

Virginia's Politics of Contentment

By Richard Skinner

Pleased with a prosperous economy and mostly content with their leadership, Virginia voters have little interest in breaking from their current course. To comply with this public sentiment, the 1997 Virginia gubernatorial candidates, Democrat Lt. Gov. Donald Beyer and Republican (former) Attorney General James Gilmore, are portraying themselves as defenders of the status quo. Thus, the November election most likely will turn on personality or regional conflicts, not ideology. This race may also typify late '90s politics—calm and consensual.

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Personalities Set the Tone

Virginia's GOP Gov. George Allen was elected by a landslide in 1993, ending a dozen years of Democratic rule. He has followed a conservative course, abolishing parole and reforming welfare but failing to pass a tax cut. He has enjoyed high approval ratings; a recent Commonwealth poll showed that 61% of Virginians approved of Allen's performance as governor, but there's been speculation that these numbers reflect the governor's genial personality as much as his record in office. Regardless, Allen cannot run in '97 because Virginia has barred its governors from seeking consecutive terms.

Democrat Beyer is a successful northern Virginia Volvo dealer who is completing his second term as lieutenant governor. He was first elected in 1989 in a surprise victory over the widow of former Governor John Dalton. Beyer has a reputation as a moderate, especially on fiscal issues and crime, and possesses the congeniality Virginians prefer in their officeholders.

Gilmore, Beyer's GOP opponent, was a prosecutor in suburban Richmond before he was elected to statewide office in 1993. He recently resigned the attorney generalship to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest. Gilmore is a conservative who accents his ties to Allen but lacks the Governor's upbeat image. Early polls show a dead heat with many voters undecided. In a May Commonwealth poll, Gilmore and Beyer each had the support of about a third of the electorate.

Regional Struggles

The race is widely seen as a struggle between regional interests. Virginia can be divided into two main sections. The "New Dominion" consists of northern Virginia, Hampton Roads (the area surrounding Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Newport News), and the university town of Charlottesville. These areas are experiencing rapid economic and population growth, have increasingly high-tech economies, and have many new, out-of-state residents. The rest of the state might be termed the "Old Dominion," which includes the Richmond area, smaller cities such as Roanoke and Lynchburg, and many rural communities. The "Old Dominion" economy is still based

on tobacco and textiles, and cultural attitudes are distinctly Southern. Overall, a slight majority of Virginians live in the "New Dominion."

While both dominions tend to support Republican presidential candidates, they often part ways in state elections. The "Old Dominion" is more conservative than its cosmopolitan counterpart. It would, however, be a mistake to see the two regions as internally homogenous. The "Old Dominion" has a large black population that provides a significant base for Democrats. The "New Dominion" includes some conservative suburbs that consistently vote Republican.

Early polls show Beyer running strong in the "New Dominion" while Gilmore leads in the "Old Dominion." He is expected to win easily in tobacco-growing communities along the North Carolina border. This pattern of support repeats itself on the elite level, with high-tech and real estate interests in northern Virginia backing Beyer, and the Richmond business establishment supporting Gilmore.

Guardians of the Status Quo

In contrast to the early 1990s' mantra of change, Beyer and Gilmore are both campaigning as guardians of the status quo. Already, they have raised over \$9 million between them (Beyer leads Gilmore, \$4.9 million to \$4.4 million), and many predict they will surpass the record \$16 million spent on the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial race. The candidates began their TV advertising campaigns in May having mostly relied on "feel-good" commercials emphasizing their backgrounds.

Beyer is generally seen as a strong candidate, with an easy-going persona and a relaxed delivery. Gilmore, however, can come across as earnest and starchy, with little personal warmth. He may hope that some of Allen's sunny demeanor rubs off on him. If Gilmore can make the race a referen-

dum on Allen, he should win. Indeed, this election may turn out to be a charm contest between Allen and Beyer.

Voter Apathy

Both candidates may have problems with their core constituencies. Because he heads the first all-white-male statewide Democratic ticket since 1981, Beyer may have difficulty generating enthusiasm among blacks and women. Former Democratic Governor Douglas Wilder, the first African-American to hold that post, won't make an endorsement until after he hosts a Beyer-Gilmore debate in October. Almost one in five Virginians is black, and Democrats need a strong African-American turnout to win. But recent polls show a large number of black voters undecided and almost one-fifth supporting Gilmore. Indeed, turnout in general will be a problem for Beyer: polls show him running better with those "somewhat likely" to vote than with those "very likely" to vote.

Gilmore, on the other hand, may find that one of his bases of support backs him a little too strongly. The Republican candidates for lieutenant governor and attorney general both have ties to the religious right, and Pat Robertson donated \$50,000 to the Gilmore campaign. Democrats are now portraying the GOP ticket as extremist.

Tobacco Road

Beyer and Gilmore agree on most issues. Both support welfare reform and tough anti-crime measures. Both promise tax cuts and more spending on education. However, they disagree on tobacco, which has been a mainstay of the Virginia economy since the colonial period. But tobacco is no longer king in Virginia, although it may still be a prince. Virginia ranks sixth in the nation in tobacco production, and cigarette manufacturing remains an important industry, especially in the Richmond area.

But Virginia's economy has diversified, and its voters are no longer immune to anti-smoking sentiment. Last year, a *Richmond Times-Dispatch* poll found a majority of Virginians favored federal regulations on tobacco as a drug, and restrictions on cigarette advertising. But there has been speculation that, given the importance of the industry to some parts of the state, pro-tobacco sentiment may be more fervent than anti-smoking attitudes.

Beyer has announced support for FDA regulation of tobacco. He has also endorsed the recent settlement between the tobacco companies and 22 state attorneys general. Beyer has criticized Gilmore for his absence from these talks and for the financial support the tobacco industry has given his campaign. By contrast, Gilmore has been unabashed in his defense of tobacco. In March, he attended a \$50,000 fundraiser at Philip Morris' headquarters in New York City. He has presented himself as the protector of tobacco farmers against an intrusive federal government. He filed a friend-of-the-court brief supporting a suit brought by tobacco companies against new federal regulations.

Cutting Taxes, Raising Spending

After tobacco, taxes will probably be the most important issue in this year's election. Both candidates have promised tax cuts. Beyer initially left open the possibility that he might raise taxes to fund education and transportation but later backed off, which led Republicans to charge him with flip-flopping. Beyer now supports ending the corporate income tax for small businesses and the sales tax on patent medicines.

Gilmore has proposed eliminating the personal property tax on automobiles and trucks valued \$20,000 or less; revenues from this tax are funneled to local governments. Beyer initially criticized the initiative as imprudent but many political observers saw it as a winning issue for Gilmore. In July, Beyer reversed his stand and proposed giving lower-income and middle-income Virginians a \$250 income tax credit that would cancel out their personal property tax payments. While Beyer's initiative may neutralize the tax issue and deprive the Republicans of one of their principle appeals, it could lend further credence to accusations of waffling.

With national polls showing education as voters' leading concern, both Beyer and Gilmore have pledged to improve Virginia's schools. But both candidates have also had to answer skeptics who question whether they can increase education spending and cut taxes. Both hopefuls have provided the same answer: economic growth will produce enough revenue to make up the difference.

With many voters undecided on who to support on Election Day, the Virginia gubernatorial race is wide open. However, it's many weeks until the election and, as observers know, in politics the tide can turn quickly.



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