

'A critical moment in our history': McClellan announces run for Va. governor

By **Graham Moomaw** - June 18, 2020



Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond, on the Senate floor. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

For years, Virginia state Sen. Jennifer McClellan has been talked about as a future gubernatorial candidate.

The future, she says, is now.

McClellan, D-Richmond, a veteran state legislator and corporate attorney for Verizon, is formally announcing her run for governor today, with about a year to go before the 2021 Democratic primary.

In an interview this week, McClellan said Virginia is at a “critical crossroads” that calls for someone with “a clear understanding of where we have been.”

“We will be sort of weathering and recovering from an economic crisis, a health pandemic, a reckoning with racial inequity and a crisis of faith that people have in their government,” McClellan said. “This is a critical moment in our history.”

Coming from a family with a history of civil rights activism, McClellan, a 47-year-old mother of two, said she doesn't want her own children have to keep fighting the same fights.

She said she was struck by something she heard during a group discussion last year about issues facing Generation Z. A young woman said she and her peers saw President Barack Obama leading the country when they were kids, but more recently “all my generation has seen is regression.”

“And she said ‘It really makes me and my generation ask, why bother?’” McClellan said. “And it was like a slap in the face. And I looked at her and I thought, if your generation loses hope, then we are lost as a commonwealth and as a society. I cannot leave a world where they have no hope. And that is what is pushing me to run now.”

McClellan is the second Black woman to officially enter the gubernatorial field. Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, [announced her campaign](#) last month. Part of the newer, younger generation of Democrats that helped flip control of the General Assembly over the last four years, Carroll Foy highlighted the historic nature of the effort in a country where no Black woman has been elected governor of any state.

McClellan, who has served in the General Assembly since 2006, was understated when asked how her identity might factor into the 2021 campaign.

“I am not running to make history by being the first Black woman elected. I am running to make history because we’re changing the trajectory of Virginia to rebuild in a way that breaks down systemic inequity,” McClellan said. “Who I am today, my personality, my leadership skills, how I think, all of that is a function of my parents and how they raised me. So I can’t divorce myself from it. Nor do I want to. I’m proud of it. But I am not running to be the first Black woman governor of Virginia. I’m running to be the governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia who happens to be a Black woman.”

In her campaign [launch video](#), McClellan emphasizes the need for continued improvement in health care, education, voting rights and rebuilding an economy “without leaving people behind.” Even before the pandemic hit, McClellan said, the economy “wasn’t doing well for everybody.”

“First, we need to understand that workers and business are intertwined and their success is intertwined,” McClellan said.

When asked about the state’s right-to-work law, which limits the power of labor unions by prohibiting mandatory union membership or payment of dues as a condition of employment, McClellan indicates there are parts of the law she supports and parts she doesn’t.

She said she’s focused generally on “the ability for workers to be treated fairly,” but doesn’t believe anyone’s job “should be conditioned on whether they are or aren’t a



member of a union.” But employees in unionized workplaces who are receiving the benefits of union advocacy, she said, should be contributing to that effort.

“That’s too deep in the weeds for anybody to want to talk through,” McClellan said. “But that’s the conversation that we need to have.”

McClellan’s day job as a regulatory lawyer for Verizon hasn’t been particularly controversial in the past, but it could become a campaign issue as progressive voters and some Democratic politicians adopt a more adversarial approach to corporate power.





From left, Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, State Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond, and Del. Hala Ayala, D-Prince William, pose in front of a bus calling for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment at the Capitol in 2018. (Photo by Katherine Jordan)

McClellan, though, can point to a sizable policy record that includes efforts to defend abortion access and the rights of pregnant women (she also broke ground as the first delegate to be pregnant during the legislative session), curb the school-to-prison pipeline and expand affordable housing. In this year's legislative session, she served as a chief Senate sponsor on [landmark clean-energy legislation](#) and a resolution ratifying the [Equal Rights Amendment](#), a long-stalled proposal to put gender equality in the U.S. Constitution.

McClellan is among the chorus of Democratic legislators [calling for police reform](#) in response to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the nationwide unrest that has followed. In Virginia, some of the liveliest protests have taken place in her Richmond district, prompting McClellan to say [she's been "disturbed"](#) by the Richmond Police Department's aggressive attempts to control them.

