

Democrats want voters to give them control of the statehouse Tuesday. What will they do if they get it?

By **Graham Moomaw** - October 31, 2019



From left, Democratic state Senate candidate Ghazala Hashmi, Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-7th, and Democratic House of Delegates candidate Sheila Bynum-Coleman pose for a photo at an Oct. 26 canvass kickoff event in Chesterfield County. (Graham Moomaw/ Virginia Mercury)

Virginia House Minority Leader Eileen Filler-Corn is careful not to sound presumptive, but she's already thinking about what Democrats could do in year one, year two and beyond if they win control of the General Assembly.

If her party takes power in the elections Tuesday, she said, handling it wisely could mean the difference between one cycle of Democratic control and majorities that stand for “generations.”

“I think that there is a lot of good that we can do,” Filler-Corn said in a recent interview. “Some of that will be quick. And some of it may take some time.”

With all 140 seats in the state legislature up for election next week, 2019 could be a transformative year for Virginia politics. By flipping two seats in each chamber, Democrats could take full control of the statehouse for the first time in 26 years.

Hanging over the 2019 campaigns is one big question: If Democrats win the power to reshape the state, what would they do with it?

On the campaign trail, Democratic candidates are promising to enact tougher gun control laws, raise the minimum wage, pass anti-discrimination protections for

LGBTQ Virginians and ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, priorities the GOP has thwarted for years. Their broader platform includes more funding for public education, stronger environmental regulations, easier access to voting, health care affordability and defending Medicaid expansion.

Republicans — who have controlled at least one legislative chamber since 1993 — are warning voters a Democratic takeover could bring radical change, jeopardizing Virginia's reputation as a politically moderate, pro-business state.

Senate Majority Leader Tommy Norment, R-James City, who noted that Democrats had full control when he entered the legislature in 1992, said he's troubled by the level of Democratic support for repealing the state's right-to-work law, which has prohibited mandatory labor union membership since 1947.

"Those Democrats when I first came in would not recognize this agenda," Norment said, adding that, if Democrats win control, it might take "bipartisan collaboration" to block some of their bolder progressive ideas.

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At a candidate forum hosted by the New Kent County Chamber of Commerce, Senate GOP Leader Tommy Norment described himself as "incredibly pro-business." (Graham Moomaw/ Virginia Mercury)

If they win, the scope of the Democratic agenda could depend on how many seats they gain, with bigger majorities allowing more far-reaching legislation. In the House, the policy agenda would also be shaped by the election of a new speaker, possibly the first woman or person of color to ever hold the position.

Anything Democrats pursue would have to pass muster with Gov. Ralph Northam (D), a moderate still trying to mend relationships with members of his own party who called on him to resign over his blackface controversy in February.

Guns

If there's a marquee issue uniting Democrats, it's gun control.

After every high-profile mass shooting over the last few years, Democrats called for action on guns, advocating for universal background checks, reinstatement of the state's former one-handgun-a-month law and restrictions on assault-style weapons and magazine capacity. Republicans blocked every proposal, including bills that have drawn bipartisan support elsewhere, such as a bump stock ban and red flag laws that would allow authorities to temporarily take guns from people whose behavior is deemed threatening.

That debate played out again this year after the May 31 mass shooting at a municipal building in Virginia Beach, where an attack by a city engineer left 12 people dead. In response, Northam called lawmakers back to Richmond for a special session in July. Republicans — who accused Democrats of politicizing the shooting and pursuing policies that wouldn't have prevented it — [adjourned the session within hours](#), directing the GOP-led State Crime Commission study gun and mental health issues until after the election.

If voters elect Democratic majorities next week, that study may become moot.

“We’re going to get common-sense gun restrictions overnight,” former Gov. Terry McAuliffe said earlier this month at a fundraiser in Richmond.

ERA

In interviews, several Democratic lawmakers said other bills that have already drawn bipartisan support — like the ERA and banning anti-LGBTQ discrimination in housing and public employment — would be at the top of the to-do list for a Democratic General Assembly.

Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, who has championed the idea of making Virginia the 38th and potentially final state needed to ratify the long-stalled gender-equality amendment to the U.S. Constitution — said she wants the ERA done first.

“Some people want to do it on Valentine’s Day, because they think it’ll be cute. And I’m like ‘No,’” Carroll Foy said at a recent stop on her get-out-the-vote tour in an ERA-themed van. “A hundred and sixty million women are waiting for this. So let’s make it the first thing that’s coming right out of the General Assembly.”



Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, a possible candidate for statewide office in 2021, is campaigning for Democrats around the state in an ERA-themed van. (Graham Moomaw/ Virginia Mercury)

Due to long-passed federal ratification deadlines and other procedural uncertainty, it's not entirely clear what would happen if Virginia ratified the ERA. But its ratification here could help trigger a new legal push or congressional action.

Last year, ERA ratification passed the state Senate, but an effort to bring it to the floor of the House [failed in a tie vote](#).

ERA opponents have warned it could have unintended consequences, jeopardizing a variety of laws designed to protect women. Pro-life groups have also argued it could [potentially outlaw restrictions on abortion](#), a claim ERA supporters say is unfounded.

Abortion

Playing off the [firestorm that ensued](#) over a Democratic-sponsored abortion bill in the 2019 legislative session, Republicans have tried to paint their opponents as extremists on the issue of late-term abortion.

House Republicans have set up a bare-bones website featuring video of Del. Kathy Tran, D-Fairfax, telling a committee earlier this year that her bill would have allowed a woman and her doctor to choose abortion up until the moment of birth.

"THIS IS WHY YOU HAVE TO VOTE," the website reads.

In mailers warning that Tran's bill could become law if Democrats win, the Republican Party of Virginia featured photos of babies and language calling late-term abortion "murder."

Democrats have accused Republicans of twisting the snippet of video out of context and using it to mislead people about the legislation. Third-trimester abortion is already legal under state law if three doctors determine there's a severe

risk to the mother's life or health. Tran's bill, which failed in a Republican-led subcommittee, would have lowered the threshold to one doctor and removed language saying that, in order for abortion to be an option, the pregnancy must "substantially and irretrievably" threaten the mother's physical or mental health.

Though pro-choice lawmakers said Republicans were distorting the bill's intent, some Democrats — including U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va. — distanced themselves from the proposal, saying existing rules on third-trimester abortions, which rarely happen in Virginia, are adequate.

Though the uproar over Tran's bill focused on the third-trimester provisions, the legislation would have lifted a variety of other restrictions, including a rule that requires women to undergo an ultrasound and wait 24 hours before getting an abortion.

Tran's campaign did not give a yes-or-no answer when asked if she plans to reintroduce the same bill next year.

"I stand by the legislation and will always defend a woman's right to make her own reproductive health care decisions without government interference, but I'll also be focused on taking action to reduce gun violence, making health care more affordable, improving our public schools and expanding economic opportunity for every Virginian," Tran said in a statement.

To some Democrats, the abortion bill controversy represents the type of overreach that could come at a cost in future election cycles. Virginia — home to the oldest continuous legislative body in the New World — isn't known for embracing rapid change. And if Democrats win back the White House in 2020, the ground could quickly shift back toward Republicans in 2021, when the House will be up for election again.

Democratic candidate Larry Barnett, who's challenging incumbent Del. Roxann Robinson, R-Chesterfield, in a competitive race in Richmond's suburbs, said he sees trouble ahead in swing districts like his if the party moves too far on hot-button issues like abortion and guns.

"To me, there are some really good steps on both of those fronts that a majority of Virginians get behind," Barnett said. "We should not overreach in some of those territories to places that will alarm our communities and sort of create a pendulum swing in the opposite direction."

Barnett, a mental health professional, has made clear he supports universal background checks and red flag laws.

Business/labor

On Saturday afternoon, Barnett joined several other Richmond-area candidates for a canvass kickoff organized out of a suburban backyard in Chesterfield County in conjunction with End Citizens United, a national group who says its mission is to “end Big Money in politics.” In speeches to a crowd of several hundred, several Democrats framed the 2019 elections as a choice between corporate interests and the interests of average people.

Democrat Ghazala Hashmi, a college professor and immigrant hoping to become the first Muslim-American woman in the General Assembly by unseating Republican Sen. Glen Sturtevant, R-Chesterfield, dropped references to poets Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes as she asked volunteers to “add your voice to this marvelous American song.”

“It is ours. It is not corporations,” Hashmi said. “It is not restricted to just a few.”

Virginia Democrats have pushed to raise the state’s minimum wage to \$15 an hour, doubling the current \$7.25 that matches the federal minimum wage. Earlier this year, a bill to gradually raise the minimum wage to \$15 by 2021 made it to the floor of the state Senate, but died on a party-line vote.

