

The Changing of Power in the Commonwealth

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As was true of most Southern states, Virginia was dominated during the last century by one political party – the Democratic Party. So dominant was the Democratic Party that its primary election results were “tantamount to election” since, as Professor Larry Sabato points out in one of his books, the November general election inevitably ratified the Democratic primary choices. Sabato’s research found that “not a single Virginia Democrat nominated for statewide office in the primary was defeated in the general election for more than threescore years after the primary’s inception in 1905.”

For many it appears that with the beginning of a new century Virginia is once again embarking on one party rule with the Republicans clearly in charge of the General Assembly and seeming to set the agenda on many important issues. Although the final deadline for selecting candidates for the fall General Assembly elections is more than a month away, it appears that a record number of incumbents in the general election may not be challenged. With the last reapportionment of legislative districts, the Republican majority followed the practice Democrats perfected over the years and packed the opposition into as few districts as possible and carved up safe seats for themselves.

One of the results of that redistricting has been the heightened importance of the Republican primary in picking candidates in Republican-majority districts who are almost certain to win in the November election. And the struggles that are occurring in these primaries reflect the fight that is going on for control of the party.

Senior, moderate Republicans in major leadership roles are fighting for their political lives in Republican primaries. The President pro tempore of the Virginia State Senate, Senator John Chichester, who happens also to chair the powerful budget-writing Senate Finance Committee, has a serious primary challenge. The Senate Majority Leader, Republican Senator Tommy Norment, is being challenged by a multi-millionaire who is reported to be willing to spend a million dollars to retire him. And the chairman of the Senate Education and Health Committee, Senator Russ Potts, has a strong primary challenge.

These primaries have common characteristics: the incumbents are moderate Republicans who are being challenged by anti-tax, anti-abortion ultra-conservatives. On the House of Delegates side, the Republican chairman of the Transportation Committee and the Republican whip are being challenged in primaries because of their support for the Northern Virginia transportation referendum.

The conservative challenges are having an impact in other races as well. At least fifteen Republican candidates have signed a “no tax increase” pledge in Northern Virginia. A Republican State Senate candidate led the effort to have the James Madison University Board of Visitors order the campus health centers to stop dispensing morning-after contraceptive pills.

Clearly the ultra-conservative wing of the Republican Party is flexing its muscle. The primary results on June 10 will show their strength. Sabato’s study of the Democratic Primary was done in the late 1970’s when the party’s power was starting to wane; his book was entitled, *The Democratic Party Primary in Virginia: Tantamount to Election No Longer*. The Republicans may find themselves in the same position of nominating candidates who are unacceptable to the majority of voters in the general election.