

Notes on the State of Virginia('s Primary)

Voters in Districts 7 and 10 settle on nominees, while VA-5 may see a recount; Rep. Garret Graves (R, LA-6) retires

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Dear Readers: Happy Juneteenth. Today we are passing along some brief observations from last night's primaries in Virginia. If you missed it yesterday, also check out Louis Jacobson's full rundown of the races for the nation's state legislative chambers. We will return next week.

-- The Editors

Virginia primary recap

Yesterday, voters in our home commonwealth went to the polls. The contests that we were following included the Senate race and a selection of competitive House primaries. What follows are some takeaways from those results.

With Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA) unopposed in his primary, the only statewide contest yesterday in Virginia was the GOP primary for Senate. In a lopsided vote, Navy veteran and 2022 House candidate Hung Cao won with 62% of the vote and carried every locality with the exception of Southside's Emporia. Cao was the beneficiary of a late May Trump endorsement, which may have bumped him up from being just a favorite to a landslide winner.

In something of an amusing result, a few weeks ago, Cao was criticized for suggesting that the city of Staunton, in the Shenandoah Valley, was a "podunk" town (although he technically used that term when referring to the city's newspaper)—last night, he carried Staunton with 58%, not too dissimilar from his statewide result. This reminded us of a 2022 episode where Rep. Susan Wild (D, PA-7) made some condescending comments about Carbon County, a deep red county that was added to her marginal Lehigh Valley seat in redistricting. Wild went on to *outperform* Joe Biden's showing in Carbon County by several points (though she still lost it handily).

Looking to the general election, and for reasons outlined in our primary preview last week, we continue to see Kaine as a strong favorite for reelection.

Going lower down the ballot, two Democratic-held House seats saw competitive open-seat primaries.

The 7th District Democratic contest, as we expected, was the most open-and-shut case. Former National Security Council official Eugene Vindman, who lapped the rest of the 7-candidate field in fundraising thanks to national notoriety from his role in former President Trump's first impeachment, took close to a majority of the vote and carried every locality in the district. As we noted in our preview, there was simply no anti-Vindman consolidation in the Democratic primary despite some local grumblings about his candidacy: the runner-up, former state Del. Elizabeth Guzman, was way back at 15%. Not surprisingly, Vindman's weakest plurality came in Prince William County, the district's Democratic bastion, where several of his opponents hold, or have held, some type of elected office. But even in Prince William County, the splintering was evident: 5 candidates carried at least one precinct.

Republicans in the 7th District gave Green Beret veteran Derrick Anderson a 46%-37% margin over Navy SEAL veteran Cameron Hamilton. The former was the choice of national leadership while the latter ran as more of an insurgent aligned with the Freedom Caucus. It may be worth noting that, in this light blue district, Republicans very narrowly outvoted Democrats in the primary, although the Democrats did not have a contested Senate primary at the top of the ticket, and the GOP primary for this seat ended up being more competitive, too.

District 10, a deeper blue seat, hosted a contest that seemed more up in the air, as a dozen candidates were seeking the Democratic nod. But the race shaped up to be almost a two-way race, with state Sen. Suhas Subramanyam defeating state Rep. Dan Helmer by a 30%-27% vote—only one other candidate, Atif Qarni, took a double-digit share, and just barely.

Last week, Helmer was hit with allegations of sexual harassment that dated back to his first run for this seat, in 2018 (he has denied them). It might be hard to argue that these allegations along sunk Helmer: Helmer took 27.7% of the combined early and mail-in vote and fell to only a slightly lower 26.0%

among Election Day voters, according to our calculations from Virginia Department of Elections data.

Subramanyam took 25.4% of the early and mail-in votes but surged to 34.3% with Election Day voters. Compared to the rest of the district, the electorate in Loudoun County, which is Subramanyam's homebase, was more Election Day-heavy: close to 60% of its votes were cast on the day of the election, compared to just 51% in the rest of the district. To us, this suggests Subramanyam's Election Day surge was more about his own strength in turning out his voters and had less to do with Helmer's weakness.

In fact, Subramanyam, who likely benefitted from outgoing Rep. Jennifer Wexton's (D) endorsement, seemed to have a solid "friends and neighbors" vote. By our calculations, he carried his state Senate district, a racially diverse seat that centers on the Dulles airport, with 48% of the vote (thanks to VoteHub for providing that data in an easily exportable format). Overall, Subramanyam's Loudoun County margin was enough to offset Helmer's advantage throughout the balance of the district.

