

GOVERNMENT + POLITICS, 2019 ELECTION COVERAGE

Democrat-dominated election highlights tensions under the big tent



CHARLOTTE RENE WOODS
@charlottewords

23 MIN READ

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(from left to right) Charlottesville city council candidates Lloyd Snook, Sena Magill, and Michael Payne pose for a picture during a labor day cookout.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods \ Charlottesville Tomorrow

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The logo for the Charlottesville Democratic Party recently shifted from its cartoon donkey to artwork of the Blue Ridge Mountains. City party co-Chair Ivy Hinton urged the change in order to be more representative and inclusive of the local party as a whole and the geographical region of the state.

“One of the things that I’ve said lately is that I pushed for our new logo because I appreciate all the shades of blue in the Democratic Party,” she said. “It’s why I liked the logo the best because we’re going to need every person, every value of the Democratic Party because 2020 is a really important year for us.”

Charlottesville’s Democratic ticket for the City Council has its own shades of blue as it faces independent challengers, and “there’s something for everyone,” Hinton said.

“I want you to appreciate that these three people will appeal to you,” she said. “You will appreciate them if you take the time to get the information.”

Shades of Blue

Charlottesville is a predominantly Democratic city and one of several blue strongholds throughout the state. Quentin Kidd, dean of Christopher Newport University’s College of Social Sciences and director of the Judy Ford Wason Center for Public Policy, said that nuances become more noticeable in one-party towns.

“Charlottesville happens to be a situation a lot like Alexandria is or Hampton, Norfolk, Newport News and Richmond,” Kidd said. “It’s where the GOP doesn’t get much traction, so you end up getting the divisions within the party amplified.”

He noted the rise in recent years of more progressive candidates entering into the party and finding their voices.

“It manifested itself in two ways. One is an environmental voice, and the other wing was a social justice voice,” Kidd said. “You’d hear it in African American voices and younger progressives concerned with criminal justice reform.”

Kidd said those elements have become stronger since the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, something Democratic Charlottesville City Council candidate Michael Payne has echoed, as well.

“There were a lot of people who maybe usually voted and paid attention, but they hadn’t really been directly involved in politics a lot — especially the local and state-level politics,” Payne said. “I think after 2016, there was just this enormous increase in people getting involved in local and state-level politics more than I’d seen, more than people who had been around for a while had seen.”

Since the 2016 presidential election, Virginia’s local, state and federal elections have seen more racial diversity, women, and younger candidates. The 2017 General Assembly election resulted in 15 seats flipped to Democratic representation in the House of Delegates — with many of them women, to include the first openly transgender woman to serve. Colloquially, it became referred to as the “blue wave.”



Del. David Toscano (center) discusses the 2017 "blue wave" and other politics during an Oct. 10 event with political commentator Paul Belaga (left) and novelist John Grisham (right).

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods \ Charlottesville Tomorrow

With Charlottesville's general candidate lineup historically being Democratic, the current winners from the June primaries have teamed up as a united ticket to ward off three independent challengers.

The number of independents is something Democratic candidate Sena Magill said is not uncommon in Charlottesville, and Kidd agreed.

Kidd says that running as an Independent allows for some distinction.

"When you're a one-party town, you can run independent and draw attention to your name," Kidd said. "Unless the party is going to provide you all the services at a local level — your polling, campaign manager ... helping you with fundraising — the only benefit you're getting as D versus an I is signaling to voters."

Also echoing Kidd, Payne said he doesn't feel it's unbelievable that he and Snook share the same ticket. He cited that the Democratic party has always had divides in terms of generation, income, ideology, and race and that perhaps the divisions are more apparent in Charlottesville because of the progressive nature of the city.

"I think our running as Democrats' goal is to figure out what are our shared priorities that we are able to work on," Payne said. "Sometimes, when you're in a city like Charlottesville that's extremely progressive, some of those intraparty debates get the most emphasis because this is just such a progressive town."

Democratic City Council candidate Lloyd Snook noted that while there are differences in approach to policy between Payne and him, they share a lot of goals on addressing the core issues they hope to tackle in their potential shared four-year term.

"I may represent sort of institutional memory in a way that neither Sena nor Michael will — having been involved in city government things for close to 40 years," Snook said. "On the other hand, Michael has contact with both people and the ideas that they represent that are very different from mine."

