

To: Interested Parties

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Post-Election Polling in Virginia

We were retained by a coalition of organizations (AAPI Progressive Action, NEA Advocacy Fund, and the National Public Education Action Fund) to explore what trends emerged in the immediate aftermath of the November 2017 Gubernatorial election. As we saw in Alabama, increased turnout among non-whites, along with an enthusiastic Democratic base and a more ambivalent Republican one, can help propel a Democratic victory.

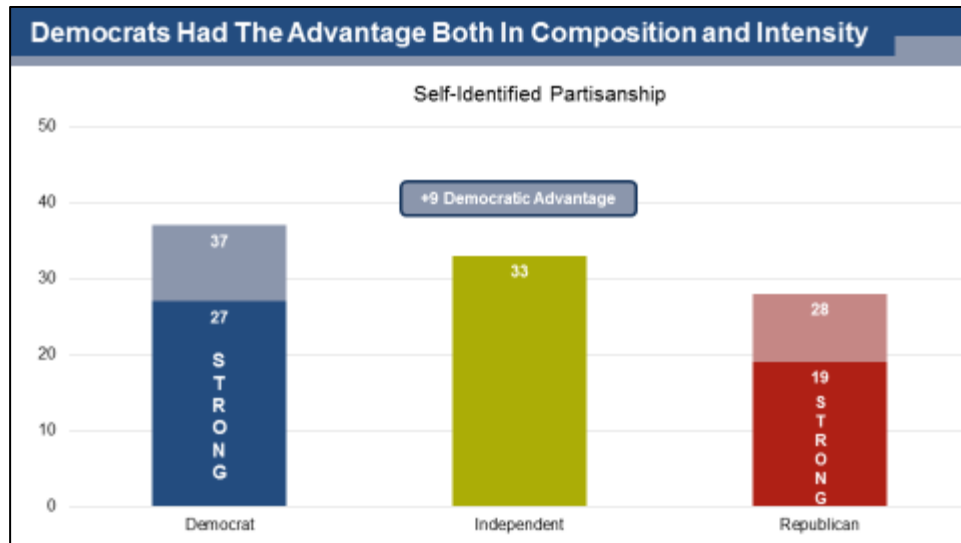
But beyond atmospherics, we also wanted to explore the unique themes and messages of the Northam/Gillespie contest, to see what lessons can be applied to 2018 races and beyond. Combining a large sample size, an in-depth survey instrument, oversamples with AAPI and Hispanic voters, and a comparison of voters to non-voters, we're able to paint a more detailed picture than exit polls or vote totals alone. In particular, we confirmed the importance of a policy-driven conversation, particularly around health care and education.

Key Findings

- Both the electorate's composition and enthusiasm broke in Democrats' favor
- Health care and education were central to the more nuanced conversation heard by voters
- Trump helped Northam more than Gillespie
- "Racially-loaded" messaging and the economy appealed to some of Gillespie's base
- Communities of color overwhelmingly broke for Northam, yet had different priorities

❖ Both the electorate's composition and enthusiasm broke in Democrats' favor.

Compared to past gubernatorial elections, turnout in 2017 was higher, and disproportionately Democratic. Our sample also included voters who didn't vote in the 2017 election, but still had relevant vote history. We found these non-voters were more Republican than voters, a departure from typical turnout trends. Further, 2017 voters who said they didn't vote in 2016 also broke for Northam.



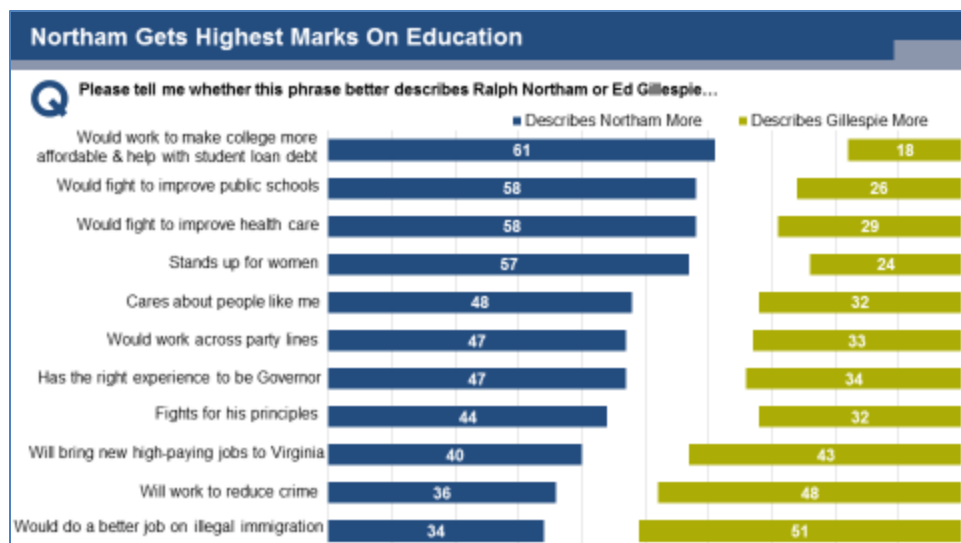
The composition of the electorate was not just more Democratic, it was more enthusiastically so. Democrats had the advantage in intensity of party identification.

