

Some Takeaways from the Virginia Election



On Tuesday, Republican Glenn Youngkin pulled an upset victory in Virginia's gubernatorial race, defeating Democratic nominee (and former governor) Terry McAuliffe. There was a lot of national attention on the contest, with many in the media framing the election – perhaps with good reason – as a telling measure of the current political tides.

Virginia had been a blue state for some time, but a late polling surge from Youngkin, amidst some sharp rhetorical missteps by McAuliffe, put a lot of political operatives on edge. In the end, Youngkin walked away victorious, and both major political parties should probably take notice of why.

McAuliffe chose early on to nationalize the race by making it, in large part, about Donald Trump. He cast Youngkin as a disciple of the twice-impeached former president, and took every opportunity to reinforce that narrative. On paper, the plan probably made some sense. Trump remains unpopular both nationally and in Virginia, and he's still, after a year,

spreading the same “stolen election” lie that provoked the January 6 attack at the U.S. Capitol.

This has placed Republican political candidates in a very tough spot. Trump, who continues to demand (and mostly get) loyalty from party leaders, is still very popular among the Republican base, with polls showing that many of these voters still believe his false claims about the 2020 election. Just last month, Trump even appealed to Republicans not to vote in 2022 and 2024 unless the fabricated injustice was righted.

GOP hopefuls have been left trying to figure out how to simultaneously avoid Trump’s ire, get his base to participate in the election process (unlike what happened in the Georgia run-off), and sufficiently distance their campaigns from Trump in the general election to appeal to independent and suburban voters.

Recognizing that challenge, McAuliffe applied maximum MAGA pressure to Youngkin.

Conversely, Youngkin focused on closer-to-home issues like education, public safety, and taxes. He presented detailed solutions to various problems. Sure, he paid some lip-service to Trumpism early in the election cycle, and even accepted the former president’s endorsement, but he was smart enough not to campaign with Trump, and barely acknowledged him moving forward.

Having defeated far more Trumpy candidates in the primary, thanks in part to the state party’s adoption of ranked choice voting, Youngkin stated that President Biden won the 2020 election fairly and legitimately, and he strongly condemned the January 6 attack.

By the general election, Youngkin’s presentation more closely resembled Mitt Romney’s than that of a MAGA apostle, making it difficult for McAuliffe, the Democrats, and the mainstream media to get a “Trump clone” narrative to stick... at least with

those who mattered: Virginia voters.

Despite Trump's comical insistence, after Youngkin's victory, that it was the MAGA base that dragged the governor-elect across the finish line, exit polls revealed that nearly 20% of Youngkin's voters had an unfavorable view of Trump. Additionally, Youngkin greatly outperformed Trump's 2020 numbers across the entire state.

But what McAuliffe really had working against him, in addition to his unforced error of saying, "I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach," was the bad national environment.

By nationalizing a state election, McAuliffe more closely aligned himself with the country's broader problems, from a disappointing economy with rising inflation, to chaos at the border, to a demoralizing defeat in Afghanistan, to a pandemic that hasn't gone away the way many people expected it to. All of these things have happened under Democratic control of Washington, including a Democratic president whose disapproval rating remains above 50%.

So, in hindsight, it probably wasn't a smart idea for McAuliffe to have Biden campaign with him. Trump may be unpopular in Virginia, but so is Joe Biden.

And only one of those guys is currently our president.

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