

Virginia gubernatorial race offers “choice” of right-wing candidates

By Ed Hightower
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In the off-year elections in the United States, to be held November 7, only two states, New Jersey and Virginia, will choose governors and most state legislators. In past years, the elections in the two states, held 12 months after the presidential election, have occasionally signaled popular dissatisfaction with the new administration.

The New Jersey campaign has been all but conceded to the Democratic candidate to succeed Republican Chris Christie, the most unpopular of the 50 state governors. Multi-millionaire Democrat Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs banker, outspent all his opponents for the Democratic nomination by \$22 million to \$6 million combined and won 48 percent of the vote in the primary.

Murphy has a wide lead in pre-election polls over Republican Kim Guadagno, Christie’s lieutenant governor. This reflects not enthusiasm for him—he is largely unknown and his only previous political office was as US Ambassador to Germany—but rather widespread hatred of Christie, renowned for budget cuts, political corruption (Bridgegate) and monumental arrogance.

In Virginia the contest is closer and more competitive, with polls showing Democrat Ralph Northam, the lieutenant governor in the administration of Terry McAuliffe, with a not insurmountable lead over Republican Ed Gillespie, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, who narrowly lost a Senate race in Virginia three years ago.

One of the striking features about the race is that the two “major party” candidates espouse nearly identical right-wing programs, particularly on budgetary and economic issues, while differing only on a handful of social issues such as abortion. Neither can claim a mass base of support, and both emerged as favored candidates of their respective party machines.

Gillespie epitomizes the political establishment, with more than a quarter century in Republican politics, as

campaign aide, lobbyist for corporations like Enron (which made him a millionaire), communications chair to the George W. Bush presidential campaign in 2000, RNC chairman, and finally counselor to President Bush from 2007 to January 2009.

Gillespie continued to advise major Republican electoral campaigns for the next several years, including the presidential run of financier Mitt Romney in 2012. In 2014, he ran unsuccessfully for a US Senate seat from Virginia and nearly defeated Democrat Mark Warner.

Gillespie was long associated with the ultra-right “mainstream” of the Republican Party, helping draft Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” in 1994, advising the campaign to impeach President Bill Clinton, campaigning to block a recount in Florida in 2000, then serving as an apologist for the war in Iraq. He is now termed a “moderate,” only by comparison to the fascistic wing of the party empowered by the presidency of Donald Trump.

Gillespie barely defeated primary rival Corey Stewart, former manager of Trump’s presidential campaign in Virginia, who ran a vicious immigrant-baiting campaign, in which he identified himself with the defense of Confederate war monuments. In 2007, while a county official in Prince William County, in the outer suburbs of Washington DC, he gained notoriety by instructing police to check the immigration status of everyone they arrested and ensure that they were cut off from any public assistance.

Stewart met with the organizers of a neo-Nazi and white supremacist campaign to save a statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia after the city council began action to remove it last spring. These same groups organized the fascist riot in Charlottesville in August which led to the death of an anti-racist protester, Heather Heyer.

Significantly, Gillespie has responded to the fascist

violence in Charlottesville, which produced widespread popular revulsion, not only across Virginia but nationally and internationally, by moving further to the right and embracing the campaign to preserve Confederate monuments (most of them erected, not after the Civil War, but decades later, as symbols of Jim Crow and opposition to the civil rights movement). He appealed to Stewart's reactionary supporters just a week after Charlottesville, saying, "I think we should keep them up," and also, "We should teach history—NOT erase it."

Apart from preserving Confederate monuments, Gillespie promises to cut state income taxes by 10 percent across the board. He supports increased federal defense spending on new naval warships, a theme that is something of a sacred cow in bourgeois politics in a state home to the Pentagon and the huge US Navy complex in Norfolk. He supports ending sanctuary cities in Virginia, a reactionary attack on immigrants.

While usually avoiding direct references to Trump—who lost the state narrowly to Hillary Clinton and is deeply unpopular, especially in northern Virginia, the main population center—Gillespie tries to echo Trump's claim to stand up for the "American worker." This is just as bogus for Gillespie, the multimillionaire corporate lobbyist, as for the billionaire real estate swindler in the White House.

What does Democrat Ralph Northam offer? His political history is instructive. He currently serves as lieutenant to Governor Terry McAuliffe, a longtime Clinton crony. In the 2013 elections, while running separate campaigns, they were considered a "balanced" ticket by the standards of bourgeois politics, since McAuliffe was supposedly a liberal from urban Northern Virginia, and Northam was a former rural pediatrician and fiscal conservative.

Northam spent the first decade of the 21st century in the exact same political camp as Gillespie. He admits to having voted for George W. Bush twice, in 2000 and 2004, the same period when Gillespie was working for the Republican candidate and president. Northam's explanation is that he was "underinformed."

He entered electoral politics in 2007, winning Virginia's 6th Senate district, representing parts of southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore, in a race where he had no Democratic primary opponent. In 2009, state Republicans courted him, asking him to switch parties, which would have given them a majority in the Senate. Clearly, they did not think his positions on any issues at the time were unacceptable.

The Democratic gubernatorial primary featured two right-wing Democrats, each posturing as a liberal while trading accusations that the other was a closet conservative. Tom Perriello was a single-term anti-abortion, pro-gun Democrat who held the US House of Representatives seat for Virginia's 5th congressional district from 2008 to 2010, then worked for the Obama administration in Africa. During the 2017 Democratic gubernatorial primary he sought to position himself as the "outsider" candidate against Northam, the choice of the party machine, and received endorsements from the ostensible left wing of the Democratic party, including Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and former Obama adviser Dan Pfeiffer.

Ultimately Perriello's effort to posture as a "true progressive" was unconvincing, and it was easy for Northam to tout his own pro-choice, pro-gun control record and win the nomination.

Northam's "progressive" credentials end there. His program, a mix of tax cuts and regressive educational measures, would have found wide support in the Republican party of the 1990s. He claims to support subsidized child care, paid family leave for low-wage workers, school-based healthcare centers and higher teacher pay. At the same time, however, Northam touts the value of a balanced budget, and boasts that as a state senator he voted to cut spending by \$4.6 billion following the 2008 economic crash.

Particularly important is his program on education, one of the key functions of state government. "Not every Virginian wants—or needs—to attend a four year college or university," Northam's program explains. His "G3" education program—Get Skilled, Get a Job and Give back—centers on dual enrolling high school students in trade schools to "align with regional employer demands." That is, he wants working class youth to forgo a college education and start working for information technology companies that serve the military and intelligence apparatus of US imperialism.

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