

2020 ELECTIONS, GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

# How Virginia's largest congressional district could flip this year



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## A 20-year GOP stronghold continues to ebb and flow

As polling shows Dr. Cameron Webb could flip the 5th Congressional District from Republican to Democrat, it goes beyond Webb and Bob Good as candidates and to the actual shape and demographics of the district itself.

Former Campbell County Supervisor Bob Good, the Republican candidate for the seat in the House of Representatives, said he wants to fight. Webb, the Democratic candidate and director of health policy and equity at the University of Virginia, said he wants to heal.

Which message — and candidate will prevail — remains to be seen, but recent polling indicates Webb could flip the seat blue for the first time in a decade.

Their messages diverge and the demographics of Virginia's largest congressional district is diverse — featuring a mix of urban and rural localities, various business sectors and agriculture, as well as a solid blend of Democratic and Republican constituents. Having leaned Republican since 2000, recent seat

blend of Democratic and Republican constituents. Having leaned Republican since 2000, recent seat holders have been single-term representatives, and only one Democrat has occupied it in the last two decades.

Polling and reports have labeled the district a “toss up” or placed Webb within the margins of winning. Beyond the differences in the candidates themselves, the 5th District represents an almost microcosm of America.

Amidst a global pandemic, social unrest and a tense presidential race that offers a partisan umbrella to fall under, Good’s campaign uses President Donald Trump’s talking points as Webb’s caters to Democrats while courting moderates across a political spectrum.

## Entering an ideological rift

Cook Political Report is among the political entities that recently labeled the 5th District a “toss up.” David Wasserman, a political analyst with Cook, said that a potential Webb victory may echo the last time a Democrat represented the district.

In 2008, Tom Perriello entered the scene as a young, fresh candidate catching a Democratic wave of energy from President Barack Obama’s campaign and student turnout in college towns.

Though various polls show that the presidential election appears to have margins as narrow as the 5th does, the district is shaped differently now, and nationwide politics are more divided than they were then — Wasserman said the division within the Republican Party itself is creating a rift that Webb has spent much of his campaign entering.

Wasserman considers Webb a “unicorn” for this race. Aside from Webb’s campaign strategies, Wasserman notes how his very identity can appeal to a wider range of voters.

“He’s a young African American doctor who’s the son of a [Drug Enforcement Agency] agent and is running ads advertising support from local sheriffs of different races, is married to a physician from the Southside, and is touting in his ads that he is an advisor that has worked for presidents Obama and Trump,” Wasserman explained. “So that’s a good message in the 5th District considering that it voted for Trump in 2016.”



Congressional candidate Dr. Cameron Webb speaks to a crowd of supporters in Charlottesville.

Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

Webb, a medical doctor who also has a law degree and is University of Virginia’s director of health policy and equity, has already spent some time in the nation’s capital. In 2016 and 2017, he served a White House fellowship spanning the end of the Obama administration and the beginning of Trump’s.

Wasserman explained how Webb’s candidacy is also happening at a time where the Republican Party within the district appears to be “fractured.” He noted how incumbent representative, Denver Riggleman, was ousted over the summer in a drive-up convention.

“If Denver Riggleman lifts a finger for Bob Good, it’s going to be his middle one,” Wasserman said.

Riggleman does not appear to have lifted a finger for either candidate with an endorsement, but he expressed his frustration with binary politics. He is also contemplating a potential bid for governor as his next move — one where he could potentially run as an independent.

“This is the worst job I’ve ever had, but probably the best thing I’ve ever done,” Riggleman said of his time in Congress.

He cited the sprawling district, increasingly partisan politics and his own “independent voice” as contributing factors to the challenge of the job.

“I think that independent voice made people on the left and the right pretty angry all the time because I’m really not much into pandering in politics,” Riggleman explained. “I think that’s what let me win, but that’s what led to the ridiculousness of what happened to me later.”

Around the time Webb was staving off three opponents in the June 2020 primaries, the Republican Party of the 5th District elected to hold a drive-up convention at the Tree of Life Ministries in Campbell County — near where Good resides. Riggleman suspects if a districtwide primary had happened, he could have won it.