[That vote was engineered](#) as a message to the business community from Norment, the Senate GOP leader who said in a recent interview that he found Democrats’ economic proposals “very disturbing.”

“How in the world can we afford to pay somebody passing a hamburger out a McDonald’s window \$15 or \$20 an hour?,” Norment said. “They are not going to absorb that cost.”

After Virginia voters refused to enshrine a right-to-work policy in the state Constitution in a 2016 ballot referendum, Republicans and business leaders have tried to elevate it as an election-year issue, warning that scrapping it could jeopardize Virginia’s top spot in the CNBC best-states-for-business rankings. A survey conducted this year by the Virginia Chamber of Commerce found that a majority of Democratic candidate oppose the right-to-work law.

Democrats have noted that Virginia was named the worst state for workers in another set of rankings compiled by anti-poverty group Oxfam America.

“I think that they are not mutually exclusive and we can do a good job on both,” Filler-Corn said. “I think that we can do better for workers while still maintaining our best state to do business in the rankings.”

As a candidate in 2017, Northam discouraged his party from targeting the right-to-work law, and it’s not clear if Democrats would make a concerted legislative push against it if they win control.

House Speaker Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights, who is in a tough re-election fight against Democratic challenger Sheila Bynum-Coleman, said the progressive groups and big donors supporting Democrats are going to expect big things in return.

“They’re not going to let them come in here and do very small, moderate policies. You just don’t get that kind of money for that,” Cox said as he took a break from giving out free hot dogs to a large crowd at a campaign event/Halloween festival he hosted in a Chesterfield park.



House Speaker Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights, took notice of the hot dog costume worn by Asiaonna Pope, 10, of Hopewell, at a festival he hosted in a Chesterfield County park. (Graham Moomaw/ Virginia Mercury)

As Democrats prepare to fan out for the final get-out-the-vote push, their argument is that as Virginia has changed, Republicans aren’t changing with it.

“Republican leadership refused to debate any of these issues,” Filler-Corn said. “And I think that they will see that that was a mistake at the ballot box.”

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Virginia took a step toward redistricting reform. With power up for grabs, will lawmakers follow through?

By **Graham Moomaw** - October 14, 2019



The sun rises over the Virginia Capitol. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

Virginia is closer to passing redistricting reform than ever. But anti-gerrymandering advocate Brian Cannon says both Democrats and Republicans are whispering that the idea is doomed if their opponents get power.

“You know, if the other side takes over, your amendment’s done.’ They both kind of say that,” Cannon said, describing what he’s hearing in an election year [with control of the General Assembly](#) at stake.

Despite the uncertainty, Cannon, the executive director of OneVirginia2021, remains optimistic that both sides will see a benefit in giving up the legislature’s power to redraw political maps, no matter who wins enough seats in November to wield it.

“I think this thing has a high likelihood of passing,” said Cannon, whose anti-gerrymandering group has spent years urging lawmakers to create an independent redistricting commission. Critics of the existing system — which leaves map-drawing power with the General Assembly — say it gives lawmakers free rein to draw their own districts with partisan advantage and self-preservation in mind.

With Virginia scheduled to redraw its legislative and congressional districts in 2021, the General Assembly representatives voters elect in November will decide

whether or not to change the system ahead of a redistricting process that will shape state politics for years to come.

In February, the legislature gave the first of required several approvals for a constitutional amendment that would create a bipartisan, 16-member commission tasked with redrawing the state's legislative and congressional maps every 10 years, starting with the year after the 2020 census.

How the commission would work

Eight state legislators and eight citizen members would serve on the commission.

The legislative seats would be split evenly between the House of Delegates and the state Senate, with each chamber sending two Republicans and two Democrats selected by party leaders.

The eight citizen members would be appointed by a selection committee made up of five retired judges. Both parties' leaders in the House and Senate would each submit 16 potential citizen members to the selection committee. The ex-judges would pick two citizen members from each list.

The 1812 political cartoon that helped popularize the "Gerry-mander," named for Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry. (Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

Any proposal would need support from six of eight citizen members and six of eight legislative members in order to be sent to the General Assembly. Three of four Senate members would have to approve plans for the Senate, and three of four House members would have to approve plans for the House.

If the full General Assembly doesn't approve a commission proposal within 15 days, the commission would submit a second plan.

If no plan passes, the Supreme Court of Virginia would draw the lines.