"We need transparency and accountability for police misconduct. We need to address where there are police departments that have a history of either brutality or racism or violence. We need to look at why," McClellan said. "But why are we sending the police to be first responders to a mental health crisis? And not giving them the tools, if they show up in the crisis, to de-escalate it?"

McClellan served in the Virginia House of Delegates from 2006 to 2017. In late 2016, she [won a special election](#) to fill the state Senate seat left open by U.S. Rep Donald McEachin, D-4th, who was on his way to Congress.

With her lengthy experience in Richmond and deep connections in Democratic politics, McClellan is expected to be a strong contender in what could be a packed field.

In addition to Carroll Foy, McClellan's potential competitors include Attorney General Mark Herring, who has already said he intends to run, Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax and former Gov. Terry McAuliffe, who left office in early 2018 but is considering trying to return for another four-year-term.

Gov. Ralph Northam cannot run for reelection due to the state's term limits.

Anti-establishment Sen. Amanda Chase, R-Chesterfield, is the only major Republican candidate to formally announce a gubernatorial run.

Asked about the prospect of McAuliffe getting into the race later in the cycle and crowding out other contenders with his name recognition and ability to raise money, McClellan said she's "not running against anyone" and will instead focus on putting out her own vision for how Virginia should be run.

"I know that this is not a moment to retreat to the past," she says in her launch video. "But to step boldly into our future."

Graham Moomaw

A veteran Virginia politics reporter, Graham grew up in Hillsville and Lynchburg, graduating from James Madison University and earning a master's degree in journalism from the University of Maryland. Before joining the Mercury, he spent six years at the Richmond Times-Dispatch, most of that time covering the governor's office, the General Assembly and state politics. He also covered city hall and politics at The Daily Progress in Charlottesville. Contact him at gmoomaw@viriniamercury.com

After losing the speaker's gavel, Kirk Cox seemed done. Now he's building a 2021 campaign.

By **Graham Moomaw** - September 21, 2020



House Speaker Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights, declared victory at his election night party in 2019. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

When Kirk Cox lost his Republican majority in his first and only term as speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, he seemed like a man who just wanted to avoid attention.

He had survived his own race in a district [that got much tougher](#) for a Republican due to court-ordered redistricting. But with the speaker's office gone, he gave up leadership duties, going back to being a regular delegate instead of trying to lead a minority party into a new era of Democratic dominance.

He only filed one bill for the 2020 session, an uncontroversial proposal to let people keep more reward money earned from tips to police by making it tax-exempt.

He rarely spoke.

Six months later, he's everywhere. And he's talking a lot about where he thinks Democrats are going wrong and how he might return Republicans to relevance in a state that seems to be turning sharply against them.

In early August, Cox, R-Colonial Heights, announced his interest in running for governor in 2021, a race that could be one of the nation's first major tests of how

Republicans will fare in a post-Trump political environment if former Vice President Joe Biden prevails in November.

To win the GOP nomination, Cox, a mild-mannered retired teacher and baseball coach who has been in the House of Delegates since 1990, would have to get past Sen. Amanda Chase, R-Chesterfield, whose unorthodox, Trump-style populism has galvanized hard-right supporters but drawn rebukes from Republicans who feel her behavior often goes too far.

It's clear Cox has more than a passing interest. Behind the scenes, he's actively standing up a campaign by recruiting staff, retaining a data and research firm, calling up fellow Republicans for support and scheduling events with major donors.

Travis Smith, a GOP consultant formerly of Kansas City-based Axiom Strategies who joined Ron Butler and Ray Allen at the Richmond direct-mail firm Creative Direct last year, has been brought on to assist Cox's 2021 effort. Cox has also lined up the data firm i360, which has worked with the Virginia House GOP caucus for years.

As part of the testing-the-waters phase, Richard Cullen, the former chairman of the McGuireWoods law firm and a major GOP donor, recently helped convene a call between Cox and about a dozen other business leaders.

"Everybody just likes Kirk," Cullen said in an interview. "That may sound trite in today's rough-and-tumble world. But I think people are looking for somebody with a personality that's not polarizing... I think in today's climate you can't underestimate a genuinely good person."

Cullen and other Cox allies say his background in education — an issue he's emphasized in the legislature by pushing for college tuition freezes and teacher pay raises — could give him crossover appeal in the types of populous, Democratic-leaning areas where Republicans have rapidly lost ground.