“I wish I had had a real election to run in a primary instead of whatever happened in that church parking lot,” Riggleman said.

Labeling himself a “bright red conservative” as well as a “biblical conservative,” Good began his campaign in part from Riggleman officiating a same-sex wedding in the summer of 2019. Not in favor of “pandering” to any political party, Riggleman also occasionally voted in line with Democrats and employed bipartisanship on several bills while in Congress. Meanwhile, Good has aligned himself with Trump and “bright red” politics.

As [more than two million Virginians have already voted statewide](#), the timer is still going for early in-person voting and absentee ballots ahead of Election Day on Nov. 3.

As the outgoing representative, Riggleman noted that health care and rural broadband were two challenges he worked to address during his representation and how the district continues to grapple with the two issues which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

On whoever wins the seat, Riggleman stressed that they continue to address health care, infrastructure and the economy.

And, he said, messaging matters.

“I think it’s the transmission of a message with integrity and having ideas that make sense and not just spitting the same ideological crap that you see all the time coming from certain types of candidates,” Riggleman said.



Congressional candidate Bob Good speaks to supporters at a rally in Madison County.

Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

## The gerrymandered heart of Virginia

Beyond the candidates themselves, the shape and size of the district contributes to the partisan ebb and flow, as well as the variety of concerns Webb or Good will have to represent.

“Southern and western Virginia used to be all Democrats. Northern Virginia was entirely Republican. Now it’s the opposite,” said Hamilton Lomard, a demographer at UVA’s Weldon Cooper Center. “But the 5th district, it really kind of runs between those two poles. I think that’s why it’s one of the reasons it’s a swing district.”

Once more concentrated on Southside Virginia, the 5th District has evolved over time. Every 10 years, new state and congressional maps are drawn by the General Assembly based on the U.S. Census Bureau data — a process that could potentially be handed to a redistricting commission pending a state constitutional amendment on this year’s ballots.

As populations have dropped and grown in regions around the state, districts need to remain contiguous. As such, the 5th has gradually stretched narrowly upwards, capturing density in the northern part of the state while still widely housing sparsely populated counties near the North Carolina border.

Gerrymandering has also been practiced in district drawing as legislators have been tempted by the fruit of drawing favorable maps to keep themselves more likely seated. Republicans and democrats alike have benefitted over time.

“Legislators sit in a room, look at a map and say ‘well how are we gonna draw these lines so it makes those districts more favorable to us?’” said former Democratic Del. David Toscano.

He stated how voter information data helps legislators determine map shapes.

“They even know what the tendency of a precinct is to vote one party or the other,” Toscano explained. “So they use all that data to draw those lines presumably to have a map that’s fair, but we all know when they’re drawing the lines, they’re tending to protect themselves.”

The district that Webb or Good wins next month may not be the same district they serve again should they seek reelection. In 2021, state and congressional maps are set to be redrawn, and this year, a [ballot referendum](#) can determine who is in charge of the task next with the goal of lessening gerrymandering.

The result of decades of advocacy for redistricting reform took the shape of a referendum that is now in the hands of voters. If the majority of Virginians vote “yes” on the constitutional amendment, a redistricting commission will be formed in 2021 responsible for creating the next decade’s maps.

Though the proposal passed the General Assembly twice before making its way to ballots, [some of the same legislators who once supported the notion critique its altered version and urge people to vote “no.”](#)

Democrats, who hold a majority in the General Assembly, fear the inclusion of legislators on the proposed commission — different from the originally proposed commission structure — could taint the process and lead to continued gerrymandering. Instead, they ask voters to trust them to draw fair maps in 2021 while trying again to establish a better version of the redistricting commission. State legislators across the aisles agree the amendment is not perfect, but many see it as a good start.

Perriello, the last Democrat to hold the 5th, did so just before the 2011 redrawing. Still, he said a lot of the same challenges of representing the broad district persist.

“It’s much harder to have a sense of political cohesion in the district,” Perriello said. “But it just means you’ve got to work that much harder to make sure you’re listening to folks. As long as the times are as split as they are now, it’s very easy for some portion of the district to simply feel not represented.”