The governor, who currently has veto power over General Assembly-approved redistricting plans, would have no role in redistricting process once the commission is established. However, the governor's office could shape the enabling legislation laying out the commission's rules and procedures in greater detail.

In order for reform to happen in time for the 2021 redistricting, the amendment has to pass the General Assembly in the same form next year. Then it would need final approval from Virginia voters in the 2020 election.

There's no guarantee it will get that far.

Some Republicans suspect the redistricting reform push isn't as nonpartisan as it's made out to be and that Democrats will lose their anti-gerrymandering zeal if they're back in position next year to pass their own gerrymandered plans, potentially locking in a decade or more of Democratic governance. Some Democrats worry that Republicans — who have been shut out of statewide offices for a decade but still have slim majorities in the state legislature — will seize every opportunity to hang onto political power if given the chance.

The commission proposal – which calls for eight legislative members and eight citizen members – passed the state Senate unanimously. In the House, roughly a dozen Democrats opposed it, saying it left too much wiggle room for partisan gerrymandering and didn't do enough to protect communities of color.

'Just wanted to get something passed'

In a recent interview, Del. Lamont Bagby, D-Henrico, the chairman of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus, said he still has strong reservations about the commission proposal.

"A lot of individuals that we trusted lost credibility by jumping on the first train that leaves the station," Bagby said. "It was evident that African Americans weren't fully considered. ... And Republicans were taking advantage of individuals that just wanted to get something passed that was said to be redistricting reform."

Bagby said he's also concerned about the amendment's backup mechanism if the commission or the General Assembly couldn't agree on a redistricting plan. In that scenario, the Supreme Court of Virginia – which is appointed by the General Assembly – would draw the district lines.

"It's been 20 years of Republicans putting members' friends and family on the Supreme Court," Bagby said. "I would not trust redistricting in the hands of the Supreme Court."

The two most recent justices appointed to the state Supreme Court are Stephen McCullough, who once worked under former Republican Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, and Teresa Chafin, the sister of state Sen. Ben Chafin, R-Russell.

The redistricting process that began in 2011, when Republicans controlled the House of Delegates and Democrats controlled the Senate, was successfully challenged in two racial gerrymandering lawsuits. Those cases led federal courts to redraw portions of the congressional map and the Virginia House map.

'Both parties think they'll be in power'

Redistricting reform proposals had long been blocked by House Republicans, but Speaker Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights, got on board this year after crafting a compromise measure that gives lawmakers a role in redistricting rather than handing the process over to a panel of outside experts.

At a candidate forum this week, Cox said the compromise approach – which hands some control to people with no self-interest in the maps but still gives the General Assembly an up-or-down vote – was a "nice combination."

"I'd be supportive of that whether we're in control or we're not in control," Cox said.

Speaking shortly after Cox at the same event in Chesterfield County, Sen. Glen Sturtevant, R-Chesterfield, said the amendment that passed didn't go far enough because it doesn't explicitly ban gerrymandering.

"Both parties think they'll be in power and be able to redraw the lines. And both parties will try to gerrymander," Sturtevant said.

Though Democrats have long touted nonpartisan redistricting as a priority, their legislative caucuses haven't issued firm promises to support the amendment next year.

"We are hoping to flip quite a few seats," said Kathryn Gilley, a spokeswoman for the House Democratic Caucus. "It's going to be up to those newly elected members to say where they stand on specific legislation."

'Important to pass implementing legislation'

Some Democrats who voted for the amendment this year — even though they weren't entirely happy with it — say its flaws can be remedied via a separate bill laying out more detailed rules and criteria for how the commission would work.

"People are unconformable with some aspects of this bipartisan commission," said Del. Mark Sickles, D-Fairfax. "So it's important to pass implementing legislation so there will be a better understanding of how the commission would work."

The accompanying bill could include stronger measures to protect minority voting power. The amendment says the commission must comply with federal and state laws dealing with "racial and ethnic fairness," including the Voting Rights Act. Supporters say duplicating Voting Rights Act-style protections in state law would safeguard against any future changes to federal law.

The bill could also ensure racial and geographic diversity on the commission.

"If we have all a bunch of white people from Northern Virginia, that would be a huge fail on a lot of levels," Cannon said.

Bagby said he's skeptical that the accompanying bill could resolve his concerns about the Supreme Court being the final arbiter in case of a deadlock.

"Something is not always better than nothing," Bagby said. "What it appears we're doing is we're letting the same people that gerrymandered us for the last 20-plus years continue to do the same thing to us. Just with different hats on."

Because voting rights are involved, any outcome under a reformed redistricting system could still be challenged in federal court.

Cannon said he believes the amendment can pass under all election-outcome scenarios, but “the path to victory is a little different under each one.”

If Democrats take full control, he said, they’d have the power to pass an accompanying bill that could get them close to the type of redistricting reform they’ve long said they support. If Republicans keep one or both chambers, he said, they may still see a benefit in eliminating the governor’s veto power and passing their preferred version of reform that continues to give lawmakers a role in the process.

“I don’t know that that keeps all of them,” Cannon said. “But it should keep enough for us to get this through.”

Graham Moomaw

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After Democratic victories, rural Virginia counties rush to declare themselves gun sanctuaries

By **Graham Moomaw** - November 20, 2019



Amherst County residents raise their hands to show support for their county's "Second Amendment Sanctuary" resolution. November 19, 2019. (Graham Moomaw/Virginia Mercury)

AMHERST — In an overflowing meeting room, speakers repeatedly invoked the Virginia-born Founding Fathers who saw fit to enshrine firearms in the U.S. Constitution.

One man said the impeachment inquiry against President Donald Trump — which he suggested could be a “coup” — shows the need for an armed citizenry capable of standing up to tyranny. Another raised the possibility that, if Americans can’t keep their guns, they may one day have to “do like in Hong Kong,” where pro-democracy protesters are using improvised weapons like bows, firebombs and catapults to resist authorities.

“The time is coming,” said Jeff Wade, an assistant pastor at a Baptist church in Madison Heights. “I’m mighty afraid that we’re going to have to defend ourselves because of what we believe in. Not only on the Second Amendment, but on any other issue that the government declares to be right, but God declares to be wrong.”

Though the spirit of rebellion was running high among the crowd of well over 300 that packed the Amherst County Board of Supervisors meeting Tuesday night, the paper before the board was comparatively mild.

Amherst — a rural county of almost 32,000 people north of Lynchburg — was set to declare itself a “Second Amendment Sanctuary,” following a mostly symbolic trend sweeping the countryside after Democrats triumphed in this month’s General Assembly elections while promising to enact tougher gun laws. With legislative majorities taking power for the session that begins in January, [Democrats are expected to push](#) for universal background checks, red flag laws that would allow authorities to take guns from people deemed to be a threat, bans on assault-style weapons and high-capacity magazines and other measures.

Co-opting language some progressive cities have used to signal their immigrant-friendliness, Amherst officials were preparing to vote on a draft that declared gun rights “part of the fabric” of their county, something to be “respected and celebrated.”

Though the concept is new to Virginia, conservative localities in several other states have already branded themselves Second Amendment sanctuaries, declaring that they support gun rights and oppose laws that could infringe upon them.

On Tuesday, Amherst’s leaders told the crowd they were prepared to pass the resolution, but they wanted to take a few days to fine-tune it for a future meeting.

Board Chairman Jimmy Ayers, a former sheriff, said no laws will be able to keep guns away from criminals who want them and suggested gun violence is caused by bad parenting.

“We’ve become a society now that folks are not made to be accountable and responsible for their actions. That is the problem,” Ayers said.

At least seven counties — Carroll, Charlotte, Campbell, Appomattox, Patrick, Pittsylvania and Dinwiddie — have passed gun sanctuary resolutions, according to the Virginia Citizens Defense League, a pro-gun lobbying group helping to organize the effort.

By the time lawmakers return to Richmond in January, dozens more could follow.

Philip Van Cleave, the president of VCDL, predicted a “tsunami” of gun sanctuary resolutions.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Van Cleave said. “Not with Virginia Tech. Not with any of these other things that have come up with Obama and everything else.”

Asked if he's concerned that stoking defiance of soon-to-be-enacted laws could contradict the notion that his group is made up of responsible, law-abiding gun owners, Van Cleave said "you're not required to obey an unconstitutional law."

"That's where the question is. Is it unconstitutional or not," he said. "And some of that will be settled in the courts."

Gun lobbyist Philip Van Cleave, president of the Virginia Citizens Defense League. (Photo by Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

The wave of local resolutions are a sign of the conservative backlash the [new Democratic majorities](#) can expect next year as they work to pass their gun proposals. But, on their own, the resolutions have little real-world impact beyond the message they send about where a particular community stands.

In a statement, Attorney General Mark Herring's office said the resolutions "appear to be nothing more than symbolic."

"It's not clear what a Second Amendment sanctuary is, what its proponents are hoping to accomplish, or what authority they think they have to preemptively opt out of gun safety laws, but if the Virginia Citizens Defense League is circulating it you can bet it's a bad idea," said Herring spokeswoman Charlotte Gomer. "If the General Assembly passes new gun safety laws, as Virginia voters demanded just two weeks ago, we expect that everyone will follow the law and keep their citizens safe."

A spokeswoman for Gov. Ralph Northam said Northam's gun proposals are "basic, commonsense measures that any responsible gun owner should support."

"Let's be clear, as the results of this election prove, Virginians are demanding their legislators take real action to combat gun violence and save lives," said Northam spokeswoman Alena Yarmosky.

Reached by phone Wednesday, Sen. Dick Saslaw, the Fairfax Democrat will will retake his post as majority leader come January, didn't mince words about those pushing the idea of gun sanctuaries.

"They're delusional," Saslaw said.

Outgoing House Majority Leader Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah, who will continue to lead the House GOP as minority leader next year, said the resolutions were an understandable show of opposition by people displeased with the elections and what the results will bring.

"They are rightly up in arms about the notion that they would be made to be criminals overnight," Gilbert said.

Before the Amherst supervisors discussed the resolution, Ayers asked everyone in the room who supported the resolution to raise their hand. The support appeared to be unanimous, but only because the lone voice of dissent was waiting in the hallway because she couldn't get in.

When her name was called to speak, Gloria Witt, a representative from the Amherst NAACP, took the lectern in front of the overwhelmingly white crowd and asked: "What are you afraid of?"

"It's not about taking your guns," Witt said. "And the fact that all of Amherst County would show up in an outcry to stand against what might happen ... What does that say about all these little counties?"

Describing herself as a "country girl," Witt said all the men in her family have guns, but she sees no reason to oppose universal background checks and bans on military-style weapons.

"As an African-American female, it's quite interesting that you can get this kind of energy around something like this when we're killing people with guns that were designed for military use," Witt said as some in the crowd murmured disapproval. "Shooting an animal is one thing. Target practicing is another one. Having a gun that will shoot 50 rounds in 30 seconds, I argue, is not necessary."

Supporters of the sanctuary resolution in Amherst portrayed gun control as a threat to rural traditions, something that would punish people in places like Amherst for violence happening elsewhere.

The Virginia Citizens Defense League handed out pro-gun stickers on Capitol Square. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

Lowell Bowling Jr., a contractor, said he's worried Virginia's gun laws will soon be written by city-dwellers who aren't used to shooting their own food or having to kill predators to protect a farm.

"Around here, it's a way of life," Bowling said. "Most people were raised with 'em. Our children are raised with 'em."

Benny F. Woody Jr., who described himself as a 76-year Amherst resident, said he was concerned about the hunting ramifications of a bill that would prevent anyone under 18 from handling a firearm without adult supervision. Under current state law, it's illegal for adults to let children under the age of 12 handle a gun without supervision.

"My grandsons have been hunting since they were 9 and 10 years old. They know what's right and know what's wrong. They know gun safety," Woody said. "And it's unfair to them to take away something they've loved for all these years."

Though some supporters acknowledge the resolutions are symbolic, Van Cleave suggested counties could go a step further once new gun laws are enacted.

"The county can direct its employees not to enforce unconstitutional gun laws," Van Cleave said.

Regardless of action by county boards, rural sheriffs, elected officials who serve as the chief law enforcement officers for their communities, could also wade into the gun debate.

In Southwest Virginia's Lee County, Sheriff Gary Parsons already has.

"I want to assure the citizens of Lee County that me and my officers will stand up to any federal or state agency that attempts to infringe upon our gun rights," the sheriff's office said in a Nov. 18 Facebook post.

In an interview, Parsons struck a more nuanced tone, saying he sees "some viability" in the idea of red flag laws, as long as there's due process involved and it's not used as a "weapon against people." He said the post was meant to convey that his office would not participate in any effort to seize newly banned guns that were once legal.

"I can't affect what guns are allowed to be sold in the future," Parsons said. "And I don't know if we're even looking at that."

Mercury reporter Ned Oliver contributed to this report.

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