It's also worth noting the wide education gap among white

women. White non-college educated voted for Gillespie (+43 Gillespie), while white college educated women voted for Northam (+29). Given the salience women's issues will continue to have in 2018, these results could portend a large gender gap in other races.

❖ **Health care and education were central to the more nuanced conversation heard by voters.**

Conventional wisdom described this race as chiefly about Trump and his brand of fiery, racially-loaded conservatism. Yet voters heard a more complex dialogue, and in particular were driven to support Northam based on education and health care issues. Much like the exit polls, we found health care to be the biggest driver of Northam support. We took several bites at the apple to determine what issues mattered most to voters — an open-ended question, a closed-ended question about top issues, and a series of closed-ended questions focused on campaign themes and specifics. No matter how we asked the question, health care rose to the top of Northam voters' lists of what moved them (33 percent of voters overall, 47 percent of Northam voters said health care was one of the top issues driving their vote).



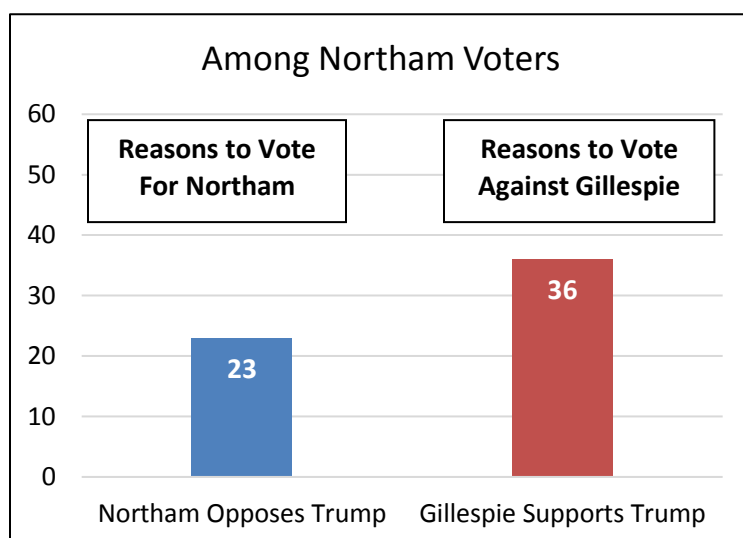
Education was also a top-tier issue for Northam voters. Whether K-12 public schools or college affordability, many Northam voters cited education as one of their driving factors (29 percent of Northam voters named it one of the top issues). Northam is also

best described by the phrases “would work to make college more affordable and help with student loan debt” (61 percent describes Northam, 18 percent described Gillespie) and “would fight to improve public schools” (58 percent described Northam, 26 percent described Gillespie).

❖ Trump helped Northam more than Gillespie

While the gubernatorial race was far more nuanced and policy-driven than news coverage would lead one to believe, make no mistake: Trump mattered greatly in Virginia. He was wildly unpopular (38 percent favorable, 54 percent unfavorable), and more unpopular with Democrats (9 percent mean favorable rating) than popular with Republicans (77 percent mean favorable rating).

