Held (4) |
| Cortez Masto (D-Nev.) | NC Open (Burr, R) |
| Hassan (D-N.H.) | PA Open (Toomey, R) |
| Kelly (D-Ariz.) | Johnson (R-Wisc.) |
| Warnock (D-Ga.) | Rubio (R-Fl.) |
| Solid Democratic (10) | Solid Republican (16) |
| Bennet (D-Colo.) | AL Open (Shelby, R) |
| Blumenthal (D-Conn.) | MO Open (Blunt, R) |
| Duckworth (D-Ill.) | OH Open (Portman, R) |
| Leahy (D-Vt.) | Boozman (R-Ark.) |
| Murray (D-Wash.) | Crapo (R-Idaho) |
| Padilla (D-Calif.) | Grassley (R-Iowa) |
| Schatz (D-Hawaii) | Hoeven (R-N.D.) |
| Schumer (D-N.Y.) | Kennedy (R-La.) |
| Van Hollen (D-Md.) | Lankford (R-Okla.) |
| Wyden (D-Ore.) | Lee (R-Utah) |
| | Moran (R-Kan.) |
| | Murkowski (R-Alaska) |
| | Paul (R-Ky.) |
| | Scott (R-S.C.) |
| | Thune (R-S.D.) |
| | Young (R-Ind.) |