## In the final stretch



An election worker holds a cup of pens for entering voters outside of Albemarle County's registrar office.

Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

As Good works to lock down the GOP-leaning population the district has had, Webb is locking down Democrats and working to siphon votes from people willing to navigate beyond their party line.

Good recently completed a “Good for Law Enforcement” tour while Webb is in the midst of a districtwide tour with events spanning from socially-distanced meet and greets, to checking in with how small businesses are coping during the pandemic, to skeet shooting at a Lynchburg-area farm.

Both candidates have tapped into high profile supporters as well.

Last week, [Kamala Harris' husband, Doug Emhoff, visited Charlottesville to stump for Webb](#) ahead of a canvassing event. Emhoff emphasized Webb's physical healing as a doctor and aligned it with how the Biden-Harris ticket aims to “heal the soul” of America.

This week, [Good hosted a rally in Madison County featuring House Republican Whip Steve Scalise](#). The congressman emphasized the importance of reelecting Trump and support of Republican candidates against “socialism.”

Beyond healthcare and the economy, recent months have reignited national policy focus on policing and police reform.

Nigel Mason, a Charlottesville firefighter, retired Navy veteran and Trump supporter briefly considered also voting for Webb. Ultimately, he explained that he's recently been “put off by Webb over his stance on defunding the police” and has since voted for Good.

[Defunding the police](#) is a broad term that gained more widespread attention throughout the summer amidst nationwide demonstrations following a recent spate of deaths of African Americans by law enforcement or vigilantes. For some, it means the abolishment of police and creation of something new,

while for others it takes the form of divesting funds from police departments and allocating them to other resources.

A September attack ad from Good's campaign featured imagery of Webb overlaid on scenes of riots and looting claiming he would defund police and calling him "way too liberal." Webb countered with an ad featuring support from rural sheriffs — including one who served in Campbell County when Good was a supervisor.

On defunding, Webb says he does not support defunding police and calls the attacks "Washington politics as usual" as well as an attempt to "distort for political gain."

"This is a moment where it's really important for us to not drive further political wedges but instead look to build unity in our communities," Webb said. "Here in the 5th Congressional District, there's not a single law enforcement office that needs fewer funds."

He added that adequately funding law enforcement with resources for enhanced training and good compensation can retain quality officers.

"I think the federal government has a role to play to support community oriented policing strategies," Webb explained. "I'm focused on public safety and making sure that everyone feels safe in their communities. I'm focused on justice in our criminal justice system."

In ads and campaign events, Good has accused Webb of being aligned with the "radical" factions of the Democratic Party. Webb has presented himself as a "consensus builder" and taken aim at Good's prior voting record and conflicts of interest in his time serving local government.

Recent campaign filings indicate Good has investment holdings in two pharmaceutical companies that benefited from votes during his time as a Campbell County supervisor. Webb has since called for Good to divest from the holdings.

When asked at the Madison rally how he plans to represent the large and diverse district, Good said that he would "fight to continue the Trump economy."

At the event, he discussed healthcare, stating that Webb and a Biden-Kamala Harris administration would be "Obamacare on steroids."

"I believe that market forces and private provisions for healthcare are the best method to provide the best options at the lowest price for the vast majority of citizens," Good said in an interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow.

Meanwhile, Webb plans to draw on his experience as a physician and bipartisan experience in healthcare policy.

"Having worked in both the Obama and Trump White Houses, on health policy, I've seen across the aisle some of the common areas where we can work together," Webb explained.

While Good and Webb both support a market-driven healthcare system — Webb wants to "leverage the innovation and choice" on the private side and the "compassion and inclusivity" on the public side.

Somewhat mirroring the presidential race, Webb has retained interest in candidate debates, as Good has declined, save for one virtually and one proposed to be hosted at Liberty University — where he previously worked and does not lie within the boundaries of the district. The two campaigns have yet to agree on a second one.

During the September debate hosted by the Senior Statesmen of Virginia and moderated by Daily Progress reporter Allison Wrabel, each candidate pleaded the case for their candidacy and critiqued each other over Zoom while about 1,000 viewers looked on.