Payne has been involved with Indivisible Charlottesville and is a regular council attendee. He has advocated in Council Chambers for measures to enhance public transportation, support affordable housing and increase climate resiliency measures. Snook, whose advocacy has been seated in legal matters in his role as an attorney, sees things he can learn from Payne's community organizing background.

"I've been interested to learn some things, for example the terminology some people use these days to talk about racial matters," Snook said. "It's very different from the terminology that was being used when we were talking about race in the '60s, '70s and '80s. We didn't talk about white supremacy then; we didn't talk about structural racism then. It's been interesting to learn some of the perspective that he and his supporters bring."

On sharing a ticket with Magill, as well, he cites her experience with PACEM and Region Ten.

"Sena is in the middle between the two of us in some ways," Snook said. "She is sort of the perfect social worker. If she could hug the entire city of Charlottesville she would. Empathy for people's problems is something that she brings to a greater degree than the two of us do."

Jake Gold, who is coordinating campaigns for the shared ticket, noted the key issues that Snook, Payne and Magill are united on.

On affordable housing, Snook said he appreciates how it intersects with address climate change, saying "it's not a situation where only one answer is right."

One such example of intersecting policies was a [pilot program](#) approved by the current council over the summer. Spearheaded by Charlottesville Climate Collaborative and Local Energy Alliance Program, the program provides incentive for landlords to accept housing vouchers in exchange for energy efficient retrofits to units. With better energy efficiency, utility bills can become lower and be less of a financial burden on low-income residents.

The pilot program aligns with some of the Democratic tickets' campaign goals — climate resiliency and equity. Magill also noted the significance to further invest in energy reduction for the long run.

"With the city's commitment to funding the renovation of some public housing, we need to make sure that renovation includes an eye on energy efficiency," Magill said. "If we use good energy practices in building, it makes a more comfortable living environment and reduces energy uses. Every place that we have a chance to reduce that energy usage will help us with our climate goals."

On matters like improving public housing and the idea of converting to electric busses, Magill said there will be up-front costs, but that such measures can save money in the long-term while enhancing climate resilience.

Magill said that she, Payne, and Snook have weekly dinners where they discuss policy proposals. The idea of public transportation as both an equity and environmental issue is an area where they unite.

"We don't agree on everything, but we can come to a place of agreement that represents our different viewpoints," Magill said. "I think that brings an incredible strength to council. I think that difference is a strength, not a weakness."



Charlottesville democrats and various candidates gather at a labor day cookout.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods \ Charlottesville Tomorrow

Suzanne Michels, the other co-chair of the city’s Democratic Party, and Hinton recently sent a news release noting that the trio agrees “mostly, but not entirely,” will vote together “often, but not always” and that they will seek to educate each other about issues.

Gold noted how different the political scene has been in town in recent election years — many of the issues that the Democratic trio will work on, if elected.

“The Charlottesville political scene is opening itself up to a lot more progressive ideas that weren’t really thinkable three years ago. ... If there is anything good that can come from the terrorist attack in August 2017, the only way you can make sense of it is that we are going to repair the things that brought us there, and Michael talks about that a lot,” Gold said.

“The Democratic primary was a remarkably policy-focused conversation around specifics, and because of that, we were able to arrive at a consensus,” Payne said. “It’s sort of easy to lose track of how much has changed in two years versus just what people are talking about and what’s considered a priority and starting to see how some of that will unfold come January on council. And I think that the current council has planted a lot of seeds of change that we can continue to cultivate.”

With councilors Wes Bellamy, Kathy Galvin and Mike Signer not seeking reelection, January 2020 will showcase a City Council composed entirely of councilors who were not on the council during 2017’s “Summer of Hate.” Mayor Nikuyah Walker and Vice Mayor Heather Hill were elected that November.

As an outgoing councilor and former vice mayor, Bellamy has discussed the equitable policies the council has achieved in recent years that he is proud to have been a part of.

“In the equity package, we got more towards underserved communities,” Bellamy said. “Things like addressing education equity with Denise Johnson’s position.”

In April of this year, Johnson, who was the executive director of City of Promise, was hired as the first supervisor of equity and inclusion for Charlottesville City Schools.

Bellamy also mentioned the council’s efforts to [support Black-owned businesses and entrepreneurs](#), programs like Go Solar and other initiatives that bolster workforce development along with the hiring of City Manager Tarron Richardson and Police Chief RaShall Brackney— both African American.

Race in the Races

But across the three Democrats and three independents currently running for the City Council, only one of them is African American. Bellamy and Walker are two of few nonwhite councilors in Charlottesville history.