Calling on relationships built over a 30-year General Assembly career, Cox already has the backing of senior House Republicans like House Minority Leader Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah, Del. Rob Bell, R-Albemarle, and Del. Terry Kilgore, R-Scott.

In a recent interview, Cox, 63, said he feels "very committed" to a 2021 bid, though he doesn't expect to make anything official until after the November elections. In his telling, the biggest motivator to seek a bigger role was seeing what Democrats did with power once they got it.

"I felt that we left the state in very good shape," Cox said, emphasizing pro-business policies in particular. "I just saw that whole philosophy sort of thrown out."

Del. Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights, sets up his computer during the veto session at the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond, VA Wednesday, April 22, 2020. The House members were meeting outside in a tent instead of the House Chamber in order to practice social distancing due to the COVID-19 virus. (AP Photo/POOL/Bob Brown).

Alarmed by what he characterizes as lackadaisical leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and the summer of mass protests over police brutality and racism, Cox said the General Assembly's ongoing special session has solidified that belief.

"Now that the Democrats have totally been in charge I think the contrast could not be clearer," Cox said. "They have struggled, to me, mightily to govern."

Cox hasn't shied away from criticizing his successor, Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, D-Fairfax, the first woman to wield the gavel in the House's 400-year history, for perceived legislative dysfunction. In the special session, he said, Democrats have been slow to take up the pandemic-rattled state budget and have seemed disinterested in addressing widespread disruption to K-12 education, focusing instead on an "anti-policing agenda" in response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

"I think Black lives are extremely important," Cox said. "I guess I think sometimes we have a false choice here. I do think you can be supportive of the police and good community policing and also doing better as far as addressing some of the racial inequities. Obviously there's a lot of pain out there."

Cox has sought to emphasize the property damage that has accompanied anti-racist protests in Richmond, shooting a social media video outside the boarded-up state Capitol building and blaming the situation on "Democratic leadership."

If he were to become the 2021 gubernatorial nominee, Democrats seem poised to argue Virginia voters have already seen Cox's vision for the state and rejected it.

"It comes as no surprise Kirk Cox is angry with all the historic achievements Democrats have accomplished in the General Assembly," said Filler-Corn spokesman Jake Rubenstein. "His entire two-year speakership was based on an extreme agenda of blocking the progress that Virginians wanted."

Cox critics are also quick to point out he needed a random-draw tiebreaker to become speaker when the GOP nearly lost its majority in 2017.

"Kirk Cox is known for how quickly he lost a 20-year Republican majority in the House of Delegates," said Grant Fox, a spokesman for the Democratic Party of Virginia. "This gubernatorial run — which is built around trying to be more extreme than Amanda Chase — is just a sad attempt at recapturing the relevance he lost along with his speakership."

A wave of electoral losses has left the Virginia GOP with a thin bench of potential statewide candidates, wiping out many of the suburban moderates some strategists see as having the best chance to broaden the party's appeal beyond its rural base. And in a former battleground state they controlled just a decade ago, the Trump era has given Virginia Republicans little reason for optimism.

Ed Gillespie, a mainstream, Bush-wing Republican with a background in the D.C. lobbying/consulting world, fell short in his run for governor in 2017 while never fully embracing Trump.

In 2018, staunchly pro-Trump conservative Corey Stewart, who came surprisingly close to upsetting Gillespie in the 2017 gubernatorial primary, was trounced by U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va.

Last year, the GOP lost its majorities in both the House of Delegates and the state Senate. As Democrats took full legislative control, they conducted a sweeping overhaul of state policy, passing bills to expand voting access, prohibit anti-LGBTQ discrimination, roll back restrictions on abortion, move toward ending reliance on fossil fuels, allow the removal of Confederate statutes, toughen gun laws and raise the minimum wage.

In this year's statewide contest, Republicans are running a little-known candidate, retired U.S. Army officer Daniel Gade, against U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., who had a double-digit lead in recent polls.

Republicans haven't won statewide in a decade, but many believe the environment could quickly turn more competitive if President Donald Trump loses in November and the anti-Trump voter backlash subsides.

With Chase the first candidate to declare for 2021, some were relieved to see Cox — who has a record of pairing kitchen-table issues like education and the economy with firm social conservatism on abortion and guns — step up as a potential alternative.