The district, which spans more than 10,000 square miles — larger than New Jersey — encompasses a variety of voters as it stretches from the North Carolina border to nearly Maryland. As recent polling signals the race will be close, November will indicate if the district is ready to flip again.

signals the race will be close, November will indicate if the district is ready to tip again.



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# More than a hashtag: What Biden and Harris could learn from #Charlottesville since Unite the Right



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12 MIN READ  
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Chalk messages, signs, and flowers adorn a wall on 4th St where Heather Heyer was killed and many others were injured on Aug. 12, 2017.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods \ Charlottesville Tomorrow

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“Charlottesville” was the first word spoken in Joe Biden’s campaign launch video in spring 2019, citing the events of Aug. 11 and 12, 2017, as inspiration to run. In the year and a half since, he’s emerged as the Democratic presidential nominee while evoking Charlottesville several more times.

Though to-date, he has not visited the city during his campaign and likely can count on votes from the Democrat-leaning locality, Charlottesville Tomorrow checked in with various people about what they think

a potentially elected Joe Biden/Kamala Harris administration can learn from Charlottesville and Virginia as a whole.

## Charlottesville's history as the nation's history

University of Virginia professor Jalane Schmidt — along with Jefferson School African American Heritage Center Executive Director Andrea Douglas — has led walking tours of Court Square since 2018.

The free tours, which usually last about 90 minutes, contextualize the history connected with Charlottesville and Albemarle County memorials ranging from the slave auction block marker to the area's bronze statues of Confederate soldiers.

For Biden to understand why Unite the Right happened in Charlottesville goes beyond just the statues, Schmidt said.

She noted the connection between Charlottesville's racist past, President Donald Trump's rhetoric during his last campaign, and the growing rise of white supremacy and neo-Nazism from fringe into mainstream in recent years.

"It wasn't just 'Poor Charlottesville — how did this happen here?'" Schmidt said. "All these horrible alt-right guys are crawling out from under their rocks on 4chan, 8chan, Daily Stormer, and it became 'IRL' — in real life. They got stirred up and emboldened."

Schmidt reflected on how, around 2016 and 2017, Charlottesville had been examining its past and figuring out what to do with its Confederate monuments. Between the Blue Ribbon Commission and the City Council's vote at the time to remove the monuments, organizing began to take shape for what eventually became the Unite the Right rally. Schmidt noted that while the monument decisions appear to have been a catalyst, there is more to it than simply that.

"There is a direct connection between the Trump campaign and the fact that we here in Charlottesville were trying to face up to our past," Schmidt said, adding that Trump's rhetoric was "whipping up" bad actors.

On Charlottesville's history, Schmidt explained what may have made it a "petri dish" for white supremacists, in part, to select it as a gathering place.

She explained that it was not just that UVA was the alma mater of some rally organizers, but how the study of eugenics at the university led to the "one drop rule," a former classification that any individual with a single ancestor of Black ancestry was considered Black for social and legal purposes.

Charlottesville's public schools were also among the last to integrate in the country.

"It's just amazing the history of white supremacy we have here and the national impact — so in some sense it was like coming full circle," Schmidt said. "Charlottesville and UVA had been a leader in some of this stuff and sort of injecting it into the national blood strain."

Yet, the multiple events that transpired over the summer of 2017 catapulted Charlottesville into a national spotlight and caught the attention of Biden.

In the aftermath of the Aug. 12 rally, Trump went on to say that there were "[very fine people on both sides](#)" — cementing Biden's inspiration to seek the presidency.

"In that moment I knew the threat to our nation was unlike anything I'd ever seen in my lifetime" Biden

In that moment, I knew the threat to our nation was unlike anything I'd ever seen in my lifetime," Biden said in his campaign launch video.

For Schmidt, however, events like the rally or other acts of racist violence should not be unanticipated.



University of Virginia professor Jalane Schmidt and Jefferson School African American Heritage Center Executive Director Andrea Douglas lead an Aug. 9, 2019, walking tour with historical contextualization of various monuments throughout Court Square and at Market Street Park in downtown Charlottesville.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods/Charlottesville Tomorrow

"It shouldn't be surprising. A lot of the white residents here in Charlottesville, they were so shocked," Schmidt explained.

