

VIRGINIA HOUSE OF DELEGATES

Overview

Virginia's House of Delegates (HoD) is divided into 100 districts, each representing an average of 80,010 residents. Members are elected to two-year terms with no term limits; due to Virginia's off-year elections, all 100 seats will be up for re-election on November 7th, 2017. Currently, Republicans hold 66 seats in the HoD, while Democrats hold 34. This election has gained much scrutiny as a test of the resistance against Donald Trump and the Republican Party. While flipping control of the HoD appears unlikely, the potential for major gains is present - as is the potential to rebuild in rural areas, setting the stage for a flip in 2019.

Approach to Analyzing Districts

Fig. 1 shows the current HoD district map by party. The map closely follows national trends: Democratic strongholds are present in urban Northern Virginia, and in major cities such as Richmond, Norfolk, Roanoke, and Charlottesville. Republicans dominate the rural southwest and northeast of the state. The main 'potential pick-up' districts are found in the suburbs and exurbs of the aforementioned major cities, but there are also strong chances in Districts 12 (includes the college towns of Blacksburg and Radford) and 100 (the Eastern Shore, including parts of Norfolk and Virginia Beach).

It should be noted that while Virginia has become a blue state on the national level, this doesn't necessarily translate to state-level Democratic gains. As Fig. 2 (courtesy of Daily Kos) shows, there were 19 HoD districts that voted for Hillary Clinton, but elected a Republican Delegate. No districts voted for Trump and elected a Democratic delegate. This implies that voters in Virginia have, in most cases, correctly seen the dangers posed by Trump, but still feel an affinity for Republicans at the state level. (It could also be inertia, as Democrats haven't controlled the HoD since 1997). Local issues, rather than national ones, will be paramount, especially when trying to defeat incumbents. More optimistically, as the HoD vote took place a full year before the Presidential vote, observers may interpret the 17 districts that voted for Republicans and then voted for Clinton as being prime pick-up opportunities. I will admit, however, to being somewhat of a pessimist.

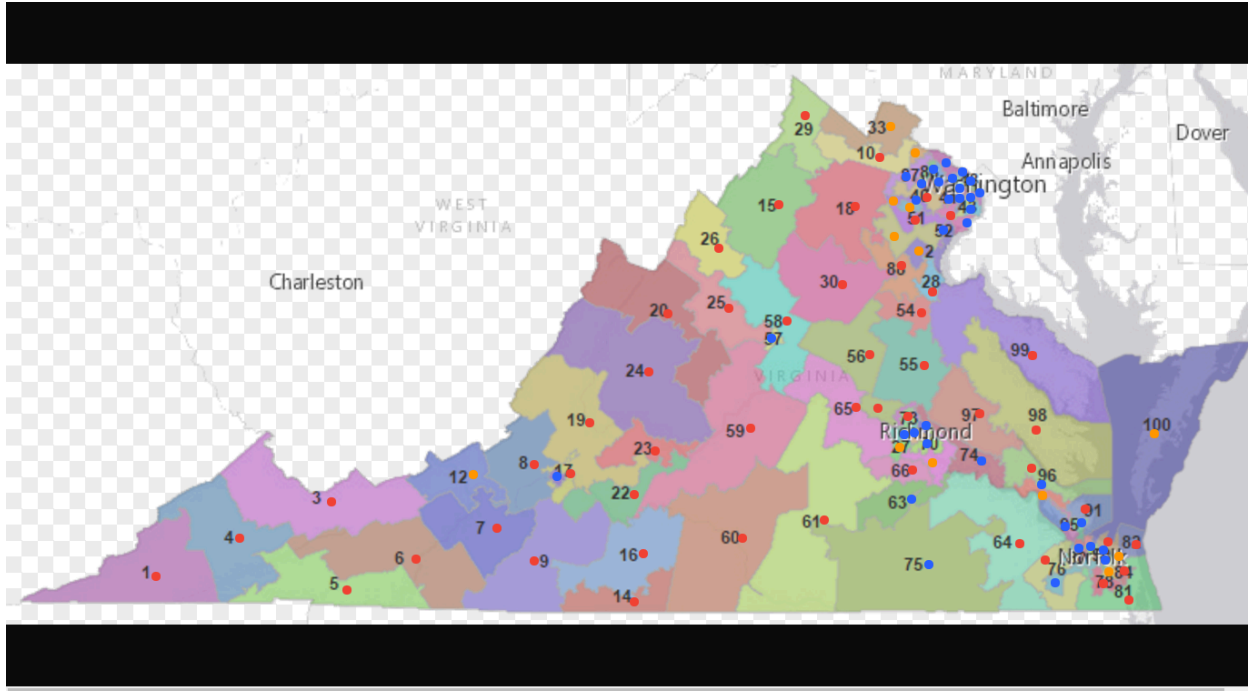


Fig. 1. Partisan control of Virginia's 100 HoD districts. Red dots represent Republican control, blue dots represent Democratic control, and orange dots represent Republicans who won <60% in 2015.