“I’m only the seventh Black person ever to the City Council, and this is the first time we’ve ever had two at the same time in history,” Bellamy said. “[Albemarle County] hasn’t had a Black person on the Board of Supervisors since 2002. When you look at things like that, it’s because Charlottesville is a place rooted in white supremacy and racism.”

Charlottesville, like the rest of the country, has had a past tied to racism — from the era of holding people as slaves on Monticello, to the marches and rallies that erupted in violence in August of 2017. Charlottesville saw the 1965 razing of [Vinegar Hill](#), a neighborhood where many African Americans owned homes and businesses following the Civil War. The city was one of the last school systems to [integrate](#) after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. An October 2018 [New York Times article](#) highlighted equity issues in public schools that still persist — and which are in the process of being addressed by community members and the School Board.

Bellamy said racism isn’t always overt examples, like the tiki torches and chants during the August 2017 Unite the Right rally or [racial slurs and threats that he has received](#).

“Newer leadership is more brash, but it’s more predicated in truth. It’s not the politeness that makes a lot of white people comfortable,” Bellamy said. “There’s a lot of white fragility. Sometimes it’s difficult to lead but there has been a change.”

Bellamy said he’s seen a philosophical shift locally that “will allow us to move forward.”

In Albemarle, Jerrod Smith, Democratic co-chair for the Rivanna District, said political parties need to stop operating in bubbles in order to reach more constituents and candidates.

“A lot of times in the county and politics in general, we’re not trying to meet the entire community,” said Smith who lost by a narrow margin in the June primaries for the Board of Supervisors. “We’re trying to stay in our bubble and do what our bubble wants.”

On the lack of candidates of color, Smith said a more engaged approach is needed not just in representing all constituents, but for future candidate outreach.

“We have to discuss the issues not just when they become a problem. We need to have more forums in the county,” he said. “Committees and boards don’t have much representation, so are we actively looking for minorities to join these boards? We need to make sure our representatives represent all of us.”

He said he hoped his campaign contributed to inspiration for future candidates.

Bellamy also noted how during election seasons, candidates have dipped in and out of various communities, rather than remaining engaged long term.

"Blacks have just been historically taken for granted. The expectation is there that we will vote party-line Democratic."

Don Gathers

Former Democratic City Council Candidate

“You can’t just come to Black folk when it’s election time or go to churches and community cookouts and think that will address all of our needs,” he said. “You have to be deep in the trenches to understand our needs.”

Meanwhile, independent candidate Bellamy Brown asserted that he is open to going in different spaces to engage his potential constituents. He also feels his identity as an African American candidate is a perspective he can bring to the table.

“Whether you’re rich, poor, Black white — I understand the role of public service at the government level, and I seek to pull that out,” he said to Charlottesville Tomorrow over the summer. “I do think I bring a dynamic that I think our city needs, just from the aspect of the community of color that’s there.”

He said he chose run independent to avoid political affiliation of any kind because his platform is about policy work, not politics.

CNU’s Kidd said that if there is dissension in the coalition reflected in discontent, running as an independent can be a valuable signal.

“It may be wise because you can distance yourself from some baggage,” Kidd said.

“With this whole polarization in our country today, it’s like, I’m not here for politics, I’m here to do work for my community that clearly hasn’t been done,” Brown said in Charlottesville Tomorrow’s Voter Guide. “We had a 50% African American community here and now it’s 19%, and this was all under Democratic rule. A local political party doesn’t always mean it’s necessarily translating to the people.”

Brown’s top donors include the Blue Ridge Home Builders Association, the owner of Ix Art Park, and the Monticello Business Alliance, a political action group that historically has donated to Republicans.

Brown noted that across all six candidates, they unanimously agree the region needs ongoing improvements to its transportation and to address affordable housing, sometimes with different approaches. On things that set him apart, Brown said that he can relate to people of color in the city who have been racially profiled by law enforcement in some capacity. He also elaborated on his background working in finance as something to bring to council.

“I bring a financial management piece that none of the other candidates have,” Brown said recently.

When asked if local parties and government should make efforts to recruit more diverse candidates, Brown said he feels his own campaign contributes to that ongoing progress.

“I think there are a number of people from the lower-income communities of color that can get involved,” Brown said. “I think the more that it’s heard and the more that people see that or become inspired by my campaign that they will get out there and get involved. Of course, I’ll be out in the community and encouraging people to do so as well. So, I think it’s just leaders who have gone out front really reaching back and paving the way for a new succession of leaders to come in after them.”

