

Democrats in crisis over Virginia election

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Tuesday's statewide election in Virginia is the focus of political and media attention in the United States, not only for its intrinsic significance—Virginia is the 12th largest US state—but as a barometer of the political crisis of the Biden administration.

The Democratic Party has controlled the Virginia governorship for the last eight years, with Terry McAuliffe and Ralph Northam serving back-to-back four-year terms. Now McAuliffe is seeking to return to office, against the challenge of a well-funded Republican, hedge fund capitalist Glenn Youngkin, who is heavily backed by ex-president Donald Trump.

Final pre-election polls showed the contest at a virtual dead heat, with one or the other candidate leading by less than a percentage point. Turnout was expected to be heavy for an off-year election, with more than 1.1 million votes already cast in mail-in or early voting.

In 2017, the last such statewide election, only 2.6 million were cast, while turnout in the 2020 presidential election was 4.4 million. President Joe Biden carried the state by more than 10 percentage points, as a huge turnout in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington D.C. outweighed Trump's margins in rural areas and smaller cities like Lynchburg and Roanoke.

Both campaigns have sought to capitalize on popular alienation from the successive administrations in Washington D.C., with McAuliffe denouncing Youngkin as a Trump clone, while Youngkin capitalizes on the disillusionment of Democratic voters with the failure of the Biden administration to produce any significant improvement in their jobs or living standards.

McAuliffe's slide in the polls, from a six-point lead in the summer to a near tie, has touched off alarm in national Democratic circles, and produced a rush of prominent Democratic Party figures to Virginia to campaign on his behalf, including Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, former Georgia gubernatorial candidate

Stacey Abrams and President Biden himself.

This assistance cannot disguise the lack of any popular enthusiasm for either McAuliffe, who ran a pro-business administration in the state from 2013 to 2017, or the Biden administration in Washington. As *Politico* observed last week, the key to Youngkin's political strategy is "depressed Democratic turnout" due to the "electoral ennui brought on by Biden and congressional Democrats' inability to enact a slew of campaign priorities."

The most important issue facing working people in Virginia, the raging COVID-19 pandemic, is virtually unmentioned by the two bourgeois candidates. One in nine Virginians, more than 900,000 people, have been infected with coronavirus, and nearly 14,000 people have died.

But McAuliffe declared October 24 in Richmond, side-by-side with Obama, "I want Virginia to be the first state in the United States of America that calls an end to the COVID pandemic." He went on to pledge that he would keep open the schools and businesses.

As for Youngkin, he has embraced right-wing calls for eliminating mask mandates in schools and mandatory vaccination in workplaces, in the name of "individual liberty," i.e., the "freedom" to infect and kill others and to subject school children to the risk of a deadly infection.

Both candidates boast of their ties to corporate America and prove it by spending record amounts of money. McAuliffe, who came to prominence as a fundraiser for Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Youngkin, a hedge fund boss, have raised a combined \$117 million, nearly double the \$65 million raised and spent in the governor's race four years ago. Youngkin has loaned his own campaign \$20 million from his personal fortune.

McAuliffe cited the success of the Democrats in winning giant corporate investments from hi-tech and

social media companies through subsidies and appeals to identity politics. “Amazon, Google, Facebook, are not moving to states that discriminate against gays or women,” he said in one media interview. “We would never have gotten the Amazon deal here if Glenn Youngkin were governor. He’s a culture warrior.”

In a final desperate appeal to mobilize black voters, McAuliffe pledged to hire more African Americans as public school teachers, declaring that he wanted to reduce the proportion of white teachers, now 80 percent. Half of Virginia school children are from racial and ethnic minorities.

Youngkin has sought to balance between an overt embrace of Trump, who is deeply unpopular among the majority of Virginia voters, and the mobilization of the ultra-right using scarcely disguised appeals to racism and to Trump’s “big lie” that the 2020 election was stolen.

Despite endorsing Youngkin, Trump has stayed out of the state, apparently at the candidate’s request. He has phoned in to two rallies, including one where the participants pledged allegiance to a flag that was carried into the US Capitol on January 6 by the attackers who sought to block certification of Trump’s defeat in the 2020 election. Youngkin did not attend either rally.

The Republican candidate has used coded appeals to racism, pledging to ban “critical race theory,” although it is not taught in any Virginia K-12 school. He ran an ad campaign in the final week of the campaign denouncing McAuliffe for his 2015 veto of legislation that would have allowed parents to ban books from school libraries—the target, in that case, was Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

From the earliest days of his campaign as the Republican nominee, Youngkin has declared “election security” to be one of his major concerns, although there is zero evidence of any tampering with the ballots in the state. Elections in Virginia are conducted by 133 county and city governments, the vast majority of them Republican-controlled, and Biden carried the state by a margin of nearly half a million votes.

In an effort to forestall such charges, the state government enacted several changes in ballot-counting procedures, including a requirement that local officials count mail-in votes during the week before Election Day, and announce those totals as soon as the polls

close.

This means that McAuliffe likely will appear to be well ahead, until same-day ballots are counted. Then Youngkin will pull ahead, since rural counties traditionally finish their counting earlier, before the huge and heavily Democratic counties like Fairfax, with more than 1 million people, deliver their results.

Mail-in votes received as late as Friday will be counted as long as they were postmarked by Election Day. If the election is very close, these ballots could determine the outcome. In 2020, slightly more than 10,000 such ballots were received late and counted.

The Republican Party is preparing to intimidate and discourage voters, particularly in heavily minority districts in Richmond, Hampton Roads (Norfolk-Virginia Beach) and northern Virginia, by recruiting an army of poll watchers. As many as 3,500 had been recruited and trained by the week before the election, and party officials expressed hopes to reach a total of 15,000 by Election Day.



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