She added that Biden evoking Charlottesville is not surprising, either, and said this city has more to offer as a learning moment beyond the events that transpired three years ago.

"We can offer 'what does it mean for a community to look honestly at its past and how the past is affecting the present?'" Schmidt said. "We've done a lot here in terms of community consultation. Our civic engagement is at a very high level."

## Forging equitable paths

Charlottesville City Councilor Sena Magill understands how an event like Unite the Right can inspire a campaign because it inspired hers. After her husband was injured during the rally — resulting in a damaged carotid artery and subsequent stroke — the former social worker

realized she wanted to be involved in local government.

Now serving as vice mayor, she noted how equity has been a throughline of council conversations and large focus for the city's mayor in particular.

"Mayor [Nikuyah] Walker brings equity into every conversation. While that can be uncomfortable, it's necessary," Magill said.

Magill hopes that a Biden/Harris administration will do the same.

According to Biden's Virginia communications director, Renzo Olivari, Biden got into the race "because he saw the Charlottesville attack as a defining moment in the history of our country."

"Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have laid out a comprehensive policy agenda to address issues that contributed to the Charlottesville attack and begin to heal our nation after four years of President Trump," Olivari said in an email. "Joe and Kamala will fight anti-semitism and white supremacy and work to close racial equity gaps in our economy, education, and health care systems — making sure this pandemic and its aftermath no longer disproportionately affect communities of color."

As the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted racial and socioeconomic disparities, part of Biden's policy agenda is aimed at "[advancing racial equity across the American economy](#)" through reforming opportunity zones, spurring public-private investment through a small business opportunity plan, and a housing plan focused on affordability and homeownership, among other initiatives.

In more local collaborative efforts, the city of Charlottesville, Albemarle County and UVA recently met virtually to discuss a memorandum of understanding aimed at enhancing communication and collaboration regarding equity.

"Pretty much every policy has previously come from a non-equitable lens and we didn't realize it," Magill explained. "Even those of us who want equity, haven't realized how off we have been and how off the system has been."

system has been.

As such, the city's latest efforts to revise its Comprehensive Plan also will include an affordable housing strategy.

Meanwhile, housing policy emerged as a talking point in the presidential elections as the president promised to keep low-income housing out of suburban neighborhoods.

Trump, along with Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson, [penned an opinion piece](#) in the Wall Street Journal over the summer reiterating that point.

More locally, a February [report by the Charlottesville Low-Income Housing Coalition](#) highlighted the city's historical use of racial covenants and the impact that zoning has had on homeownership and affordability. It referenced the 2018 Orange Dot Report, which also found disparities in income for white Charlottesville residents and some of its Black residents.

"In Charlottesville, the fight to preserve affordable housing intertwines deeply with the pursuit of racial justice," the CLIHC report reads. "After August 12, 2017, in which our commitment to racial justice and the safety of our Black residents came under a national spotlight, it became even clearer that we must go further than debates about monuments and historical apologies."

According to Biden's website, his [plan involves](#):

- Ending redlining and other discriminatory or unfair practices in the housing market
- Providing financial assistance to help people buy or rent — including down payment assistance through refundable and advanceable credit and fully funding rental assistance
- Investing in energy efficient homes
- Pursuing an approach to end homelessness

Another option, Magill suggests, would be the establishment of a federal land trust aimed at creating more affordable housing.

"Let's take a hard look at HUD and say, 'We're not just sheltering people, we're homing people,'" Magill explained. "Let's look into how we can provide a program like a land trust that you can build a house on top of to make it permanently affordable so that people can actually move from public housing to homeownership. We can start breaking this generational poverty."

Magill suggested that if Biden were to speak with local elected officials, he could gain some insight into what has worked for Charlottesville and what federal support could help accomplish local initiatives around the country.

"Come talk to us. We are still trying to figure things out, and we know government can be a slow process. But find out what our roadblocks have been," Magill said. "As we are making changes, what we find here may be pertinent to lots of other places as well."

