

The Washington Post

Sunday Print Edition, November 19, 2017 | Metro Section – Local Opinions p.C4
(Posted online Nov. 17)

The battle for the Virginia House



Danica Roem, center, prepares to give her victory speech after winning a Virginia House of Delegates seat. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

By Mark J. Rozell

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In the 2017 electoral tsunami that lifted Virginia Democrats to their sixth victory in the past seven statewide election cycles, voters also came within a whisker of turning the Virginia House of Delegates blue, a transformation that not even the most optimistic Democrat had predicted.

Nov. 7 virtually erased the GOP's 66-to-34 vote advantage in the 100-member House.

The persistent presence of President Trump, his controversial policies and unpopular antics generated a huge turnout from Virginia's Democratic population centers, overwhelming Republican voters who find themselves increasingly concentrated in rural precincts with shrinking populations. Even Virginia's reliably Republican suburbs are turning blue or purple.

So now, with recounts expected in several particularly tight House contests, these next few weeks will be dramatic times for political junkies, but what happens also will help determine major policy directions for the commonwealth.

While Republicans held a commanding grip on the House, Democrats tried in vain these past several years to expand Medicaid health-care coverage to more than 400,000 lower-income Virginians. With the Republican majority in the House gone or razor-thin, Virginians can get ready for another health-care push.

With parity in the House within striking distance, Democratic leaders now also dare to consider whether they might be able to increase Virginia's minimum wage or pass a measure to provide paid family leave for Virginians.

Thirteen new Democratic lawmakers were elected after pledging to refuse contributions from Virginia's electric utility giants, and those lawmakers may have their sights set on diminishing corporate influence on politics here.

A House of Delegates with a more robust Democratic caucus might even take on the long-untouchable gun lobby by considering new gun-control measures.

With 10 new female members in the House, efforts to restrict abortion rights may be a harder sell than before the election.

Among the 27 women in the House who take office in January: two Latinas and two Asian Americans.

The legislative chamber also may become less a battleground for the culture wars without longtime Republican Del. Bob Marshall (Prince William). Marshall, who bragged about being Virginia's "chief homophobe," will be succeeded by Democrat Danica Roem, Virginia's first openly transgender lawmaker. (Let that sink in for a moment.)

There may even be a credible effort to adopt a less partisan way of drawing boundaries for legislative districts. Both parties have engaged in gerrymandering to help perpetuate their control of the legislature. In recent years, computer-assisted mapping allowed Republicans to hang on to their huge House majorities in Virginia despite the rising Democratic tide statewide.

So, there will be a lot of talk about "a new day" in the House.

But don't be lulled into thinking that Virginia's partisan battle is over. It will be intense, and probably nasty. Democrats feel they've been elected to effect significant changes in policy. Republicans believe their sworn duty is to block "the liberal agenda."

With the approach of a 50-50 split in the House, each side will engage in imaginative parliamentary maneuvers to gain every advantage it can.

After the recounts, if Democrats are still shy a working majority in the House, look for Gov.-elect Ralph Northam (D) to try to lure one or two carefully selected GOP lawmakers out of their legislative seats with attractive state job offers. Northam might also use this tactic in the Virginia Senate, where Republicans hold a one-vote margin.

Gaining the 51st seat in the House gives the majority party control over the legislative agenda and the speakership, the all-important presiding officer's post.

The speaker of the House runs the chamber and chooses committee members — all of them, from both parties. For a lawmaker, committee assignments mean the difference between power and oblivion. All those childhood lessons about “sharing” and “playing fair” don't resonate with politicians. The prize of power is just too great. When it comes time to organize the legislature, the ruling concept is “to the victor belong the spoils.”

Sorry, Mr. Rogers.

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