Gold, who works within the party for candidates, noted where the party could enhance its outreach.

“The Democratic Party has a way to go,” Gold said. “Work has to be done to make it feel like it’s as welcome as many people believe it is.”

Former Democratic City Council candidate Don Gathers, who planned to run in conjunction with Payne, agrees. Gathers is an organizer with Public Housing Association of Residents and cites Payne’s and his initial alliance over their shared interest in advocacy surrounding affordable housing and redevelopment of public housing. He withdrew his candidacy amidst [racial and campaign interference threats](#) made by Florida resident Daniel McMahon, who went by “Jack Corbin” on social media. Gathers said he cannot comment on the matter, which is working its way through federal court, but expressed his ideas for political outreach and encouragement.

“The first step would be to make sure that Blacks don’t feel exploited or used; that they very much feel heard,” Gathers said. “Locally, but that’s a problem of the party nationally. Blacks have just been historically taken for granted. The expectation is there that we will vote party-line Democratic. I think recent events have shown them that’s not always the case.”

Gathers suggested that the Democratic Party — and any party— spend more time in various neighborhoods to hear the wishes and concerns of their residents.

“Go out and identify people who they think would be reasonable and viable candidates to carry their banner forward,” Gathers said.

Similar to Gathers, Gold also explained that the City Council could have more engagement outside of bimonthly public meetings in Council Chambers by having more town hall events around the city’s neighborhoods.

“There are legitimate criticisms of the Democratic Party about lacking transparency,” Gold said. “A lot of people have lost faith in the party and who is standing up for it. Just like City Council and Charlottesville, there’s been a breakdown of trust.”

Gold cited Mayor Walker’s successful independent campaign as part of the work to establish more government trust.

“She ran on repairing that and ‘unmasking the illusion,’ as she called it,” Gold said.

While Walker’s 2017 campaign began before the events of August 2017, the preparation and response from local government and law enforcement exacerbated trust and transparency issues within Charlottesville.

In a 2018 panel with Virginia Humanities hosted at Piedmont Virginia Community College, Walker participated in discussion on race relations and policies in Charlottesville.

“I’ve been having these conversations for decades. People wanted to hide behind the illusion of perfection in Charlottesville,” Walker said then. “I think I’m more hopeful today after the events of last summer that we can finally move forward than I ever have been.”

The Continuation of the Blue(er) Wave



Del. David Toscano, (D-Charlottesville) discusses the 2017 Blue Wave and upcoming elections at an Oct. 9 event featuring novelist John Grisham and political commentator Paul Begala.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods \ Charlottesville Tomorrow

In looking beyond the 2016 presidential election, the tragedies of August 2017 and the local and state elections of that year, Charlottesville is one area of Virginia seeing more progressive policies trickle into politics.

Payne said that if the General Assembly — of which all 140 seats are up for election — flips to a Democratic majority “then things that have never been considered possible for decades will become possible in Charlottesville.”

He cited local examples like a city-wide living wage, changes to affordable housing and zoning and increased state-level support for transportation. Meanwhile, state-level democratic candidates are campaigning on similar issues along with healthcare access and criminal justice reform.

In and ahead of 2017, retiring Del. David Toscano, D-Charlottesville, who was house minority leader, was involved in a push for more diverse and Democratic candidates in an effort to flip the House of Delegates to a Democratic majority. The 2017 General Assembly elections yielded a flip of 15 seats that fell just short of a majority but brought more diverse candidates.

As the longtime incumbent considered how soon he wanted to step back from politics a challenger emerged within his party.

In December 2018, University of Virginia economics professor Sally Hudson announced her candidacy and pulled several wealthy private donors who consistently give to Democratic candidates. By February, Toscano formally announced he would not seek reelection.

“Until you actually tell people you’re actually going to step down, you’re never sure that you are,” Toscano said. “I’ve been thinking about this for about a year and a half to two years. I’ve accomplished a lot of what I wanted to do, and now it’s time for the Democrats to take the next step and get the majority.”

One of Hudson's earliest big frequent Democratic donors was Cynthia Neff, a former candidate for the 58th District. She said she was attracted to Hudson as a candidate after they had a conversation.

Neff said the inclusion of younger candidates into the mix was part of why she donated to Hudson and Payne. They are 30 and 27 years old, respectively.

