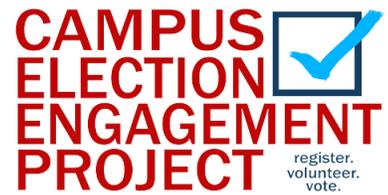# 2019 Virginia Legislative Races— Why Your Vote Matters

Virginia is now **a swing state:** one where both parties have a strong chance at winning. So key issues and key elections come down to close votes.

All 140 Virginia General Assembly seats will be up for grabs in November — 100 in the House of Delegates and 40 in the Senate. Your votes will determine what bills are passed or rejected, and therefore Virginia's future. Republicans currently control the House of Delegates by a 51-49 margin and the Senate by 21-19. If Democrats win both houses, then any legislation they pass will likely be signed by Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam. If they don't, the state will remain under split control, with each party capable of blocking the other's proposals.

In 2017, both candidates in a House of Delegates district had the same number of votes for a seat that would determine statewide control of the House of Delegates. To break the tie, they put each name in a film canister to be randomly selected from a bowl. Republican David Yancey was chosen, giving Republicans a 51-49 majority. Your district could end up equally close.

Whoever controls the legislature will, together with Virginia's governor, determine legislative and congressional districts following the 2020 census. Slight shifts in district lines can decide key elections. In 2010, the General Assembly created a map that opponents claimed packed African American voters into a smaller number of districts and diluted their voting strength in other districts. A federal court ordered the map redrawn. November's elections will decide who votes on competing redistricting proposals that will shape the state's politics for the next 10 years.

So you, a single voter, can make the difference in who sits in the General Assembly — and how districts are drawn for future elections. **Please don't let Virginia politics come down to another lottery drawing.**

Some key issues where the parties have divided:

Environmental Issues Several Democratic-backed initiatives supported transitioning Virginia's energy sourcing away from fossil fuels. They failed primarily because of Republican opposition. Instead, a Greenhouse Gas Initiative bill passed that prohibited state agencies from participating in carbon dioxide cap-and-trade programs without a two-thirds vote from both legislative houses. **Vote Breakdown, House**: Republicans: 51 Yes; Democrats: 48 No. **Vote Breakdown, Senate**: Republicans: 20 Yes, 1 No; Democrats: 18 No. Gov. Northam vetoed the bill.

Felon Rights Virginia is one of three states with a lifetime voting ban for past felons. Two bills tried to restore the right to felons, but the measures were rejected in a subcommittee. Individuals convicted of a felony must currently receive a restoration of civil rights by a state authority to vote. **Vote Breakdown:** Republicans 8 No; Democrats 6 Yes.

ERA The Equal Rights Amendment promises "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex" and has been a source of political debate for nearly half a century. If Virginia passed the ERA, then it would become the 38th state to do so — therefore meeting the required national two-thirds majority to add the measure to the U.S. Constitution, although opponents said the amendment missed the 1982 deadline. Republican Sen. Dick Black said he opposes the "unintended consequences" that may accompany it, like overturning laws restricting or banning abortion. Two Democratic bills and one Republican bill tried to ratify the ERA in 2019, but all were defeated in a House of Delegates subcommittee. **Vote Breakdown, Senate**: Republicans: 7 Yes, 14 No; Democrats: 19 Yes. **Vote Breakdown, House Subcommittee**: Republicans: 4 against the ERA; Democrats: 2 for the ERA.

Gun Regulation Gun issues trigger some of Virginia's strongest partisan divides. Democrats sponsor bills they call "common-sense" laws to regulate gun purchasing and carrying. Republicans argue that gun control endangers individuals by stripping them of means of defense. During the 2019 General Assembly, 22 gun-related bills were introduced.

One to allow "carrying dangerous weapon(s) to place(s) of religious worship" passed in the Senate. **Vote Breakdown:** Republicans: 21 Yes; Democrats: 19 No. Another to make Virginia the 10th state to ban the exchange of large-capacity firearm magazines failed in committee. **Vote Breakdown:** Democrats: 6 Yes; Republicans: 8 No. After the May 2019 Virginia Beach shooting, Gov. Northam called a special session on gun legislation, but couldn't get a vote. Republican Sen. Mark Obenshain said, "I wish that it was as simple as some would suggest to address this, but quite frankly we have some deep societal issues that need to be addressed."

Medicaid Expansion Medicaid offers premium-free coverage for persons who otherwise cannot afford medical care. For five years, Republicans held the majority in the House of Delegates and blocked the Medicaid expansion that was an optional part of Obamacare. After Democrats made major gains in the 2017 elections, Virginia became the 33rd state to implement Medicaid expansion, with the bill expanding coverage for 400,000 low-income individuals who earn up to 138% of the federal poverty level. Despite Medicaid expansion being Democrat-supported for years, the successful bill gained the necessary Republican support and lost some Democratic advocates because it included work requirements for eligibility. **Vote Breakdown:** Republicans: 51 Yes; Democrats: 13 Yes, 36 No.

Marijuana Decriminalization In 2018, Virginia legalized the medical use of cannabis oils with less than 10 milligrams of THC per dose. Other medical use is still banned, along with recreational use. Attorney General Mark Herring, a Democrat, said criminalizing possession is "needlessly creating criminals and burdening Virginians with convictions." Two bills decriminalizing possession (HB2079 and HB2370) failed in subcommittee. **Subcommittee Vote Breakdown:** Democrats: 3 Yes; Republicans: 5 No.

Minimum Wage Eighteen states increased their minimum wage requirements in 2019. Virginia's current minimum wage is $7.25 per hour, the federal minimum, and has not been raised since 2009. Four 2019 bills attempted to raise the minimum. One would have increased it by roughly $1 each year to reach $11.25 per hour by 2022. Two aimed for $15 per hour. Democratic Sen. Rosalyn Dance introduced the Senate bill that had a close vote. Democratic Sen. Jeremy McPike said that raising the minimum wage would help promote stronger families because "without the opportunity to earn a living wage, these workers have to work two and three jobs to make ends meet. That means time away from their kids." **Vote Breakdown, Senate**: Democrats: 19 Yes; Republicans: 21 No.

Election Day is Nov. 5

Know which candidates are running. Register to vote online or at your local registrar's office by Oct. 15. Find your polling place, update your registration, apply for an absentee ballot or contact your local registrar office at the Election Citizen Portal. Additional Election Day and voter information can be found at Vote411.org.