Former Republican Gov. George Allen called Cox a “hard-working and conscientious public servant leader,” but said he's not endorsing anyone yet. He added that he'd also be enthusiastic about “well-qualified and commendable candidates” such as GOP Congressmen Rob Wittman and Denver Riggleman and former Congresswoman Barbara Comstock.

“But, I'm very positive and happy that Kirk Cox is stepping forward as a candidate Republicans and all voters can admire for his integrity, knowledge and constructive ideas to improve opportunities for all Virginians,” Allen said.

Riggleman, a Nelson County distillery owner who lost his seat in Congress at a convention this summer amid a backlash over his decision to officiate a same-sex wedding, has said he's considering running. Pete Snyder, a Northern Virginia tech entrepreneur who made an unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor in 2013, is also frequently mentioned as a possible contender.

Bill Carrico, a former state senator and ex-state trooper from Southwest Virginia, has also expressed interest in running. He recently hosted Cox in Galax, where the two went to church together.

In an interview, Carrico said he has made it clear to Cox he's still considering a run of his own.

“I'm not ready to say that this is not a path forward to me,” Carrico said. “However because we're close friends, I think it's something that we can teach our party and everybody else. You can run a campaign and let the people choose who has the best vision and who has the best path forward and not be so divisive toward each other.”

Relations seem frostier between Cox and Chase, who both represent Chesterfield-area districts.



In an interview, Chase said her supporters see Cox as a career politician and part of a Richmond “good old boys network.” Many were surprised, she said, to see someone who looked ready for retirement start talking about running for governor.

“I have challenged and run against the Republican establishment elitists, the pay-to-play in Richmond for over a decade,” Chase said, citing her work as a campaign consultant prior to joining the Senate in 2016. “And I’ve always won, quite honestly.”

Virginia State Sen. Amanda Chase, R-Chesterfield, arrives in the temporary Senate chambers at the Science Museum of Virginia prior to the start of the Senate session at the facility Tuesday Aug. 18, 2020, in Richmond, Va. Chase, who has a doctors note excusing her from wearing a mask, has been asked to hold a shield up to her face when entering and exiting the chamber. (AP Photo/Steve Helber/Pool)

She said her constituents were upset by Cox’s role in passing Medicaid expansion. As speaker, Cox oversaw Medicaid expansion’s passage in the House in 2018 after opposing it for years, a move some Republicans saw as a pragmatic nod to political reality after the House GOP lost 15 seats in 2017. Others saw it as a capitulation.

“What they have told me is that when he had that leadership position, when the pressure was put on him he caved in to the pressure,” Chase said of her constituents. “They see me as different. They see me as someone who is strong.”

Cox said he took a “practical” approach to the issue by building in conservative safeguards like the so-called “kill switch” to roll back expansion if federal dollars stop paying for it, likening what passed in Virginia to the approach taken by Vice President Mike Pence when he was governor of Indiana.

“Clearly, in the House we did not have the votes to block expanding Medicaid,” Cox said.

Chase also suggested her background in banking and finance made her better prepared for executive-branch leadership.

"I highly respect our teachers. My mom was a school teacher," Chase said. "But how does that translate over into being a governor? I just think it's very different."

Cox disagreed.

"I think a teaching background is a great background to run from," he said. "You're just relating to so many people on a real level."

Chase said she's not concerned about Cox's ability to raise money or win endorsements, adding she doubts he'll ever catch her "on the social media front."

"People like my passion, my enthusiasm," she said.

Cox insists he's not making his decision based on who else is in the race, but he said he wants "to see the Republican Party put its best foot forward."

"You also need to show people a vision. It can't be just all emotion," Cox said.

"People also have to be uplifted somewhat."

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'The status quo isn't working': Carroll Foy launches run for Va. governor

By **Graham Moomaw** - May 27, 2020



Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, filed paperwork to run for governor. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

No black woman has ever been elected governor of any state.

Jennifer Carroll Foy, a 38-year-old attorney and member of the Virginia General Assembly, thinks she could be the first.

“The road to politics is a difficult one,” Carroll Foy said in a recent interview when asked about that statistic. “And it’s not easy to run for office when you don’t come from power and prestige and wealth.”

Carroll Foy is formally launching her bid for governor this week, speaking publicly for the first time about her aspirations for higher office and why she believes voters should put their trust in a second-term state delegate in what could be a crowded contest for the Democratic nomination in 2021.

