Anti-Trump voters propel Democrats to victory in state and local elections

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Democrats scored lopsided victories in state and local elections on Tuesday, propelled by mounting popular opposition to President Donald Trump and his attacks on health care and democratic rights.

The Democrats easily ended eight years of Republican control of the New Jersey statehouse, as Democrat Phillip Murphy defeated the incumbent lieutenant governor, Kim Guadagno, by 15 percentage points in the race for governor of the 11th most populous state in the US.

In the more hotly contested and politically significant Virginia gubernatorial race, the Democrats retained the governorship of the 12th largest state as incumbent Lt. Governor Ralph Northam bested Republican lobbyist and former party chairman Ed Gillespie by an unexpectedly large margin of nine percentage points. The Democratic sweep included all three statewide offices—governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general—and the capture of at least 15 formerly Republican seats in the Virginia House of Delegates, the state legislature's lower chamber.

The Democrats' rout in the legislative races was on a virtually unprecedented scale. Going into Tuesday, the Republicans controlled 66 of the chamber's 100 seats. With several races still too close to call, the Democrats may very well take control of the body, marking the most sweeping shift in the Virginia legislature since Reconstruction.

The outcome was not a vote of confidence in either Northam or the Democratic Party, which suffered a debacle in the 2016 elections and lost four special congressional elections earlier this year. Rather, it was a repudiation of the politics of the far-right, which are being encouraged by both Trump and his former chief adviser, Stephen Bannon, the head of *Breitbart News*.

Virginia is the state where, last August, white supremacists and neo-Nazis staged an armed demonstration in Charlottesville, the home of the University of Virginia. One of the marchers plowed into a group of counter-protesters with his vehicle, killing Heather Heyer. After the fascist riot, Trump solidarized himself with the neo-Nazis, declaring that they included "very fine people," while placing the blame for the violence on "both sides."

In the final month of the campaign, Gillespie, a veteran of the Republican Party establishment, who had served as a counselor to George W. Bush, adopted the racist and anti-immigrant tactics of Bannon. He accused Northam of protecting undocumented immigrants and violent immigrant gangs by casting the deciding vote against a Republican-backed bill banning the establishment of sanctuary cities in the state. He also sought to link Northam to a convicted pedophile and denounced him for supporting the removal of Confederate statues from public squares.

At the same time, Gillespie sought to distance himself from Trump personally, barely mentioning his name and declining to invite him to come to Virginia to campaign in his behalf. Trump, for his part, issued a series of tweets in the run-up to the vote declaring that a Northam victory would result in rampant crime and the unleashing of the Salvadoran M-13 gang.

Northam, a conservative former Army doctor who had twice voted for George W. Bush and had been unsuccessfully recruited by Virginia Republicans, capitulated to Gillespie's immigrant baiting. In the final week of the campaign he declared that, if elected, he would sign a bill to ban the establishment of sanctuary cities. He also repudiated a campaign ad sponsored by a Latino organization showing a pickup truck with a Gillespie for governor sticker and a Confederate flag chasing down a group of minority youth.

Despite Northam's capitulation, Gillespie's open appeal to racist and fascistic elements evidently backfired, ensuring his defeat and widening its margin.

Northam was chosen by the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party establishment to pursue its strategy of largely writing off voters in rural areas and working class regions devastated by layoffs and mine closures and basing its campaign on more affluent suburban voters as well as minorities. He defeated a Bernie Sanders-backed challenger, former congressman Tom Perriello, in the Democratic primary last spring.

During the campaign, he issued ads promising to "work with" Trump and avoided the issue of social inequality or any other question that remotely challenged the wealth and power of the ruling class. He focused instead on gun control and "diversity," i.e., questions of racial and gender identity. In his victory speech, Northam called for unity, saying the election was a mandate to "end the divisiveness … and to end the politics that have torn this country apart."

Despite Northam and the generally right-wing character of his campaign, popular hatred for Trump found a distorted and limited expression in his vote and that for other Democratic candidates. Transgender candidate Danica Roem defeated the incumbent Republican state legislator who had boasted that he was the state's "chief homophobe" and sponsored a bill restricting transgender people from using bathrooms of their choice in government

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buildings.

