

# [***In Virginia, Youngkin looks to prove that non-MAGA politics can be a winning Republican strategy***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:69K4-X321-DY7V-G1MT-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

November 7, 2023 Tuesday 4:59 PM GMT

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**Length:** 1647 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*Virginia*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/06/politics/virginia-suburban-women-abortion-youngkin/index.html) Gov. Glenn Youngkin isn't on [*the ballot this year*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/07/politics/what-to-watch-election-day/index.html), but his push for a new conservative direction for the Republican Party is.

Tuesday night's results of Virginia's legislative elections will be viewed, for better or for worse, as a referendum on Youngkin's non-MAGA brand of conservative ***politics*** and the state House of delegates and state Senate candidates who subscribe to it. He's made sure of it. Youngkin - elected two years ago in a state that has swung blue in the last four presidential cycles - is hoping to flip the state Senate and hold control of the House of delegates, and has endorsed in key primaries, spent weeks campaigning with Republicans across the commonwealth, urged his party's voters to cast their ballots early and raised millions to help compete with Democratic fundraising.

All 140 seats in the Democrat-controlled Senate and Republican-controlled House of Delegates are up for election, and candidates are running on new maps following a dramatic redistricting cycle.

Youngkin's investment - of time on the trail, messaging training and financial resources - reflects the high stakes for both his party and his own political future. Virginia governors aren't allowed to run for consecutive terms, making this the only chance Youngkin will have to govern with Republicans majorities and enact a conservative agenda after two years of sharing power with Democrats. GOP victories on Tuesday would also boost his profile before he embarks on the next stage of his political career, whether that's a late entry into the Republican presidential primary or a run for the US Senate in 2024 or 2026.

Privately, the governor and his political team have been deeply involved in recruiting candidates he felt best reflected his particular brand of more traditional GOP conservativism, ones whom the Youngkin team hope can win both Trump supporters and the [*suburban voters*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/07/politics/fault-lines-suburbs-elections-2023/index.html) former President Donald Trump lost in 2016 and 2020.

"The focus here was getting candidates that reflect their community and the Commonwealth," a knowledgeable GOP source told CNN. "That's why Gov. Youngkin leaned in during the nomination contests and went 10 for 10 in the ones that were contested. When your goal is winning to further a commonsense conservative agenda, you have to put the best team on the field."

About 20 battleground district candidates, competing in both delegate and state Senate races, attended several bootcamp meetings and messaging sessions with a debate coach starting in the spring, according to a second source. His team also discouraged campaigns from denying the results of the 2020 presidential election - make it clear they needed to look forward, was how it was conveyed. ( "I've consistently said that Joe Biden was legitimately elected president," Youngkin told ABC's George Stephanopoulos on Sunday.)

Candidates were encouraged to rally around Youngkin's proposed 15-week [*abortion*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/06/politics/abortion-politics-2023-elections/index.html) ban, with exceptions for rape, incest and life of the mother, and not to support a wider ban. The discipline extended beyond the 10 candidates Youngkin endorsed in competitive primaries, so as to keep distractions at bay. At one point, sources say, one delegate candidate posted something rather incendiary on abortion. Within 25 minutes, the post was taken down. Virginia Democrats, who would normally use such a post to put the entire GOP in an awkward position, did not apparently even notice.

Youngkin is eager to argue that he was successfully able to chart a sane, conservative path for legislative candidates.

"In 2021, a state that was lost, a state that was completely blue, has systematically taken a right turn and demonstrated that common sense conservative policies work," Youngkin said during a get-out-the-vote campaign stop Monday in Fredericksburg. "We have got to finish the job."

It's not clear Youngkin's strategy will work. Democrats are projecting that they only need to keep control of the Senate Tuesday, which would allow them to continue blocking the governor's policies. Anything short of control of both chambers would likely be a "huge disappointment" for Youngkin, said Mark J. Rozell, the dean of the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. Virginia has been trending Democratic for years and the Dobbs Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade has many Democrats running ads focused entirely on the issue of abortion rights, which could very well work in some of these districts.

"It was something of a gamble on his part to stake so much of his political capital on races that he doesn't have complete control over," Rozell said. "There are local candidates and personalities and issues that drive some of these competitive races that have little to do with the governor's intervention or efforts.".

