

## 'A lot at stake for communities of color': Race takes central role in redistricting fight

By **Graham Moomaw** - October 15, 2020



*Dels. Cia Price, D-Newport News, and Lashrecce Aird, D-Petersburg, react after a proposed redistricting amendment proposal narrowly passed the House of Delegates in March. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

When the Virginia House of Delegates was getting ready to pass its 2011 redistricting plan, Del. Jeion Ward, D-Hampton, stood to say something she knew her colleagues might not want to hear.

*Last in a series on the debate surrounding the redistricting reform amendment on Virginians' ballots this fall. Previously: [A sharp split on the role of legislators](#)*

But, she said, “I just don’t care.”

Speaking on the House floor before a vote on a Republican-crafted legislative map, Ward, a member of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus, said she knew her district lines had been drawn to make it easier for her to get re-elected, and that it would have been easy for her to just think about what was “going to be good for me.” But she didn’t think the map represented the type of bipartisan effort voters expect. And that’s why she would vote no, even though it wouldn’t stop the map from passing.

“But I hope that in all the history books, that somewhere, people will remember me as someone that had the nerve to stand up and say no,” she said at the time.

Seven years later, her district was one of [11 ruled racially gerrymandered](#) by a federal court that found House leaders used illegal racial targets to draw Black voters into majority-minority districts. That practice made districts safer for Black incumbents like Ward, while also making neighboring districts easier for White Republicans to win. When a court-appointed expert redrew the racially gerrymandered districts last year, Ward's district got more White voters and Republicans. But it remained solidly Democratic, and she ran unopposed.

Ward's 2011 speech highlighted the complicated role of race in the redistricting process, an issue that has become perhaps the most contentious point in this [year's debate](#) over redistricting reform and the proposed constitutional amendment to create a 16-member, bipartisan commission to redraw the maps starting in 2021.

Half the seats would go to sitting legislators appointed by party leaders and half would go to citizens nominated by party leaders and appointed by retired judges. If voters approve the amendment on Nov. 3, the commission will redraw the state's legislative and congressional maps in 2021. If they don't, the Democratic-controlled General Assembly will draw the maps and submit them for Gov. Ralph Northam's signature.

*Del. Jeion Ward, D-Hampton, carried legislation in the House of Delegates to raise the state's minimum wage. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

Black delegates have been the plan's most vocal opponents for two years, arguing they shouldn't be asked to trust political and legal systems that have failed Black communities before. Protections and inclusion for racial minorities, they say, should be a prominent, built-in feature, not an add-on or a promise.

The fact that so many Black Virginians were voting under a racially gerrymandered House map for most of the last decade until the courts addressed it for the 2019 elections, said Del. Marcia Price, D-Newport News, shows why many members of the Black Caucus have their guard up about a commission that is neither independent or non-partisan.

“There’s a lot at stake for communities of color,” Price said.

Late last month, the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP formally announced its opposition to the proposal, saying “for too many years, politicians have drawn rigged districts that strip Black voters of our voice.”

However, some amendment supporters say Virginia’s recent history with racial gerrymandering shows how political motives and self-preservation can intertwine across party lines. And they see the fears of drastic racial implications as misplaced, providing cover for Democrats and Black Caucus members who would prefer to draw the districts themselves.

In the 2011 process, Ward was an outlier among Black House members, most of whom voted for the plan later found to be racially gerrymandered and some of whom helped craft it.

Tavorise Marks, an amendment supporter and Chesterfield NAACP member, said many of the Black politicians opposing the commission plan have strongly Democratic districts and understandably want to keep them that way.

“Wouldn’t you want to be in a position to protect that?” said Marks, who ran for the House last year but lost a Democratic primary.

He said the commission’s critics have “turned the entire issue into emotion.”

“Don’t put fear out there having this whole entire thing be about stripping away your rights,” Marks said.

Black delegates bristle at the claim their opposition might be rooted in self-interest rather than legitimate concerns about minority representation.

“Our fear is not for self,” Price said. “We are scrappers. We know our communities. We’ve been working hard for our communities.”

As part of the 2019 Democratic takeover, the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus grew to 23 members, the most since Reconstruction. Several senior Black lawmakers now lead legislative committees, including Ward, who oversaw the passage of the state’s first minimum-wage increase since 2009 as chairwoman of the House Labor and Commerce Committee.