"It's just like, we have sent far too many people like [state Sen.] Bryce Reeves[, R-Spotsylvania,] who is an insurance salesman in his 40s or 50s who now wants to make a career in politics. He does that through taking huge money from corporations and Dominion [Energy]," Neff said.

Incumbent senator Reeves is being challenged by former Charlottesville School Board member Amy Laufer in the 17th District. Laufer — like Hudson and Payne — is among candidates refusing money from Dominion and instead leaning towards private donations and have taking money from entities like the Clean Virginia PAC.

As Payne has been associated with Indivisible Charlottesville and Charlottesville Democratic Socialists of America, along with his age, Neff found him "refreshing."

"He's different than me, but he's young. We need to stop electing lots of old farts," Neff said. "The future belongs to them [young people]. We fucked up the planet."

She added that "you shouldn't have to wait until you're 50 to get elected to office." She also noted his advocacy before and during his campaign around affordable housing.

"Here is a guy who spent all this energy and effort and still may not be able to live here," she said of Payne, who has said much of his paycheck goes to rent.

As younger, more diverse, and sometimes more progressive candidates emerge, Toscano said the things they can learn from more seasoned politicians and what those seasoned politicians can learn from the newer ones will occupy politics for the next decade.

"I like to think the new energy young people bring is really important to reinvigorating the party and also rethinking how we do policy," Toscano said. "I think it's also important to take time to listen to the folks that have been around a while because it's useful to have some insight about what works."

Hudson, who won the June Democratic primary and had no further challengers, is proposing ranked choice elections as an alternative to partisan ballots.

"Each party has different forces on the left and right," Hudson said. "As someone who is a big believer in election reform and encouraging more diverse candidates and voters, we need to alter our election laws."

Meanwhile, Virginia faces what can be perceived as a challenge and an asset for the Democratic party in its 2019 election year.

Given that 2019 is what politicians call an "off-off year" because there isn't a presidential or gubernatorial race at the top of the ballot, voter turnout is a concern. Locally, Charlottesville's and Albemarle's Democratic parties have been working hard on campaigning and canvassing efforts to retain the statewide party's blue stronghold in the state. Across the state, some General Assembly candidates are hoping to flip Republican-held seats blue to gain control of the legislature.

Despite the off-off year, Toscano said he is hopeful for Democratic General Assembly candidates because of building energy for 2020 Democratic presidential candidates in the way that President Donald Trump's candidacy in 2016 helped ignite 2017's blue wave.

"The goal is to be present, get out the information about our candidates, and to rally up people for every election cycle," Charlottesville Democratic Party co-Chair Hinton said. "Virginia has an election every year, so there's no downtime for us. Each year can be as complicated as the next because during the years that are not presidential or gubernatorial, we still have to get people out to vote."

To learn more about Charlottesville and Albemarle county-area candidates for local and state races visit the [Voter Guide](#).

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WRITTEN BY:
Charlotte Rene Woods
@charlottewords

Charlotte Rene Woods joined Charlottesville Tomorrow as a reporter in March 2019. She has a B.A. in Journalism + Design from The New School in New York City, and she earned her M.S. in Multimedia Journalism from Virginia Commonwealth University.

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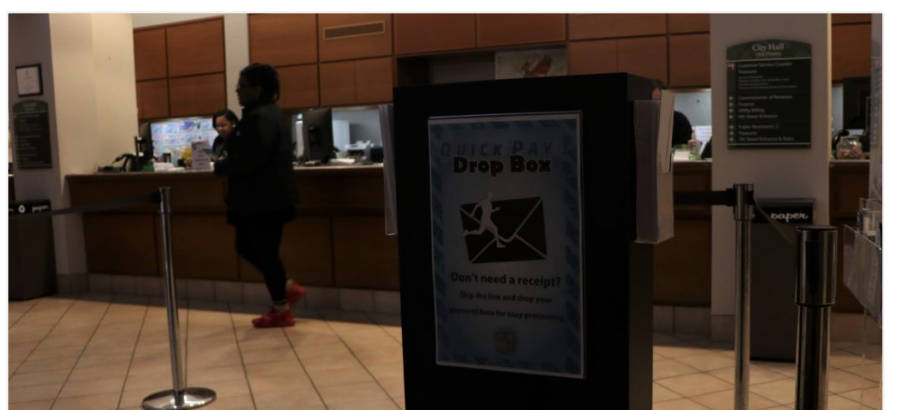
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