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ABC News Exit Poll Analysis: The Virginia Governor's Race

In Virginia's Governor Race, Underwater Favorability and a Biden Drag

A more closely divided electorate than a year ago, underwater ratings for Joe Biden and a popularity deficit for Democrat Terry McAuliffe defined the off-year contest for Virginia governor in exit poll results.

Among challenges for the Democrats – who'd won all statewide races in Virginia dating to 2013 – was McAuliffe's lack of personal appeal. Forty-five percent saw him favorably vs. 51 percent unfavorably. Republican Glenn Youngkin did better, 52-44 percent, favorable-unfavorable.

While a projection hadn't yet been made, by 9 p.m., two hours after the polls closed, ABC News characterized Youngkin as leading.

The race was watched as an early test of Democratic vulnerabilities under Biden, with an eye toward the 2022 midterm elections. Compounding McAuliffe's own challenges were negative views of Biden's job performance, with more Virginia voters disapproving than approving, 54-45 percent. Intensity, which can influence turnout, was particularly poor for Biden: Twice as many "strongly" disapproved of his work in office, 46 percent, as strongly approved, 23 percent.

Given those views, turnout shifted from a year ago. Virginia voters reported having split between Biden and Donald Trump in 2020, 47-45 percent – indicating that many Biden supporters sat this contest out, since he won the state by a 10-point margin.

Trump, for his part, was no more of an attraction, seen favorably by 42 percent, unfavorably by 54 percent, a 12-point negative score. Youngkin kept Trump at arm's length in the campaign, as did McAuliffe with Biden (save two joint campaign rallies), for evident reasons.

Ultimately, more Virginia voters said a reason for their vote was to show opposition to Biden (28 percent) than support for him (20 percent). The rest, 48 percent, said Biden wasn't a factor.

In terms of some key voter groups:

- The suburbs were a battleground in Virginia, as elsewhere. A big group – they accounted for six in 10 voters – suburbanites tipped slightly toward Youngkin, 53-47 percent. Biden had won the suburbs by 8 percentage points.

- White Virginians accounted for 74 percent of voters, up from 67 percent in 2020 – and while Trump won them by 8 points last year, Youngkin won whites by 23 points. Members of racial and ethnic minority groups made up 26 percent of voters, down from 33 percent last year and the fewest since 2009.

- Robust turnout by college-educated voters aided McAuliffe. College graduates accounted for 49 percent of voters, up 6 points from last year's presidential election, and McAuliffe won 58 percent of this group. Youngkin, for his part, did strongly among those without a college degree, outperforming Trump a year ago.

- Youngkin may have done himself a favor by keeping Trump at a distance. Among the majority who held an unfavorable opinion of Trump, 17 percent voted for Youngkin regardless. About half as many Biden disapprovers backed McAuliffe, 9 percent.

- Youngkin made education a centerpiece of his campaign, arguing for parental input and against the teaching of critical race theory. A quarter of voters picked education as the top issue – second only to the economy – and Youngkin won them by 55-44 percent.

- This was the first election in which Virginia offered early in-person voting, from mid-September through Saturday, and the exit poll estimated that 27 percent of voters availed themselves of it - a group in which McAuliffe won 57 percent, countered by strong results for Youngkin among Election Day voters.

- White evangelical voters made up 27 percent of the electorate, and Youngkin won 88 percent in this group - the largest share of white evangelicals to vote for a Republican in Virginia in exit poll data in gubernatorial or presidential elections dating to 2008.

Voters' criticisms extended to the major parties overall, indicating more vulnerability for the Democratic Party – 52 percent called it too liberal – than for the Republican Party, called too conservative by fewer, 45 percent.

On specific issues, though, the electorate itself was not so easily categorized. Fifty-nine percent favored legal abortion and 55 percent supported employer mandates for coronavirus vaccines, both closer to McAuliffe's views than to Youngkin's. On the other hand, 53 percent said monuments to Confederate leaders on government property should be left in place.

As noted, Youngkin sought to make parental involvement in school curricula a key issue, striking a chord; 51 percent of voters said parents should have "a lot" of say in what their child's school teaches, and he won three-quarters of their votes.

Voters divided in choosing the most important of five issues facing Virginia: the economy and jobs (33 percent), education (24 percent), taxes (15 percent), the pandemic (14 percent) and abortion (8 percent). It's notable that the economy finished as the top issue even as 55 percent rated it positively – and also that the pandemic trailed as a top concern.

Youngkin, a former private equity executive, and McAuliffe, an ex-governor, ran closely in trust to handle the economy, 43-40 percent. Youngkin opened a 6-point edge in trust to handle crime, 44-38 percent; McAuliffe countered with a 6-point lead in trust to handle the pandemic, 43-37 percent. Neither approached majority preference on any of these, given the numbers who trusted both or neither.

Among other groups, the exit poll indicated a dearth of young voters (whom McAuliffe won, but much more narrowly than Biden) and a surfeit of those age 65 and older (a better group for Youngkin). One region flipped – Richmond and Southside, from +14 for Biden in 2020 to +10 for Youngkin. There also was a dramatic change, and nearly a flip, in Hampton Roads, +26 for Biden last year, now a narrow 51-49 percent, McAuliffe-Youngkin, in the exit poll.

In partisan preferences, Democrats and Republicans were essentially evenly matched, 35-34 percent, with independents – likely the decisive group – making up the rest.

The exit poll, conducted for ABC News and its media partners, included interviews conducted both in advance of Election Day, to capture the views of early and absentee voters, and among in-person voters today. Results may be adjusted to reflect the official results as all votes are counted (and mail ballots will be accepted through Friday noon).

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