Meanwhile founding member of Black Lives Matter Charlottesville Don Gathers wants Biden to hear from survivors of the rally along with advocates and activists for their insights and experiences "doing the work."

Gathers is also the [victim of online threats from a white supremacist](#) —part of the reason his 2019 candidacy for Charlottesville's city council was cut short. The Florida resident who had targeted Gathers online has since been sentenced to three years in prison.

Though Gathers initially hoped that Biden would never visit Charlottesville during his campaign—concerned that Biden had "used [Charlottesville] as a prop to launch his platform"— he now hopes that he will come after all.

"I would love nothing more than a town hall where he can hear people who have been doing the work," Gathers said.

# Police reform and how Virginia is voting



Credit: Mike Kropf / Charlottesville Tomorrow

Police reform emerged as a legislative priority for the General Assembly when Gov. Ralph Northam called legislators back to session for budget work over the summer. As the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others inspired a new wave of nationwide demonstrations, it — paired with a Democrat majority in the House of Delegates and state Senate chambers — inspired policies aimed at altering how policing operates.

This week, Northam signed a variety of police reform bills that include a ban on no-knock warrants limiting the use of chokeholds, mandating additional crisis response training and legislation that grants localities stronger police civilian review boards.

In particular, Gathers is pleased with the bill that grants police civilian review boards the power to investigate the conduct of police officers and make disciplinary recommendations.

The bill, in part, was inspired by localities like Charlottesville within the state that have created such boards or panels. Charlottesville was among the first few localities in Virginia to establish civilian oversight of police with a resolution passed in December of 2017.

Gathers said the passed legislation puts “some real teeth” into review boards.

Meanwhile, as Election Day approaches, [over 2 million Virginians have already voted](#) for Biden or Trump along with a slew of congressional candidates and the U.S. Senate.

State Del. Sally Hudson, D-Charlottesville, said that the state has taken a national lead on an equitable voting process.

“Democrats believe that democracy works better when more people participate,” Hudson said. “So our broad agenda has been about trying to make it easier for people to exercise their right to vote.”

Hudson noted the [longer and varied process to vote](#) this year that was implemented by the General Assembly as something Biden and Harris — if elected — could spearhead for future elections.

“All of the laws that we passed to expand ballot access in Virginia and roll back decades of voter suppression measures is showing right now, and Virginia is one of the leading states in the country on early voting turnout,” Hudson said. “I mean, you look at the crazy long lines around the country where

people have only had a week or two of early voting, and Virginia had 45 days. That's because of the Democratic majority in Richmond."

Virginia state elections have experienced a "Blue Wave" since the start of the Trump presidency; the 2018 midterms yielded a democratic majority in the U.S. House. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and a summer of organizing around racial justice, Democrats are hoping to flip the Senate and also take back the White House.

"We've got a moment in history here where we can make a lot of good. I think we are at a tilting point," Magill said. "I truly hope that, if Biden and Harris win, that they will use this to bring some real change forward and actually look at equity. It might mean they serve one term, but don't be scared of that."



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# Why state legislators are divided over support of constitutional amendment to create redistricting commission



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Virginia's General Assembly Building in Richmond.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods / Charlottesville Tomorrow

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Despite years of lobbying for redistricting reform achieving bipartisan support, the fruit of that labor is tasting sour for some Democratic lawmakers and longtime advocates.

With the passage of a constitutional amendment that could create a redistricting commission now out of their hands and onto ballots this year, some legislators are urging their constituents to vote no on

The first of two constitutional amendments on state ballots this year would establish a nonpartisan redistricting commission composed of eight legislators from both major political parties and eight appointed citizens from both parties as well. However, support for the proposal has waned as some Democratic legislators now object to legislators being involved in the commission and say it isn't nonpartisan enough.

## An opposition campaign

The hashtag [#VoteNoOn1](#) circulating on social media in recent months is part of a campaign launched by legislators from the FairDistricts political action committee created this summer. The group assembled to educate voters around the state on why they say the amendment is flawed and to dissuade their constituents from voting it into law.

Charlottesville resident and former chair of OneVirginia2021, Linda Perriello, now supports FairDistricts. After years of advocacy for redistricting reform, she has decided that she will now vote against the proposed constitutional amendment.