One seat the Black Caucus gained appeared to be a direct result of the districts being drawn to undo the past racial gerrymandering, a process that imperiled several White Republicans. Del. Clint Jenkins, D-Suffolk, handily defeated former Republican Del. Chris Jones, then the powerful chairman of the House Appropriations Committee

Black candidates like Dels. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, and Josh Cole, D-Stafford, have also flipped Republican-held districts that are not majority Black.

Carroll Foy and Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond, are now running for governor, both with the potential to make history as the first Black woman to be elected governor of any state.

For some Black Caucus members, the debate over redistricting reform is about making sure there's no sliding backward.

The commission plan's critics have pointed out the amendment has no guarantee any of the 16 seats will go to Black people. That frustration seemed to grow out of what some Black Caucus members saw as an earlier snub in 2019, when Republican leaders appointed seven White lawmakers to finalize the amendment's details before its first passage.

"There was not one person of color in the group that concocted this," Del. Jeff Bourne, D-Richmond said earlier this year during an emotional floor debate before the second vote. "For those who are advocating this, to expect us to believe that you have all Virginians in your heart and your mind and in this flawed amendment ... miss me with that."



*Del. Jeff Bourne, D-Richmond. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)*

The amendment's backers have tried to pass accompanying legislation to partially address the concern about commission inclusivity, specifying that those appointing commission members "shall give consideration to the racial, ethnic, geographic and gender diversity of the Commonwealth." That guideline isn't in place yet, but commission supporters say it's widely understood that the General Assembly leaders tasked with appointing commissioners will not create an all-White panel. The two Democratic senators on the commission would be appointed by Senate President Pro Tempore Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, a senior member of the Black Caucus who supports the amendment.

"People must be closing their eyes or whatever," said Bobby Vassar, a Democratic attorney and former legislative director for U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Newport News, at a recent virtual discussion hosted by pro-amendment group Fair Maps VA. "We have Louise Lucas, the president pro tem of the Virginia Senate, who's a Black woman, a strong Black woman, that everybody knows. Louise is not going to allow this process to not represent and include Black people."

Lucas could not be reached for comment. And McClellan did not respond to requests for an interview.

*Members of the Legislative Black Caucus laid out their legislative priorities for the veto session in April of 2019 and responded to criticism from Republicans for working with Gov. Ralph Northam on the issues despite their calls for his resignation. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

The four Black Caucus members in the Senate voted for the amendment this year, but they've generally been less vocal about their support than the opponents in the House. They don't seem to share the concerns that the amendment could harm Black voters.

The other main race-related critique of the amendment is that it doesn't include strong enough protections similar to the Voting Rights Act, the landmark federal law intended to protect minority voting power, especially in Southern states with histories of suppressing Black votes.

The amendment's text says all districts must be "drawn in accordance with the requirements of federal and state laws that address racial and ethnic fairness," including the U.S. Constitution's Equal Protection Clause and the Voting Rights Act. Opponents argue that's not good enough, because federal courts reshaped by President Donald Trump could diminish those protections in the future. In a state whose Constitution still includes a now-moot ban on gay marriage, they say, racial protections should be important enough to be written in directly.

"This is about a system," Price said. "This is not about current elected officials."

The recent shift to fairer maps and undoing the racial gerrymanders of 2011, she said, didn't happen by accident.

"It was because Black folks stood up and sued for their rights," Price said.

Supporters insist the amendment bolsters legal protections for racial minorities by writing a Voting Rights Act reference into the state Constitution, as well as language stating that districts "shall provide, where practicable, opportunities for racial and ethnic communities to elect candidates of their choice."

The phrase "where practicable" is a sore spot for opponents, who see it as a suggestion the provision is optional. Supporters say it's a simple nod to the fact that in mostly White regions of the state, it's not mathematically possible to create majority-minority districts.

At the Fair Maps VA discussion, Phillip Thompson, executive director of a pro-amendment group called the National Black Nonpartisan Redistricting Organization, joked that opponents have made the amendment sound like "the worst thing for African-Americans since slavery." If the commission produces maps drawn in the interest of Black voters instead of Black incumbents, he said, Black voters will be spread out in a way that could swing more races. And by extension, he said, they'll have more influence.

"You'll see people that now have to pay attention to you," he said. "Piling them all into one district is not going to get you power."

