



## MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Jared Leopold, DGA

RE: Democratic Momentum in the Virginia Gubernatorial Race

There's no sugar-coating it: Tuesday night's primaries were a disaster for Ed Gillespie and Virginia Republicans.

Democrats enter the general election enthusiastic and unified behind nominee Ralph Northam. Meanwhile, Republicans remain deeply divided. Their hand-picked insider candidate barely squeaked out a primary victory over an underfunded Confederate flag enthusiast, who [bluntly refused to unite](#) behind Gillespie.

Democrats have a head of steam: More than 542,000 Democrats turned out to vote in Virginia's open primary, compared to just 366,000 Republicans. Democratic primary turnout in 2017 reached nearly 70% of 2016 presidential primary figures, while Republican turnout hit just over 35%. And Republican nominee Ed Gillespie finished nearly 80,000 votes behind Democratic runner-up Tom Perriello.

Meanwhile, Ed Gillespie enters the general election sandwiched between a restive pro-Trump base and Virginia swing voters who are strongly anti-Trump. Even after a primary season spent [embracing Trump](#) and [his policies](#), Gillespie has been unable to motivate a Republican base to vote for a lobbyist described as a "[well-fed alligator](#)" in the DC swamp. And statewide polling indicates [he's being dragged down](#) among swing voters by Trump's 36 percent approval rating in Virginia.

It's clear from polling that Virginia voters want a governor who can be a check on the Trump administration. In the face of a potential Trump Tsunami, Gillespie has done nothing to get out of the way of the wave. In the first five months, Gillespie has had trouble identifying a single issue to disagree with Trump on. And he can hardly afford to separate himself from Trump now.

Gillespie's record of lobbying for special interests [hurt him among primary voters](#) in Virginia and won't win him any favors in the general either. Now, he is stumbling towards the general election as a weakened candidate with a dispirited, divided party.

The contrast in this election is clear: Ralph Northam will stand up for Virginia, while Ed Gillespie will cozy up to Donald Trump and special interests.

Collectively, the baggage of his thirty-five year career in D.C. paired with the extreme Trump agenda makes Gillespie uniquely unappealing in this current political climate. And given the extraordinary turnout in the Democratic primary, Ralph Northam can channel that enthusiasm with a clear contrasting message.

**Gillespie: A Trump-Backing D.C. Insider**

Though Gillespie tries to pitch himself as a big tent Republican, there's little daylight between Trump and Gillespie on policy. Gillespie has been vocally supportive as Trump has rolled out his agenda, and has promised to bring it to Virginia.

Gillespie has been [supportive](#) of the American Health Care Act, Trump's signature piece of legislation, even as Republican governors around the country have criticized the bill. But Gillespie took it one step further when he [announced](#) he is open to using the waiver to raise premiums on people with pre-existing conditions.

Perhaps most telling, Gillespie brags about his steadfast support of Trump while stumping on the campaign trail and [highlights](#) his endorsement of Trump on his website. In a recent debate, he made [clear](#) that, "when I call the Trump administration, I will get my calls returned."

So it's no wonder that Gillespie has already [asked](#) Trump for help campaigning in the general election.

Gillespie's been called a "[well-fed alligator](#)" in Trump's swamp, the "[consummate Republican insider](#)", and a "[creature of D.C.](#)" It's a well-earned reputation. Gillespie lobbied for the likes of Enron after serving as a top campaign advisor for President George W. Bush. More recently his firm [took](#) over a million dollars to help Tyson Foods to help alleviate labor violations. During the Republican primary, Gillespie [tried to hide](#) his client list from his time working at the Brunswick Group and DCI Group.

Gillespie, a former RNC chair and career lobbyist, is the quintessential D.C. insider. He made millions leveraging his connections in the highest levels of Republican politics.

### **Northam and Virginia Dems in Strong Position**

Gov. Terry McAuliffe has governed as a strong steward for the Virginia economy.

The McAuliffe-Northam administration has [created](#) 190,000 jobs and brought the unemployment rate down to 3.8 percent, the [lowest in nine years](#). McAuliffe has fought for a fairer criminal justice system, worked to end gun violence, and [been a brick wall](#) against attacks on women's reproductive care. Northam has proudly embraced that body of work.

Northam has run on continuing this progress and will not shy away from taking on Trump. The Lt. Governor has proved to be a strong standard bearer for the Democratic message, something Virginia voters are clearly eager for.

### **Polling**

The polling in Virginia paints a stark picture for Republicans trying to run statewide.

The president is deeply unpopular with Virginia voters. Trump, who lost by 5.5% last November, has slipped even further since then. After his inauguration, [poll](#) after [poll](#) after [poll](#) has shown his approval hovering in the mid-thirties. There's no question that Trump has done damage to the Republican brand.

Meanwhile, those same polls show the Democratic brand to be very strong in Virginia. Governor Terry McAuliffe and Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine [all have](#) 20+ point approval ratings. Combined with the [hypothetical lead](#) over Gillespie, Northam starts in good standing with the electorate.

Both [Sabato's Crystal Ball](#) and [election analyst Nathan Gonzales](#) rate the race as "Lean Democrat."

## **The Stakes of the Race**

The White House and the RGA have [both singled out](#) the Virginia gubernatorial race as the marquee election of the 2017.

For Democrats, the race is where the party reasserts itself in the Trump era. Trump's chaos and controversy will be on the ballot in November. Virginia voters rejected the president once already and all signs show they are prepared to do it again.

The resistance is twofold. Though often overlooked, the next governor will play an instrumental role in the next redistricting process. Through extreme partisan and [racial gerrymandering](#), Republicans have a stranglehold on the state legislature. Winning governorships like Virginia will make a huge difference in redefining power structures in statehouses and in Washington.

Democratic governors are on offense in the 2017-2018 election cycle. Candidates around the country will be riding a surge of unprecedented grassroots enthusiasm while the other side copes with a toxic presidency. Ralph Northam is ready to capitalize on this moment and send a message loud and clear that the road back to power starts in Virginia.