"Gerrymandering was neither mentioned nor specifically prohibited and the 'independent' commission drawing the maps would be composed of 50% politicians, who in turn would have significant power to select the remaining 50% of members," Perriello said.

Though the half of the commission that would be composed of legislators do not directly appoint the citizen half, they will provide lists of recommendations to a committee of retired judges that will make the appointments. Perriello and others say this is still too much influence from legislators.

Meanwhile, the general push for redistricting reform aims to prevent legislative control over the drawing of district maps. Presently, the General Assembly is responsible for their creation based on census data every decade. In a previously Republican-controlled legislature, the push for redistricting has been a component of many Democratic lawmaker's campaigns.

## Good enough reform for now?

At the helm of lobbying for the amendment to pass is Brian Cannon, executive director of OneVirginia2021. The organization's offshoot political action committee, FairMaps Virginia, has dedicated time to advocacy in favor of the amendment — using bipartisan fundraising, which Democrats worry about the inclusion of some [out-of-state](#) donors who have also donated to Republicans.

Still, Cannon said redistricting efforts need to be bipartisan to be effective. As a registered Democrat with legislators from his party who have lobbied with his organization for years, he is disappointed but not surprised that some legislators have taken issue with the proposed commission's current form.

"I'm a Democrat. It's not surprising to see the party in power start to oppose reform because it happens everywhere. It just sucks that it's my party," Cannon said.

With an even-party split of legislators and citizen members — along with the chairperson of the commission to be a citizen member — any map drawn by the proposed commission would need to pass by six of the eight legislators and six of the eight citizen members. Additionally a supermajority vote is needed from three of the four senators and three of the four delegates on the commission. Meetings and records from the commission would also be public. Cannon said this design aims to be as nonpartisan and transparent as possible.

However, those who now dissent say it's the evolution of the redistricting commission makeup that snags

However, those who now dissent say it's the evolution of the redistricting commission makeup that spurs their lack of support for its current form. There are also concerns that if the commission fails to produce a map, the state's Supreme Court may favor republicans, as some current judges were appointed during the GOP's majority.

An earlier proposal for a redistricting commission would have been composed from a pool of citizens who applied for the commission, rather than from lists of recommendations by legislators. Language of the text also included criteria that districts "should not be drawn to abridge or deny the ability of substantial racial or ethnic minority communities to elect representatives of their choice."

Del. Sally Hudson, D-Charlottesville, said that while she supports the previous amendment draft from before her time in the state legislature, she also supports the existing amendment, for now.

Noting the years in the making to get Virginia to this point, Hudson feels passing the current amendment is a path towards achieving true nonpartisan redistricting.

"I desperately want the stronger amendment we all deserve, and I think the path there runs through this amendment," Hudson said.

Still, Hudson acknowledges the frustrations of advocates who are dissatisfied with the state's latest redistricting attempt.

Hudson thanks long-term advocates who have elevated discussions on gerrymandering to mainstream conversation.

"I understand their frustration — particularly the people who have been in it for the longest haul because they know that the General Assembly is settling for partial progress."

That partial progress, she said, can become full progress. As a newer delegate, she noted the long journey to get this amendment on the ballot and that passing this plan even with some Democrats on record objecting will help keep the momentum going.

Republican state Sen. Bryce Reeves — whose district blankets Fredericksburg and Culpeper County but touches a part of Charlottesville — noted how politically purple his constituency is. Calling the current amendment a "good compromise," he understands it can't please everyone.

"It's a great step, I think, in getting to a more bipartisan level playing field where members [of the General Assembly] aren't drawing their districts. I've been in the majority and minority in the last 10 years," he said of his political party within the state legislature. "We need to figure out a system. Is this one perfect? No, but it's better than what we have now."

Reeves noted the temptation every legislator faces when it comes to drawing districts and believes the amendment will help end lines being drawn based on voter's party affiliations.

"I think, with this deal, you're going to see a lot more districts drawn to where they're more competitive," Reeves said.



A yard sign from OneVirginia2021 in Charlottesville.