#### **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

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Assembly and state politics. He also covered city hall and politics at The Daily Progress in Charlottesville. Contact him at [gmoomaw@viriniamercury.com](mailto:gmoomaw@viriniamercury.com)

# No, Virginia. The governor's budget doesn't fund an 18-officer gun confiscation squad.

By **Graham Moomaw** - January 7, 2020



*Gov. Ralph Northam, flanked by incoming Senate Majority Leader Dick Saslaw and House Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, outlines Democrats' priorities for the 2020 legislative session on Jan. 7, 2020. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

Amid a conspiracy theory-tinged [uproar](#) over the possibility of Virginia passing new gun-control laws, pro-gun activists have scoured the state budget for evidence validating their fears about the government coming for their firearms.

But much of the pro-gun rhetoric surrounding Gov. Ralph Northam's proposed budget doesn't match reality.

The [two-year budget](#) includes roughly \$4 million to support 18 new Virginia State Police positions related to an assault weapon ban, a line item pro-gun groups have portrayed as an ominous sign of looming gun confiscation.

"The Virginia governor's new budget reveals funding for a new team of anti-gun cops," reads a headline on conservative website Liberty Nation.

"Gun owners want to know: Is this money going to be used for the gun confiscation that, in November, the governor said he was considering," Gun Owners of America Senior Vice President Eric Pratt said in a news release urging supporters to pack the state's budget hearings last week.

"It is not clear from the document what the precise function of these 18 government collaborators would be," the National Rifle Association's Institute for

Legislative Action said in a recent post.

According to the governor's office, the funding is for administrative workers who would oversee the registration/permitting process Democrats are proposing to allow gun owners to keep firearms they already have. The 18 jobs mentioned in the budget are not trooper positions, said Northam spokeswoman Alena Yarmosky.

"These 18 positions are for administrative staff to process applications and background checks for Virginians who apply for a permit to retain assault firearms they currently own," Yarmosky said. "Funding will also support the development of an IT system to manage applications and permits."

That doesn't mean there won't be more sworn officers focusing on guns.

The budget proposal also includes roughly \$6.5 million to convert 43 civilian workers who oversee the state's sex offender registry into trooper positions, creating a new "combined sex offense and firearms investigation unit," according to budget documents. It's not clear how that unit would operate, but nothing in the budget suggests it would focus solely on enforcing an assault weapon ban.

Banning particular types of weaponry may be the most contentious of the gun-control proposals Democrats are expected to pursue using their new General Assembly majorities. Depending on how it plays out, the legislation could outlaw future sales of certain types of guns and affect the legal status of thousands of weapons Virginians already own.

Northam has said the proposal he supports will [grandfather in existing guns](#) that meet the assault weapon definition. But gun owners would have to register them with the state, a requirement gun-rights activists adamantly oppose and see as a step toward future gun seizures.

Northam's professed support for a grandfather clause hasn't stopped the proliferation of online conspiracy theories suggesting the state government is preparing to confiscate guns en masse. During a news conference at the Capitol Tuesday, Northam addressed some of those theories head-on.

"We ask that the discussion be civil and based in fact, not misinformation and intimidation," Northam said. "We have no intention of calling out the National Guard. We're not going to [cut off people's electricity](#). We're not going to go door-to-door and confiscate individuals' weapons. We are going to pass common-sense legislation that will keep guns out of dangerous hands."

In total, Northam has proposed \$7.6 million to implement new gun laws. But the price tag will depend largely on what bills have passed when the session, which starts Wednesday, ends in mid-March.



In addition to the assault weapon ban, Democrats want to enact universal background checks, create a red flag law that would let authorities take guns from people deemed dangerous and reinstate a one-handgun-a-month law.

Northam's budget includes an additional \$3.6 million to implement the other gun measures and a bill dealing with background checks for student loan servicers.

Pro-gun organizers think they have a shot at stopping some bills in the state Senate, where Democrats have a slim, 21-19 majority and several moderates within their ranks.

"Most of these bills are going to pass," said soon-to-be Senate Majority Leader Dick Saslaw, D-Fairfax. "I don't know if every single one will, but most are going to pass."

Northam's budget proposal includes \$250,000 to cover a possible increase in the number of people imprisoned under the new laws. Some conservative outlets have characterized that money as a sign the state is preparing for a mass jailing of gun owners.

That overlooks the fact that the extra prison funding arises from a routine budgetary practice.

Under [state law](#), any criminal justice-related legislation that could increase prison populations has to include an estimate of how much it might cost the state.

