

The Meaning of Election Results

Kenneth R. "Ken" Plum

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Voters in the 37th Senatorial District in Western Fairfax County went to the polls on August 6 to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of Warren E. Barry who left the seat to take a position in the Warner Administration.

Although a renegade, Republican Warren Barry was very successful at the polls. He endorsed Mark Warner for Governor. He voted to allow the sales tax referendum for transportation to be put on the ballot this November. He cast a deciding vote in more than one instance to kill legislative proposals that would have restricted access to abortion. He was a strong supporter of public schools, and he endorsed the Democratic candidate, School Board member Cathy A. Belter, to succeed him.

But the winner of the election was Republican Ken Cuccinelli, and he is no Warren Barry. You will not find Cuccinelli endorsing any Democrats; he is obviously proud to be a conservative Republican. He is adamantly opposed to the sales tax referendum for transportation. He opposes all abortions including those involving rape and incest. He is a critic of the public schools and counts home schoolers among his strongest supporters. He supports a limit on property tax increases when the schools are desperate for funding.

Has there been a major shift in public opinion in the district between the previous elections of moderate Warren Barry and the election of conservative Ken Cuccinelli? Political pundits are attempting to answer this question because it may give some indication of election results this November.

No doubt the results were impacted by it being a special election in the hot, vacation-filled days of August. The 16 percent voter participation is actually a high number for special elections anytime, but especially for a summertime election. It was not close; Cuccinelli got 10,041 votes to Belter's 8,193. The conservatives were clearly much more able as they have been known to be to identify their voters and get them to the polls.

Proponents of the sales tax referendum are taking note of the election results in spite of public statements suggesting there is no connection to the referendum. For the referendum to succeed as it needs to, supporters of the proposal must be clearly identified and motivated to go to the polls.

The implications of the outcome of this election reach beyond Northern Virginia. It affects the tenuous balance of moderates who have controlled the Virginia Senate and who have stopped restrictive abortion measures and anti-government tax proposals in the past. It will make governing more difficult for Mark Warner.

Did the voters of the 37th district intend to have these outcomes? Or are many voters in that district regretting that they did not go to the polls? Is it the case once again that an election was decided by the people who did not bother to vote?