Credit: Giles Morris / Charlottesville Tomorrow

In Reeves' latest election, he [defeated Democratic candidate Amy Laufer by just three points](#). Noting the current competitiveness of his district, he supports the amendment.

If Amendment No. 1 is not voted into law by Virginians this year, the General Assembly — which currently has Democratic majority — will retain the responsibility to draw maps.

Establishing an independent commission that some say would be better will take time, and in the meantime, advocates say they will pressure the majority to draw the next maps as fairly as possible.

Senior advisor to FairDistricts Trevor Southerland points to new state law that creates criteria that will be more fair and eliminate gerrymandering.

Del. Marcia “Cia” Price sponsored [House Bill 1255](#) in the House, and Sen. Jennifer McClellan sponsored identical legislation in the Senate. Both are members of the Legislative Black Caucus, which has criticized the lack of protection for racial and ethnic minorities in the language of Amendment No. 1.

The bill outlines criteria to avoid political, racial, and prison gerrymandering — the latter of which refers to the process of counting incarcerated individuals in census population data of jurisdictions where they may not live and legally don't yet have their rights restored to vote.

Southerland said that if Amendment No.1 fails and “redistricting goes to the General Assembly, it would not be redistricting as we know it due to HB 1255. From there, we would then continue our mission to pass a nonpartisan and independent commission so that voters can choose their politicians, not the other way around.”

The legislature can further write and pass a statute that would create and pass a commission that excludes legislators from being on it and includes the protections outlined in HB1255.

“The problem isn't that there would be gerrymandering in 2021. That's not the problem — this assumption that the Democrats will gerrymander — there's already a law on the books that said they can't

gerrymander,” Perriello said. “The problem is that [HB1255] is a statute, and the next year, you could change the majority and change it over. That’s why you want things in the constitution.”

Without the language of legislation like HB1255 in place in a constitutional amendment, it could be appealed by a future General Assembly.

Anna Scholl, executive director of advocacy organization Progress Virginia, said that the state’s process to amend its constitution has to originate in the legislature and pass two consecutive sessions with an election in between — as the efforts to place this amendment on the constitution have already achieved.

The next opportunity to craft a revised redistricting commission, if this one is rejected by Virginians, would be in January 2021, and statewide elections will happen that November. The proposal then would need to pass again in 2022 before landing on ballots in the fall of that year.

If this current commission is not voted into law, the next proposed commission, if passed, would not be drawing state and congressional voting maps until after the 2030 census.

For now, the criteria outlined in HB1255 and SB717 will apply regardless of who draws the maps in 2021 — be it the amendment passes and the commission is drawing the maps, or it fails and defaults to the General Assembly.

## In the hands of voters

While some legislators and advocates are asking voters to defer the current proposal and place districts in the hands of the General Assembly for another decade, recent polling shows a margin of those who are still undecided.

A new poll from Christopher Newport University’s Judy Ford Wason Center for Public Policy shows a break in support of the amendment between legislators and their constituents as well — with 48% in favor, 28% opposing it and 24% of voters polled undecided.

“What’s interesting is that the party leadership in the House [of Delegates] on both sides is in a different position than their members,” explained Quentin Kidd, director of the policy center. “Democratic leaders oppose the amendment, but Democratic voters largely support it. Conversely, Republican leaders support it, but Republican voters largely oppose it.”

Kidd surmised that it could be that the result of the efforts for redistricting reform have been so long in the making.

“I think it’s because for a decade the party leaders had different positions — and those positions sunk into their bases — and once control of the House changed, the incentive structure of the two sides changed,” he explained.

While some see the current amendment as partial progress and a path to better redistricting reform, others fear it’s not enough and could be a roadblock. Still, the legislative body placed the next vote in the hands of Virginians.

“Regardless of how you feel about this amendment, it is so important for people to know what the two sides feel. Then they should absolutely make their own informed decision,” Perriello said. “They’re not going to be able to make an informed decision if they don’t know the facts on either side.”

If approved, the amendment would be in Article II, Section 6 and Article II, Section 6-A of the Virginia Constitution. The full text of the amendment can be found [here](#).