When the fiscal impact is undetermined because the state doesn't have a solid estimate of how many people might break a new or expanded law, the bills get tagged with a \$50,000 minimum cost estimate.

The Northam administration arrived at the \$250,000 estimate by attaching the standard \$50,000 appropriation to five separate gun proposals.

Among the bills that had the same \$50,000 price tag last year were proposals to boost criminal penalties for drunk boating, timber theft and threatening a family member over the phone.

NRA representatives working in Virginia said this week that they and their Republican allies may push to attach more precise cost estimates to the bills, which they believe could cost the state significantly more. D.J. Spiker, Virginia director for NRA-ILA, said the \$50,000 estimates are so low "it boggles the mind."

*Mercury reporter Ned Oliver contributed.*

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](mailto:gmoomaw@viriniamercury.com)

## For now, McAuliffe is on the sidelines of Virginia's 2021 governor race. Some wish he'd stay there.

By [Graham Moomaw](#) - July 13, 2020

He's not officially on the comeback trail yet, but it wasn't hard to see the message former Gov. Terry McAuliffe was sending last week.

He announced his PAC had raised \$1.7 million in two months, an astounding sum for someone who's been out of office for two-and-a-half years and technically isn't running for anything. His donor list included senior Democratic lawmakers, including several members of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus.

The release suggested that, even out of office, McAuliffe played a key role in turning Virginia blue last year as one of the top donors to the Democratic Party of Virginia. After Democrats won control of the General Assembly despite their three top elected leaders being [hobbled by scandals](#), they started passing legislation this year that was unthinkable in the GOP-held legislature of McAuliffe's era.

The statement from McAuliffe's Common Good VA PAC said the ex-governor is focused on helping presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden win the White House. But it clearly signaled he's thinking about Virginia's future and his potential role in it as — [in Biden's words](#) — the “once and future governor.”

“From elected officials to labor leaders to progressive activists, Virginians all over the commonwealth are powering former Governor Terry McAuliffe's efforts to keep Virginia blue in 2020 and beyond,” the release said.

Not all progressives were happy to see McAuliffe try to reassert his place atop Democratic politics as he considers running for a second term in 2021, particularly

at a time when two Black women — Sen. Jennifer McClellan and Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy — have already launched gubernatorial campaigns of their own.

One activist summed up her thoughts with a Twitter hashtag: “#StandBackTMac”

“I would like to see him take what he brings to the table and use that to lift up women of color and not push them aside,” that activist, Melissa McKenney of Henrico County, said in an interview. “He’s already held the seat. We have the opportunity in Virginia to make history and elect a Black woman governor. I think that he would be doing Virginia and the country a service to lift them up so that we can see that accomplished.”

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

There’s still about a year to go before Democrats start casting votes in the 2021 primary. But its initial phase — unfolding as a crisis-stricken nation reckons with issues of racial justice and equality — has a power dynamic sparking uneasy conversations in Democratic circles.

[McClellan](#), D-Richmond, and [Carroll Foy](#), D-Prince William, both attorneys, are already off and running, and both campaigns carry historic significance. Virginia has never elected a woman as governor, and no state has elected a Black woman as governor.

But women have been at the center of Virginia’s recent blue wave, a shift largely powered by a backlash against President Donald Trump. Democratic wins in the 2017 House of Delegates elections produced a [record number](#) of women in the

chamber, which [elected its first-ever female speaker](#) two years later in Del. Eileen Filler-Corn, D-Fairfax.

Veena Lothe, executive director of Emerge Virginia, an organization that trains and promotes Democratic women interested in running for office, said that while anyone is free to run, there's a lot of enthusiasm for building on those gains.

"I think it would be historic to see the capital of the old Confederacy have a woman in charge," Lothe said. "It's a great precedent for the rest of the country."

As they launched their campaigns, neither McClellan nor Carroll Foy directly discussed McAuliffe, opting instead for broader messages about breaking from the past and choosing a candidate for the future. Between the two, McClellan is widely seen as starting from a stronger position due to her longer track record and deeper party ties. Carroll Foy, a millennial who flipped a formerly Republican seat when she was first elected in 2017, is pitching herself as a progressive newcomer with less allegiance to the status quo.

*Delegates Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, and Hala Ayala, D-Prince William, speak to reporters outside the gallery of the House of Delegates after voting to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

Carroll Foy reported raising \$776,000 in the latest reporting period. McClellan reported raising \$275,000 in the first week of her campaign, but has not yet released her number for the full reporting period.