Finally, in the *Crystal Ball's* home district, two-term Rep. Bob Good (R, VA-5) is trailing his Trump-backed challenger, state Sen. John McGuire (R), by just over 300 votes. Though McGuire has already declared victory, provisional ballots will be counted Friday, as well as mail-in votes that were postmarked by yesterday. McGuire, unlike most Trump-aligned candidates in GOP primaries this year, did a bit better among mail-in voters than he did among Election Day voters. So it's possible McGuire's lead could grow, but as of this writing, there has not been an official call from the Associated Press.

The VA-5 race could end up going to a recount—the losing candidate can request one if the margin in the race is a percentage point or less, and election authorities will pay for the recount if the margin is half a percentage point or less (the candidate pays if the margin is higher than that and the outcome is not reversed). As of right now, McGuire is winning 50.25% to 49.75% for Good, so the result is hovering at almost exactly that half a percentage point figure.

In terms of how the vote broke down in our district, McGuire's geographic coalition could be described as "Richmond-to-Danville" while Good's was mostly "Charlottesville-to-Lynchburg." Redistricting shifted the district eastward, towards McGuire's homebase in the Richmond exurbs, which could

have been decisive: McGuire carried the parts of the district that were added for 2022 by about 900 votes, which more than accounts for his current overall advantage.

As with the Cao and Wild examples, we would also note there may be some irony in the fact that the Charlottesville area, where Good's general election performances have been worse than that of his recent GOP predecessors, helped to keep him in the game this time. Unfortunately for Good, though, this heavily blue area punches well below its weight in GOP primaries: the Charlottesville/Albemarle duo accounts for 20% of VA-5's population but cast only about 10% of the votes in yesterday's Republican primary.

If McGuire's edge holds, he would be on track to become the fifth Republican to represent this seat since 2016. Given McGuire's advantages, including Trump's endorsement, Good remaining so competitive is yet another reminder that incumbents are hard to defeat in primaries. If McGuire does indeed triumph, Good would be just the second House incumbent to lose a primary so far this year. And while there have been a number of competitive challenges to sitting members this year, many other such challenges have fizzled: also last night, Rep. Tom Cole (R, OK-4) faced a free-spending businessman, Paul Bondar, who seemed to have very little connection to the district. Cole and his allies took the primary seriously, and he dispatched Bondar 65%-26%. That said, our attention will turn to New York next week, where Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D, NY-16) seems to be in real jeopardy of losing his seat to Westchester County Executive George Latimer (D). Per AdImpact, that NY-16 contest has turned into the most expensive House primary ever.

P.S. Graves retiring

While about half the states have already held their down-ballot primary contests this year, Louisiana's primary filing deadline is still a month away. This is because Louisiana holds its all-party jungle primaries concurrently with presidential elections, although the jungle primary is supposedly on its way out for federal contests. But even with the filing date set for July 19, the picture got a little clearer last week, as five-term Rep. Garret Graves (R, LA-6) announced his decision to retire.

Earlier this year, Louisiana adopted a new map that featured an additional Black-majority district. Since it was passed in late January, the plan has seen something of a back-and-forth saga in the courts: while the 5th Circuit threw

the map out on grounds of racial gerrymandering, last month, the Supreme Court ultimately allowed it to take effect. In any case, Graves, who made some strategic decisions that alienated both House Majority Leader Steve Scalise (R, LA-1) and Gov. Jeff Landry (R), found himself the odd Republican out. On the new map, the district labeled LA-6 starts in Baton Rouge and follows the Red River to Shreveport (a similar seat was in place for 1994)—this new Biden +20 seat would have been tough for a Republican.

Aside from running in a newly-configured, Black-majority seat, Graves's best option would have been to challenge Rep. Julia Letlow (R, LA-5). Though Letlow's 5th District has long been the "northeastern" seat, it has slowly been expanding its southern holdings. In fact, about 65% of the new LA-5's residents live in the Florida Parishes, an area that includes Graves's Baton Rouge homebase. But Scalise and Landry made a point of vocalizing their support for Letlow. So Graves's departure precludes a member-vs-member match-up in the Safe Republican LA-5.

While Graves's exit doesn't change the overall House math very much, with the new map, the GOP advantage in the Louisiana delegation is on track to fall from 5-1 to 4-2.

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