The Republican author of fliers denouncing Latino gang members was defeated by a Democratic Latina candidate. The Republican whip in the House of Delegates was defeated by a Democratic Socialists of America member running as a Democrat. Another Republican incumbent was defeated by the boyfriend of the television reporter who was murdered on camera last year, running on a gun control program.

Voter turnout in Virginia was the highest in 20 years, up by more than 12 percent from the last gubernatorial election. It was particularly high in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., which have large numbers of federal employees and are generally more affluent than the rest of the state.

Northam won 80 percent of the vote in Arlington, 78 percent in Alexandria, 68 percent in Fairfax County and 60 percent in Loudon and Prince William counties. He performed better in these areas than Hillary Clinton did in 2016, who won the state overall by 5 percentage points. He also did better in small cities such as Richmond and Norfolk and in their suburbs. He lost heavily in most of rural Virginia, including the former mining regions in the southwest, but not as badly as Clinton had.

Exit polls show that Northam crushed Gillespie among younger voters, scoring 69 percent of the under-30 vote as compared to Clinton's 54 percent. Black voters favored Northam over Gillespie by a 73-point margin, while Hispanic voters did so by 33 points.

Northam also ran well ahead of the retiring incumbent Democratic governor, Terry McAuliffe, who narrowly won (48-46 percent) in 2013.

According to exit polls, 47 percent of voters strongly disapproved of Trump. Of these voters, 95 percent cast ballots for Northam. Thirty-four percent of voters said they went to the polls to register opposition to Trump.

Despite the focus of both candidates on immigration and crime, health care was by far the most important issue for voters, with 39 percent listing it as their top issue. This was more than double the next issue, gun policy, at 17 percent, which was followed by immigration. Northam won the health care vote 77 percent to 23 percent.

The victor in the New Jersey gubernatorial race, Phillip Murphy, is a former Goldman Sachs banker and major Democratic Party donor who was appointed US ambassador to Germany by President Obama. His victory was a forgone conclusion as the Republican incumbent, Chris Christie, had seen his poll numbers decline to 14 percent. Voter turnout in New Jersey was a record low 35.1 percent.

Murphy adopted a more populist posture than Northam, aligning himself more closely with the trade unions on the basis of support for a $15 minimum wage and talk about raising taxes on the wealthy. He is positioning himself to work with the unions in slashing the state's massive pension liability on the backs of the workers.

Other elections across the country that indicate the growth of anti-Trump sentiment include:

* The capture by the Democrats of an Upper Peninsula Michigan House seat by more than 20 points in a district that Trump had won by four points.

* The Democratic capture of a Republican-held seat in the Washington State Senate, giving the Democrats complete control over the state legislature. As a result, the Democrats now control the executive and legislative branches of the entire Pacific Coast, including California, Oregon and Washington, accentuating the geographic divide between the solidly Democratic West Coast and Northeast and virtually the entire center and part of the country.

* Democratic victories in three special elections for the Georgia House of Representatives in districts that had been won by Trump.

* The approval by Maine voters of a referendum to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) in defiance of the Republican governor, who had vetoed a similar measure.

Incumbent Democrats easily won reelection in mayoral elections in New York and Boston.

In the face of these indications of a general shift to the left in popular sentiment, the predominant response within the Democratic Party establishment is to call for the party to move even further to the right. Douglas E. Schoen, a former pollster for President Bill Clinton and author of *Putin's Master Plan: To Destroy Europe, Divide NATO, and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence*, wrote in a post on The Hill website that Northam had rejected the "brand of liberal progressive politics as that promoted by Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders." He continued: "Democrats in particular must continue to embrace the policy alternatives and centrist positions that propelled Northam's success."

The *Washington Post* editorialized: "The triumph of Democratic Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam in Virginia's gubernatorial election Tuesday was a victory of decency, civility and moderation… Despite some flirtation with a $15 minimum wage and a few other populist stances during the spring Democratic primary, when he faced and vanquished a leftist challenger, his campaign generally avoided appeals to the Bernie Sanders-inspired extreme of his party's base."

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