Hard-right Sen. Amanda Chase, R-Chesterfield, is currently the only declared Republican candidate for governor. (Former State Sen. Bill Carrico, R-Grayson, [has said he's mulling a run](#)). Because the GOP hasn't won a statewide election in more

than a decade, the Democratic primary winner will likely enter the general-election campaign as a strong favorite to become the state's 74th governor.

## 'I would love to see Terry be an ally'

To some, the prospect of a White man crowding out two accomplished Black women to retake an influential job he's already had cuts against the principles of diversity and inclusion Democrats profess to hold.

Lisa Sales of Northern Virginia, a leader in the successful VA Ratify ERA campaign to have Virginia [formally support](#) enshrining gender equality in the U.S. Constitution, said she's worked with McAuliffe and would back him if he's the nominee. But, she's decided, "it's time for the women."

"I want every little girl in America, no matter the color of their skin, to be able to look up at the Jenns and say 'I can do that. I can be that,'" Sales said.

*Supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment stand outside of the entrance to the Capitol on the opening day of the 2020 legislative session.  
(Photo by Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

Raising lots of money and using it for "power and control" in politics, Sales said, comes easier to entrenched White men than it does for women and people of color. For McAuliffe to take the historically rare step of running for a second term after McClellan and Carroll Foy have stepped up, Sales said, would be "disrespectful."

"I would love to see Terry be an ally," Sales said. "I want to see more men in power become allies and champions of women taking power and evening the playing field."

It's not clear how widespread that feeling is. And recent history suggests the larger universe of Democratic primary voters doesn't always align with conversations taking place among the most plugged-in progressives.

A historically diverse presidential primary field yielded Biden, a centrist who's built a comfortable polling lead over President Donald Trump while campaigning mostly from his basement due to COVID-19. Yet Biden committed to choosing a woman as his running mate, and some Democrats are [publicly urging him to choose a woman of color](#).

In the closing days of the 2017 Democratic gubernatorial primary, many assumed then-Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam was in serious trouble of losing the nomination to progressive ex-congressman Tom Perriello. Northam, endorsed by McAuliffe and most of the state's Democratic establishment, won by almost a dozen points.

McAuliffe's legendary fundraising prowess, name recognition and relationships in the party could make him tough to beat, especially if non-McAuliffe voters are split between McClellan, Carroll Foy and others.

Stephen Farnsworth, a political science professor at the University of Mary Washington, said there's a "huge difference" between winning a seat in the General Assembly and the statewide profile that comes with being governor.

"The bigger the field the better his prospects," Farnsworth said. "If his critics have several choices they will go in different directions."

If he runs, McAuliffe is expected to pitch himself as an experienced leader who can help Virginia rebound from the pandemic era by stepping back into a job he already knows.

"Helping Virginia recover from the economic and health crisis of COVID-19 will require strong Democratic leadership that will fight for all," McAuliffe said in his PAC's statement.

In an indication primary support won't fall neatly along racial lines, McAuliffe's donor list includes five members of the Black Caucus: Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, Sen. Lionell Spruill Sr., D-Chesapeake, House Appropriations Chairman Luke Torian, D-Prince William, Del. Joseph Lindsey, D-Norfolk, and Del. Don Scott, D-Portsmouth.

In an interview, Lucas called the issue "heart-wrenching" and said she'd love to see a Black governor. But in an unprecedented crisis, she said, she's more concerned with electing a "proven leader" who can spearhead an economic recovery.

"There's nothing I would like more than to see an African American woman governor," Lucas said. "But given the times that we're facing, I want to see

somebody who can win and who can bring us out of this crisis.”

## **‘We aren’t the same commonwealth’**

For all McAuliffe’s strengths, it’s been more than a decade since he competed in a Democratic primary.

Prior to his career in Virginia politics, he was best known for his ties to Bill and Hillary Clinton and a stint as chairman of the Democratic National Committee. His first run for governor in 2009 didn’t end well as Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Bath, won a landslide victory in the Democratic primary and went on to lose to former Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell. McAuliffe’s outreach in the state paid off in 2013, when he became the Democratic gubernatorial nominee without competition and defeated then-Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli in a close race.

With Republicans controlling the legislature, his ability to enact his policy agenda was limited, leaving him to use his power largely to block socially conservative bills (including anti-abortion bills to defund Planned Parenthood), make economic development deals and act as the state’s cheerleader-in-chief.