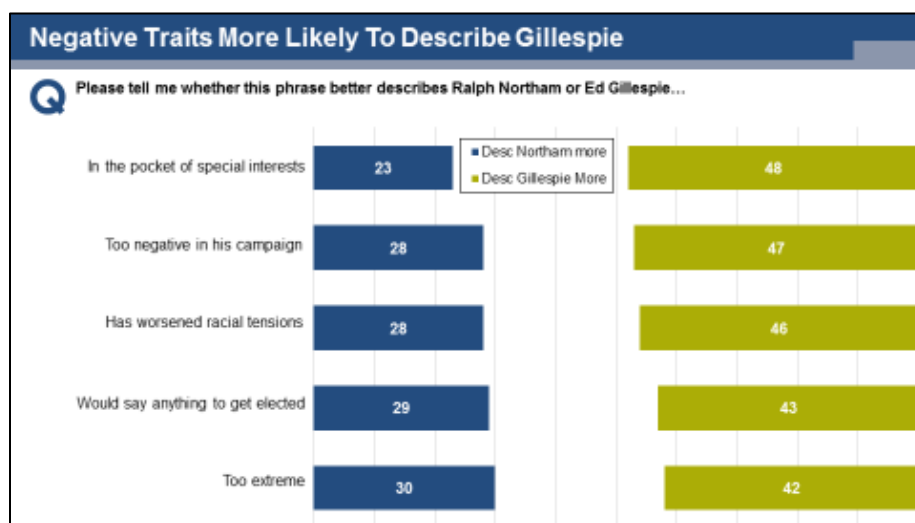
And no matter how we ask it, Northam voters volunteered Trump was a factor in their vote —whether in an open-ended question about what influenced their vote, or in a closed-ended question that asked respondents to pick one from a small list of potential vote drivers. Almost a fourth (23 percent) of Northam voters cited “he opposes Trump” as a reason they supported their candidate, and even more Northam voters (36 percent) cited “he supports Trump” as a reason they voted against Gillespie.



Further, Trump helped Northam more than Gillespie. Fewer Gillespie voters volunteered Trump as a reason they voted for him — either in the open-ends or in the closed-ended questions (12 percent of Gillespie voters cited Trump as a reason they voted for him, and 17 percent cited Trump as a reason to oppose Northam).

❖ **Northam’s image was stronger than Gillespie’s, overall and with each’s base**

Northam was more popular than Gillespie, not just overall, but with the candidates’ respective bases, and beneath the surface. On average, Northam was more popular (55 on a 0-to-100 score) than Gillespie (45). Northam’s own voters were more favorable toward him (80) than Gillespie’s voters were to him (68).



Voters also found Northam better-described than Gillespie on nearly every positive trait we tested, not just on education (as described above) but on health care, standing up for women, empathy, and bipartisanship. Gillespie was better described by all

negative traits, such as special interest ties, being too negative, and worsening racial tensions. And Northam voters rate Northam more positively than Gillespie voters rate Gillespie. While it’s certainly possible, that Northam received a post-election bounce from his base, public polling pre-election from [multiple outlets](#) also showed Northam more popular than Gillespie.

❖ **“Racially-loaded” messaging and the economy appealed to some of Gillespie’s base**

While Gillespie’s muddled messaging on Trump appeased neither the President’s detractors nor supporters, conservative -- at times racially-loaded -- messaging around guns, immigration, crime, and confederate monuments did resonate with a portion of the Republican base. However Republican men seemed to find these issues more compelling than Republican women. For example, almost a quarter (23 percent) of Republican men said “guns” was one of the top issues in their vote, compared to only 9 percent of Republican women.

Gillespie also had some advantages on the economy and taxes. Gillespie’s voters were more likely to say the economy was one of the most important issues in their vote (41 percent, compared to 22 percent of Northam voters). And slightly more voters said Gillespie was better described than Northam by the phrase: “will bring new high-paying jobs to Virginia” (Gillespie: 43 percent, Northam: 40 percent).

Yet more 2017 voters said they think Virginia is moving in the right direction (50 percent vs 42 percent wrong track), a climate that benefitted Northam more than Gillespie.

❖ **Communities of color overwhelmingly broke for Northam, yet had different priorities**

All communities of color we studied overwhelmingly broke for Northam (AAPI: +57, Hispanic: +70, African-American: +81). Yet the three groups cited slightly different issue priorities. African-Americans were particularly likely to name health care as their top issue (43 percent), while AAPI voters cited the economy (38 percent). Hispanic voters were almost evenly divided between health care, education, and immigration, although they prioritized the latter far more (31 percent) than AAPI or African-American voters (12 percent, 9 percent, respectively).

Conclusions:

- The conventional wisdom about this race was far more simplistic than the reality. Northam voters in particular heard something more nuanced.
- That said, Trump opposition was more helpful to Northam than Trump support was to Gillespie.
- Education was more salient with Democrats than in the coverage.
- Gillespie had some advantages on the economy that perhaps with a different race and climate could have been wider.
- Republican and college-educated women didn't seem to respond well to Gillespie's racially-loaded messaging.
- Communities of color varied in reactions to racially-loaded campaigning, yet all groups voted heavily for Northam.

GBA Strategies administered this survey of 1400 Virginia voters and non-voters statewide. This survey was conducted November 8th-13th, 2017 and reached respondents on both landlines and cell phones. The survey results carry a margin of error +/-2.6 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval. The survey also included an oversample of 150 AAPI voters and 150 Hispanic voters, which each carry a +/-8.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval.