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Illustration by Gabrielle Wood and Andy Caress

Ballot amendment to decide how Virginia draws voting districts

ANYA SCZERZENIE
Staff Writer

One question on Virginia voters' ballots this November will help decide the process for drawing the commonwealth's electoral districts that will stand for the next 10 years.

Amendment 1 is a proposed change to the Virginia state constitution that would take the power to draw districts away from the General Assembly as a whole and give it to an independent, bipartisan commission of 16 people — eight legislators and eight citizens — evenly drawn from both major parties.

"The proposed commission is a hybrid of sorts," VCU political science professor Alex Keena said.

Keena said one can predict how the amendment could affect Virginians by looking at states with similar public commissions, such as New Jersey, Hawaii, California and Arizona.

"In almost all cases, the commissions end up approving plans that most everybody is satisfied with," Keena said.

Voting "yes" on ballot question 1 is a vote for this amendment to pass, while "no" is a vote to leave redistricting powers solely with the General Assembly. Virginia's electoral districts are based on the U.S. Census Bureau and drawn every 10 years after the nationwide survey is conducted. Once Virginia's 2021 electoral districts are set, they will not be drawn again until 2031.

Supporters of the amendment say it is needed reform that will help the redistricting process become more bipartisan and combat gerrymandering, or drawing political boundaries to give a party a numeric advantage. Opponents say the measure is unnecessary and will concentrate the power in the hands of very few people, leading to more gerrymandering.

Keena said that if Amendment 1 does not pass, whatever political party in control of Virginia's legislature will be able to draw the lines to its advantage.

"Probably what happens is the Democrats appoint an advisory commission to

draw the lines to show they are committed to a fair process," Keena said, "but ultimately they will have the power to override any such commission because the constitution would still grant the General Assembly redistricting authority."

Many Virginians, both lawmakers and citizens, oppose Amendment 1 in favor of an alternative anti-gerrymandering legislation passed by Democrats in April. House Bill 1225, sponsored by Marcia S. Price, D-Newport News, was signed into law by Gov. Ralph Northam during the spring legislative session.

HB 1225 provides criteria for drawing political districts:

- They must be contiguous
- Can't dilute minority populations or prison populations
- Must not give undue power to one political party over another

Opponents of Amendment 1 say that the amendment is unnecessary because HB 1225 has already made it illegal to gerrymander.

Del. Mark Levine, D-Alexandria, strongly opposes the bill. He says the language of the bill is "a mess" and that it will do nothing to end gerrymandering.

"The party leaders pick every single person on that commission," Levine said. "It's not independent. It's a commission of the party leaders."

The amendment would also allow the Virginia Supreme

Court to determine district lines if the commission is unable to reach an agreement. The Virginia state legislature currently has a Democratic trifecta — holding the state Senate, House of Delegates and governor's mansion — but the state's supreme court justices are appointed to 12-year terms by a majority vote in the General Assembly.

Levine calls this language the amendment's "poison pill."

"At the end of the day, the Supreme Court will decide," Levine said. "The Supreme Court can't police itself."

The group Fair Maps VA, an offshoot of the OneVirginia2021 foundation, is pro-Amendment 1. The foundation supports nonpartisan redistricting reform in the commonwealth. Brian Cannon, Fair Maps VA's executive director, believes a bipartisan commission is needed because both parties gerrymander to their advantage.

"Partisan and racial gerrymandering are inextricably linked," Cannon said. "It's a national phenomenon, but Richmond is kind of a key part of the racial gerrymandering that would dilute Black voices."

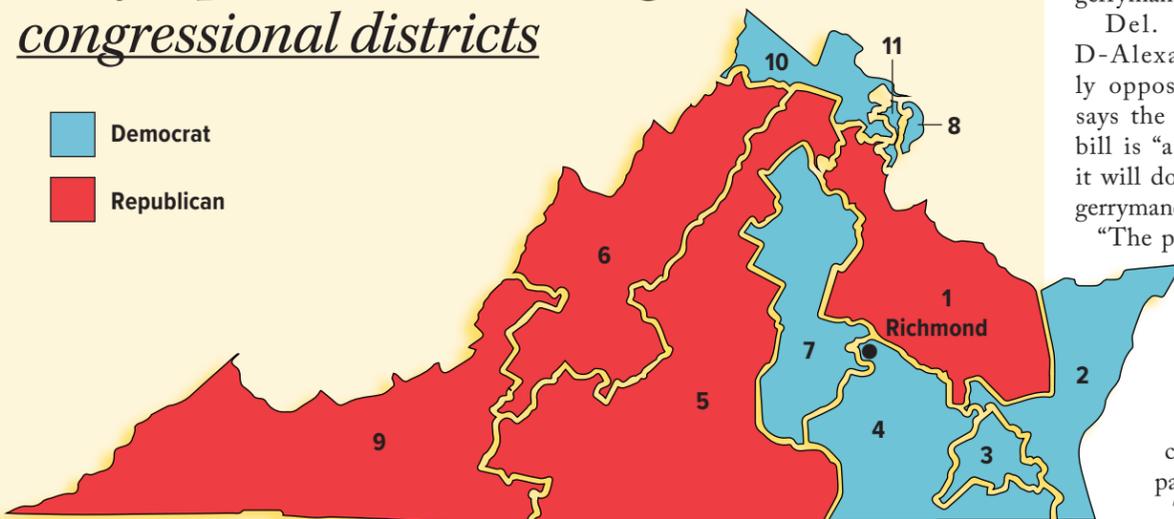
When Virginia's legislative districts were drawn after the 2010 census, they were found to be "unconstitutionally racially gerrymandered" under the Voting Rights Act. This led to a years-long court process, which resulted in the districts being completely redrawn. Former Gov. Bob McDonnell established an independent commission in 2011 to help redraw Virginia's districts, but the legislature was not bound by this commission's recommendations.

Cannon said the greatest challenge for his campaign to promote Amendment 1 is not the people who are voting "no," but those who are unaware that Amendment 1 exists.

"Our biggest opponent is not people saying 'vote no,' it's the people who say 'I don't know,'" Cannon said.

Party representation in Virginia's congressional districts

Democrat
Republican



Infographic by Raymond Liu

VCU-affiliated researchers studying gun violence prevention



Photo courtesy of VCU Health

NICHOLAS THOMSON

- ▶ VCU professor in the departments of surgery and psychology
- ▶ First-year award amount: \$649,720
- ▶ Grant duration: three years
- ▶ Research topic: evaluating the effectiveness of VCU Health's "Bridging The Gap" program at preventing gun reinjury or retaliation in adults



Photo courtesy of University of South Alabama

KRISTA MEHARI

- ▶ VCU alumna, psychology professor at University of South Alabama
- ▶ First-year award amount: \$607,195
- ▶ Grant duration: three years
- ▶ Research topic: studying the behaviors of those more likely to be afflicted by gun-related suicide and homicide to increase prevention of deaths



Photo courtesy of Research Triangle Institute

ANNA YAROS

- ▶ Former doctoral fellow at VCU's Clark-Hill Institute, research clinical psychologist at the Research Triangle Institute
- ▶ First-year award: \$349,909
- ▶ Grant duration: two years
- ▶ Research topic: examine language used in the Crisis Text Line by those experiencing gun violence to understand the moments before crises occur

infographic by Gabrielle Wood

VCU affiliates to assess gun violence effects on high-risk demographics

KATHARINE DEROSA
Staff Writer

Several researchers with VCU connections are utilizing nearly \$5 million in grant money from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to study gun violence prevention and its impact on minority communities.

The CDC awarded 16 grants to different researchers across the country to study the prevention of violent injury by firearms. Collectively, VCU affiliates will receive \$4.9 million in funding for three separate grants. One will support a VCU Health program working to assess long-term injury to victims of gun violence.

Nicholas Thomson, a surgery and psychology professor at VCU, is the recipient of the three-year grant to research the effectiveness of the program, known as Bridging the Gap. In the first year, \$649,720 will

be awarded of the total \$1.9 million grant, Thomson said in an email.

"If successful, BTG could become a nationwide model to effectively combat retaliatory gun violence for high-risk populations, resulting in fewer people being killed and becoming victims of violence," Thomson said in an email.

Bridging the Gap originally began as a study in 2007. The voluntary program works with people ages 10-30 years old, network manager Rachelle Hunley said. The program connects families and youth with resources to prevent reinjury.

"If they do have that one positive person, they may end up going to school or getting a job and avoiding any type of violence," Hunley said.

Bridging the Gap offers personal case management to connect youth with community and mental health resources, educational and vocational programs, and social

outlets. Thomson's grant will work to study the effectiveness of the program in adults.

"When people want to change, they are more inclined to participate in the programs that we offer," Hunley said.

Thomson is also working with Erin Austin, a surveillance coordinator at the Virginia Department of Health, to increase Virginia's turnaround on reports of nonfatal gun injuries in emergency rooms. VDH will receive \$225,000 to develop a system for timely state and local-level data monitoring.

The CDC funded nine similar grants at other state health departments, including District of Columbia, North Carolina and West Virginia. The grant is three years long, and \$2.2 million were divided among the 10 states, according to the CDC's website. The increased reports are meant to alert public health officials to prominent health problems and gun violence.

In 2018, 237 people were intentionally injured by firearms in Virginia, according to VDH statistics that are released every two years. In the same year, Richmond City saw the fourth-highest rate of assault by firearm in Virginia behind Roanoke City, Danville and Hampton. A 2020 report has not yet been released.

Thomson said that violently injured adults are more likely to either be reinjured or killed after being discharged from a hospital. They are also 88% more likely to commit violent acts in retaliation.

Violent injury via firearms in Virginia disproportionately affects younger people. Those aged 5-34 years old account for 72.2% of the population affected by intentional assault via firearms, and those aged 5-24 account for 36.4%, according to VDH.

Black people — tallying at 12.7% of the Virginia population in 2018, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — are also adversely affected by gun violence. According to VDH data, Black people were victims of 72.4% of intentional gun violence that took place that year.

Another CDC grant was awarded to VCU alumna Krista Mehari, a psycholo-

gy professor at the University of South Alabama. Her study examines the behaviors of those at risk of homicide or suicide by firearm to develop tactics to prevent those behaviors.

The \$1.9 million, three-year grant will help researchers find the best practices for preventing gun violence in high-risk demographics, such as African American boys and young men, and older white men. Interviews and surveys will identify methods of gun access, attitudes about ownership and the acceptance of prevention strategies.

The results will be used to create a socio-ecological model that will guide research on gun-related injuries and public health interventions.

Former doctoral fellow at VCU's Clark-Hill Institute for Youth Development, Anna Yaros, received a CDC grant to examine language used in the Crisis Text Line by those experiencing gun violence. The \$1.1 million, two-year study is designed to understand the moments immediately before crises occur as a way to prevent violence.

Yaros is now a research clinical psychologist at Research Triangle Institute. Her expertise includes preventive intervention for mental health and youth well-being.

The Virginia General Assembly passed a variety of new laws in January that aim to prevent violence in the state. They include:

- Requiring background checks for all purchases, including those between private citizens
- Attorneys and law enforcement officers may inquire to temporarily revoke the right to buy or possess a firearm if someone poses a danger to themselves or others
- A person may only buy one handgun in a 30-day period
- People cannot leave loaded, unsecured firearms in the presence of anyone under 14 years old
- Local governments can establish gun regulations at public places or events



A sticker on the door of Virginia ABC on West Broad Street in Richmond prohibits firearms upon entry. Photo by Enza Marcy

On this day

In 1918, the Allies and Germany signed an armistice to officially end World War I. This day became known as Veteran's Day in the U.S.



Justin Torone, co-owner of Rest in Pieces, inspects a table of skulls. The shop features the heads of two-headed beings, a hippo, a human and other animals. Photo by Enza Marcy

REST IN PIECES:

Shop nestles curiosity with one-of-a-kind, niche products

CLAIRE DARCY
Contributing Writer

A BEHEADED HUMAN SKELETON SITS ON a red velvet armchair inside the shop on South Laurel Street, joined by a taxidermied skunk in its lap and a similarly stuffed hyena at its heel. The trio are surrounded by thriving green plants — a delicate balance between the living and the dead.

Visitors to Rest in Pieces at 349 S. Laurel St. will find animal and non-animal products behind its black, brick frame, etched with white letters that read “ODDITIES & CURIOSITIES.”

“It’s this immediate overwhelming, immersive experience in the store, and that’s what we want,” said co-owner Justin Torone.

Rest in Pieces is unique to Richmond and the only store

of its kind in Virginia, Torone said. He owns and operates the store with his girlfriend, Alaina Gearhart.

“We try to sell things that you won’t find anywhere else in the city or in the state of Virginia,” Torone said. “We try to bring in just crazy stuff that will be something different to look at.”

Items for sale include mammal skulls, taxidermied animals, framed bugs, plants, incense and crystals. Torone said this selection often causes the business to get labeled as a “goth shop,” although he prefers to view it as a “lifestyle store.”

Every product is hand-picked by Torone and Gearhart, and as a result, the shop reflects many of their personal tastes — such as Gearhart’s passion for plants and Torone’s love for skulls.

“The first time I got a giraffe skull ... I literally couldn’t believe my eyes that I had such a beautiful creature’s skull sitting right in front of me,” Torone said.

All animal

items sold in the store are ethically sourced; the store does not encourage hunting for taxidermy, but instead partners with farms and zoos for recently deceased specimens. These partnerships tend to begin with a group reaching out to the shop with inquiries about items they no longer need. For example, farms may process livestock for meat but have no use for an animal’s head, so rather than throwing it out, they can sell it to the store.

“A lot of the taxidermy pieces, we actually know exactly where they came from,” said store manager Tazmine Beggs. “We have a baby zebra in the shop that passed away at the Pittsburgh Zoo and a lemur that passed away at another zoo.”

Beggs said Rest in Pieces prides itself on its cleanliness and customer service, striving to maintain a clean aesthetic.

The store offers custom preservation services, such as taxidermy or skull preservation — both often utilized by pet owners. The store partners with a local taxidermist for preservations and utilizes its own fleet of dermestid beetles — a type of beetle that eats flesh — for skull cleaning.

“It’s important to me to offer that service for people,” Torone said. “Bringing it up to people was a kind of taboo subject. We’re not like that here. We’re not going to make you feel uncomfortable or weird about anything, and we’re very open about death.”

The shop also offers preservation through the creation of a wet specimen. Wet specimens are fixed with a formaldehyde solution and kept in a jar filled with 70% isopropyl alcohol. Typical wet specimens in the store include snakes and frogs.

Torone and Gearhart founded Rest in Pieces in the summer of 2014. The couple began collecting unusual items and sold

them out of their home until they found a storefront in 2015. Torone said it was initially difficult to find a building because most landlords did not understand the couple’s vision for their business.

“A lot of people kind of laughed at us when we said what we wanted to do, what our store was going to be and what we were going to sell,” Torone said. “It seemed like no one understood it and no one wanted to understand it.”

The store’s first location was a 500-square-foot building in the Fan District. In January 2017, the store closed its doors to prepare for a relocation to a larger space.

In April of the same year, Rest in Pieces opened its new and current location in Oregon Hill, where it now sits near Hollywood Cemetery. The store tends to receive foot traffic from VCU students and tourists.

“We’ve quickly turned into more of a destination-point shop, where people are coming to Richmond just to come to our store,” Torone said.

Freshman psychology major Ellis Miscavage discovered Rest in Pieces shortly before moving to campus while searching online for Richmond attractions.

“When I first walked in I was like, ‘this is the coolest place I’ve ever been to,’” Miscavage said.

Miscavage has purchased merchandise from the store and admires the extensive selection of crystals and its overall inclusive environment.

“It’s for everyone. Anyone who would visit a museum would come and visit our store,” Torone said. “We’re very welcoming and happy to have anyone come through our shop.”



Rest in Pieces at 349 S. Laurel St. is a lifestyle shop that specializes in taxidermy animals, skulls, bones, specimens and other oddities. Photo by Jay Stonefield

PRESS BOX



Illustration by Marisa Stratton

Washington fans should be patient with Haskins

BEN MALAKOFF
Contributing writer

WASHINGTON FOOTBALL Team quarterback Dwayne Haskins returned to D.C. for his second season with a brand new playbook and offense. Expectations were still extremely high from a fan base that saw the team win only three games last year. For those reasons alone, fans should stray from calling the young quarterback a bust too soon. Washington made moves in the off-season to expand its defense — including signing cornerback Kendall Fuller — yet barely any veteran offensive talent was brought in to help. Since 2010, the starting QB has changed 22 times.

From Robert Griffin III to Kirk Cousins, all the way to Mark Sanchez, the Football Team only made the post-season twice in that span, losing both games. After years of failure, Washington decided to play the long game and draft a potential starting quarterback in the first round, Haskins from Ohio State University.

Haskins' first season in the NFL, while highly anticipated, was not pretty.

Veteran quarterback Alex Smith suffered a gruesome leg injury in the 2018 season, leaving the competition wide open between Haskins, Colt McCoy and Case Keenum, who eventually won the job.

However, following the trend of Washington quarterbacks before him, Keenum did not last long and was benched in Week 4 against the New York Giants. Haskins made his first NFL appearance during that game, where he threw just 107 yards and three interceptions. There were some bright spots in Haskins' performance, but it ended as a disappointing game for the team.

The rookie quarterback played in one more game before being named starter in Week 9 against the Buffalo Bills, where he threw for 144 yards. After a bye week, Haskins was named NFL rookie of the week after throwing for 261 yards and two touchdowns in Week 15. A week later, after suffering an ankle injury, Haskins was shut down by head coach Jay Gruden for the year.

Now entering 2020, Gruden has been fired along with most of his staff. Team owner Dan Snyder hired Ron Rivera as the next head coach, and Rivera brought in Scott Turner to take over offensive coor-

dinator responsibilities for the first time in his career. In training camp, Haskins was named the starter and a team captain.

Haskins can rely firsthand on second year receiver and former Ohio State teammate Terry McLaurin. Next up are wide receivers Steven Sims, who is in his second season, and Dontrelle Inman, the most tenured of the group in his seventh pro season. But the team lacks in offense without any tight end standouts. Former quarterback and journeyman Logan Thomas is starting in the position, and rookie players, including running back Antonio Gibson, are more of a toss-up on the field.

With no preseason for Haskins to adjust to the new offense, Washington has started 1-2. Haskins has thrown four touchdowns and three interceptions. Those are not standout numbers, but they are close in comparison to those of second-year Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray, who has thrown four touchdowns and five interceptions.

Taking into account the adjustments and a lacking offense, the potential is still there for the young quarterback. He is completing difficult in-coverage throws. Haskins is criticized for his poor decision making and

slow foot movement in the pocket, but he can improve. Washington's QB coach Ken Zampese, who coached three-time pro-bowl QB Carson Palmer in his early days in Cincinnati, should develop these skills in Haskins.

Fans know Rivera and his staff are looking to make Washington's team centered around its defense. Washington drafted its fifth first-round starter, Chase Young, in the 2020 NFL draft. This takes a lot of the pressure off Haskins to be the elite QB that some want. In turn, Washington only needs Haskins to be a QB who is slightly above average and will not make game-costing mistakes.

This might be hard to accept for some Washington fans. The league views quarterbacks as huge superstars, and there hasn't been one in D.C. since Robert Griffin III's rookie season. But now comes the time to accept that Haskins does not need to be elite, and it is the defense's job under Rivera's staff to meet him halfway. Fans need to give Haskins at least the rest of this season to develop, work on mechanics and learn how to be a winning NFL quarterback.