With Virginia Democrats now ascendant and debating how aggressively they should wield their power to reshape a once purple state, it’s unclear how McAuliffe’s pro-business outlook might be perceived in 2021, with more progressive Democrats increasingly focused on empowering workers.

“We aren’t the same commonwealth we were seven years ago when Terry McAuliffe was elected,” said Prince William County Supervisor Kenny Boddye, a progressive who has been active in his local NAACP chapter and has endorsed Carroll Foy. “I think that honestly at this moment in time in our commonwealth’s history, it should be about folks looking and saying ‘How do we pass that torch to the next generation of leaders?’”

The changes afoot in Virginia were on dramatic display last week when Dominion Energy announced it was cancelling the controversial Atlantic Coast Pipeline after years of doing battle with environmentalists, landowners and progressives opposed to the project.

Many Democrats cheered the demise of the \$8 billion project, which Dominion CEO Tom Farrell announced in 2014 [with McAuliffe by his side](#). At the time, McAuliffe called the pipeline a “win-win” that would create jobs and be “great for the environment.”

The McAuliffe era wasn’t all ribbon-cuttings and corporate dealmaking, like laying the groundwork for Amazon’s HQ2 project in Northern Virginia. He championed Medicaid expansion and universal background checks on gun purchases, goals

achieved when Democrats started flipping seats in 2017 and took full control in 2019.

He used his executive power to restore voting rights to hundreds of thousands of felons who had served their time, a policy widely seen as a corrective to Virginia's history of race-based disenfranchisement. Days after the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, he became the first Southern governor to officiate a gay wedding. He left office in early 2018, just after Democrats flipped 15 House seats that gave them renewed clout in Richmond.

This year, with full policymaking control for the first time in decades, Democrats decriminalized marijuana, lifted abortion restrictions, created a strong anti-discrimination law for LGBTQ people and others, passed sweeping gun-control laws, granted legal driving privileges to undocumented immigrants, raised the minimum wage, made voting easier, started moving Virginia toward a carbon-free electric grid and cleared the way for localities to begin taking down Confederate statues.

All that was impossible in McAuliffe's time, and the 2021 Democratic primary discussion will largely be about how to protect those policy gains and build on them.

Asked in an interview what she means when she says Virginia needs a future that's "better than it's past," Carroll Foy, who grew up in the economically ailing city of Petersburg, said too many voices haven't been heard.

"Too many people have put corporate interests above the people's interests. And that stops now," said Carroll Foy, a former public defender who practices criminal defense law.

McClellan, a lawyer for Verizon, has also said 2021 will be about more than just returning to the way things used to be pre-pandemic.

"The economy wasn't doing well for everybody," McClellan said in an interview when she announced her campaign. "We need to rebuild in a way that addresses that and recognizes that. How do we make sure everyone has an opportunity to participate in that growth?"

Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, the only African American currently in a statewide office in Virginia, is expected to enter the race in the next few months. He declined to speculate on McAuliffe's role in the race, saying only that the conventional wisdom about who's strong and who's not doesn't always hold up.

"Oftentimes what the voters think, feel and believe is drastically different than what insider politicians and power brokers and money interests think," Fairfax said in an interview. "Democracy belongs to the voters."

*Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax presides over the Senate on the opening day of the 2020 session of the General Assembly. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)*

As someone who has already run statewide and won, Fairfax's prospects for higher office appeared to vanish last year when two women came forward to accuse him of sexual assault, allegations he adamantly denies. He said he doesn't expect voters to tune him out because of that, pointing to the [unproven assault allegation](#) against Biden that many Democrats seemed to dismiss due to a lack of evidence.

"Now he's the nominee for president. And I believe he will be the next president," Fairfax said. "Voters want a politics of uplift."

In 2018, Attorney General Mark Herring [announced he intended to run for governor](#). But his plans became less clear after he admitted last year to wearing blackface in college. A McAuliffe candidacy could make his path to the nomination even more uncertain.

McAuliffe's PAC would not make the former governor available for an interview for this story.

As he considered running for president last year, McAuliffe faced similar questions about whether a well-off White man was the type of person Democratic voters were looking to to lead them out of the Trump era.

"There may not be oxygen. ... We may be in a place that, you know, people talk about identity politics all the time, person of color or women, we don't know," McAuliffe said when the issue came up in an [interview with conservative radio host John Fredericks](#). "But you don't know unless you give it a try."

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