Youngkin's strategy

Youngkin's political apparatus took advantage of Virginia's loose campaign finance laws to work closely with campaigns to advise on message, spending and campaign operations, the source said. On abortion, Youngkin's team shared their messaging, which has been to argue that a 15-week limit with exceptions for rape, incest and to protect the life of the mother is a consensus opinion. His team also discouraged campaigns from denying the results of the 2020 presidential election.

"We're fighting some tough fights on messaging and as a party trying to navigate the waters on certain issues," said Taylor Keeney, a former press secretary for Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell. "But Youngkin's positioned himself and positioned our party here in Virginia in the right spot, especially when you're looking at issues like abortion."

Youngkin's Spirit of Virginia PAC has raised more than $18.78 million since March [*according to the Virginia Public Access Project*](https://www.vpap.org/committees/374333/spirit-of-virginia/), including $3 million from billionaire donor Thomas Peterffy, who has urged Youngkin to consider a last-minute entry into the 2024 presidential race.

The biggest contribution - about $1.3 million - has gone to state Sen. Siobhan Dunnavant, an OB-GYN running for reelection in a competitive district outside Richmond. Dunnavant has backed Youngkin's 15-week limit, rejecting Democrats' characterization of it as a ban.

A key part of the governor's strategy was helping his preferred candidates win competitive primaries against more extreme or less experienced opponents. He endorsed in 10 competitive House and Senate primaries, in which all of his preferred candidates won.

In Senate District 27, a Fredericksburg-area Senate seat, he endorsed state Del. Tara Durant over Matt Strickland, a restaurant owner who clashed with state government over his refusal to comply with Covid-19 safety measures. In Senate District 17, Youngkin-backed Del. Emily Brewer beat Hermie Sadler, a former NASCAR driver who ran as a political outsider.

In September, Youngkin launched a bus tour to promote early voting. He's also made nearly 100 campaign stops since mid summer. Many of these events have also sought to appeal to diverse groups within Virginia. He campaigned with Durant at a Hispanic Heritage Festival in Fredericksburg and attended a Diwali event at the Heritage Indian Festival in Chantilly with Juan Pablo Segura, who is running in Senate District 31, a competitive seat in northern Virginia. The embracing of Virginia's diversity seems to underline a GOP of yore, not the MAGA of a president who once told four congresswomen of color to go back to where they came from.

The other candidates in the Youngkin Ten include Senate candidates Jason Ballard, John McGuire, Bryce Reeves and Bill Woolf, and delegate candidates Buddy Fowler, John Stirrup, Lee Peters and Mike Dillender. McGuire, Reeves, and Ballard were nominated through conventions, not primaries, a possible sign of Youngkin's strength with the party's conservative base.

"Again and again, conservative leaders understand that power, and the country's future, start in state legislatures," said Daniel Squadron, the founding partner of The States Project, a Democratic group focused on state legislative races. "On our side, that seems to be a lesson that's never learned."

The States Project announced last month it would spend more than $4.5 million in Virginia. Other Democratic groups have jumped in as well, alarmed by Youngkin's fundraising and the high stakes of the race.

The Democratic National Committee directed $1.2 million to the state at the urging of US Sens. Tim Kaine, who is up for re-election next year, and Mark Warner, bringing their total to $1.5 million. Democrats in the state have warned that if Youngkin succeeds in securing Republican control of the legislature, Republicans could roll back progressive voting laws enacted by Democrats in 2020.

Democrats lost full control in 2021 when Youngkin was elected and Republicans flipped the House of Delegates. At the time, Democrats tried to tie him to former President Donald Trump. But the former private equity firm chief executive managed to come across as more personable and moderate, while still appealing to the former president's supporters.

Two years later, Democrats are pointing to legislation he and Republicans have backed on voting rights, abortion and gun control to argue he's not as moderate as he seems. Still, there isn't a lot of evidence that the Virginia Democratic Party sees Youngkin as any sort of liability for the GOP - he isn't featured negatively in any of their ads, for example.

"What we have found out over the last two years is that that vest-wearing, affable, basketball playing dad is really a MAGA Extremist," said Virginia Democratic Party Chair Susan Swecker. "I am confident from going around the commonwealth campaigning for our candidates and out talking to voters that there's a lot of buyer's remorse."

By Jake Tapper and Arit John, CNN

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**Load-Date:** November 7, 2023

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