A Petersburg native who now represents parts of Prince William and Stafford counties, Carroll Foy was first elected to the House of Delegates in 2017 as part of the initial blue wave that prefaced the Democratic takeover of the General Assembly last year.

Asked what she’d say to someone who might question whether she has enough experience for the top job in state government, Carroll Foy said she’s “been in



Richmond long enough to know it's not working" and to see that some who have been there longer have grown "out of touch" with the people they serve.

"I've been in Richmond long enough to know that special interests still have a strong hold," she said.

Though she had intended to roll out her campaign back in March when the legislative session ended, those plans were put on hold when the coronavirus pandemic hit. But Carroll Foy said the crisis hasn't altered the primary focus of her work: the plight of working families in a state where pro-business attitudes often win out.

"For too many Virginians the status quo isn't working," Carroll Foy said. "What COVID-19 has done has really exposed what was already beneath the surface."

Though many workers have been classified as essential, she said, their paychecks signal something different.

"The economy is working very well for the very wealthy and it's not working well for the person who's working 40 hours a week and bringing home \$14,000 a year," Carroll Foy said. "We have to make a concerted effort to fix that."

That means a higher minimum wage, paid sick days and paid family leave, she said.

Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William. (Photo by Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

The General Assembly, under full Democratic control this year for the first time in decades, [passed a compromise bill](#) to raise the \$7.25 minimum wage to \$12 over the next three years, falling short of the \$15 many Democrats had pushed for. A paid

sick leave bill [failed late in the session](#), despite some lawmakers arguing the pandemic created a stark new example of why workers who feel sick should have the opportunity to stay home without losing money.

Carroll Foy also supports repealing the state's longstanding right-to-work law, which limits the power of labor unions by prohibiting mandatory union membership or payment of dues as a condition of employment. If workers stand to get better benefits and job security, she said, they should pay their "fair share" to those advocating on their behalf.

"It's about people having equal negotiation power," Carroll Foy said.

As someone who's worked as a public defender and practices criminal defense law, Carroll Foy said she supports marijuana legalization and new curbs on cash bail.

"If you're wealthy enough to buy yourself out of jail you can do that," she said. "But if you're too poor to pay you sit there for weeks and months if not years at a time. And that's not justice."

Carroll Foy's interest in a gubernatorial run has been widely known in political circles, especially after her campaign [filed initial election paperwork](#) in early April before her launch announcement was ready.

Her potential competitors in the 2021 primary field include former Gov. Terry McAuliffe, Attorney General Mark Herring, Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney and Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond.

Nearly everyone else in the field may have more name recognition and deeper relationships within the party than Carroll Foy. And progressive upstarts haven't fared well in recent Democratic primaries, with Northam handily beating ex-congressman Tom Perriello in the 2017 gubernatorial race and Senate Majority Leader Dick Saslaw, one of the most pro-business Democrats in the legislature, narrowly defeated challenger Yasmine Taeb last year.

But it remains to be seen how Democratic voters will respond to the [trio of scandals](#) last year that left all three Executive Branch officeholders – Northam, Herring and Fairfax – with diminished standing. After high-profile controversies involving race and gender, some activists have called for a concerted effort to back women of color. If McClellan chooses to enter the race, the field would include at least two black women.

Sen. Amanda Chase, R-Chesterfield, is the only major candidate to formally announce on the Republican side.

Democrats haven't lost a statewide race in Virginia since 2009, and the election of President Donald Trump helped fuel Democratic gains in the vote-rich suburbs of

Northern Virginia, Richmond and Hampton Roads. How strongly those trends carry over into Virginia's 2021 contests could depend partly on the outcome of the presidential race this year.

Gov. Ralph Northam cannot run for reelection due to the state's term limits that prevent governors from serving consecutive four-year terms.

That law doesn't prevent McAuliffe from making a comeback bid for his old job. He has openly signaled his interest in returning, [telling The Washington Post](#) there's a "strong possibility" he'll run again. His PAC reported three six-figure donations this month.

Asked about McAuliffe's possible entry into the race crowding out other contenders, Carroll Foy avoided taking a direct shot at the former governor.

"I'm excited to share my vision for Virginians," she said. "We need a leader who is right for this moment."

As one of the first black women to graduate from the historically all-male Virginia Military Institute who went on to flip a red seat in the same year she gave birth to twin boys, she said she's used to "creating trails."

"This is something that has not been done," Carroll Foy said. "But I know that everything is considered impossible until it's done."

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