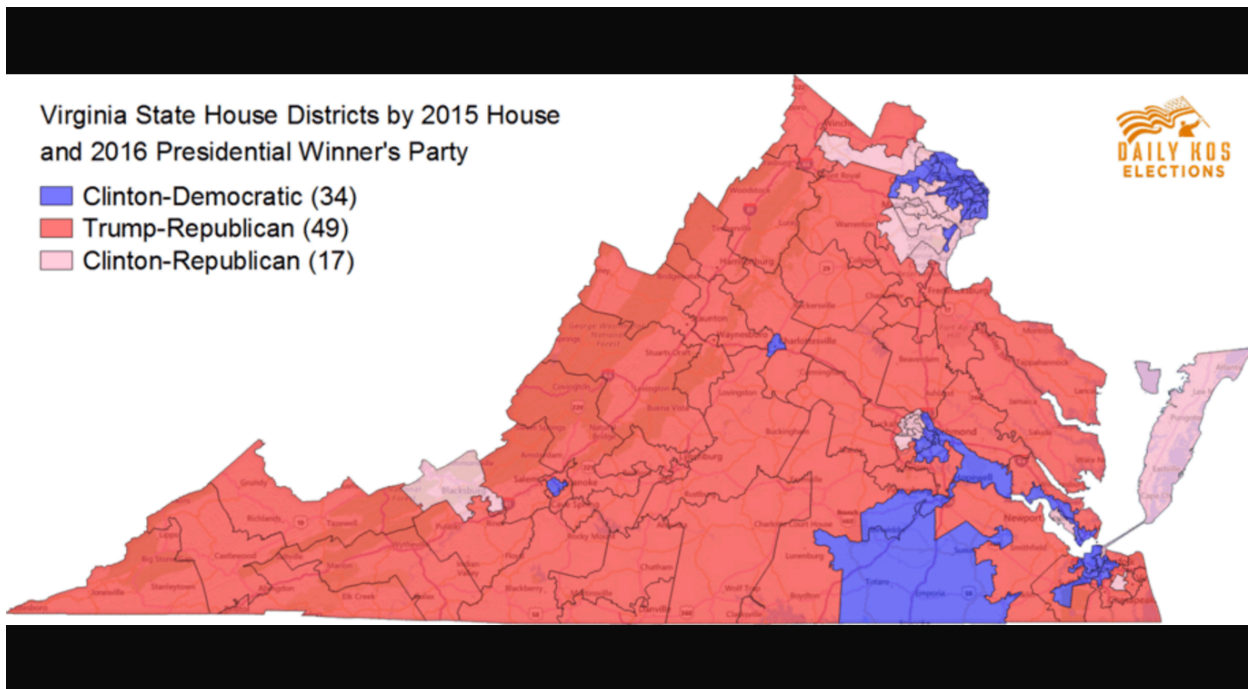


Fig. 2. Presidential (2016) and state-level (2015) vote in Virginia's 100 HoD districts.

“Don’t Call it a Comeback...”

One consistently frustrating theme when previewing state elections has been the number of uncontested races by the Democrats. In 2015, out of 100 races, there were 43 races with no Democratic candidate, vs. 24 races with no Republican candidate. No wonder things got as bad as they did - we simply surrendered almost half of the House to the Republicans!

But things are changing rapidly. Much has been made of better Democratic recruitment, and it shows already. In 2017, we’re only leaving 12 seats uncontested! We’ve actually out-recruited the GOP, who are leaving 27 seats uncontested. This alone improves our odds for 2018.

I should also point out that most of the districts we abandoned in 2015 were in the rural southwest. This part of Virginia was always Republican, but it swung very hard to Trump in 2016 (counties averaged about 10% more support for Trump than for Romney in 2012). And a large part of that was the lack of Democratic presence. It was too easy to claim that Democrats simply didn’t care. With candidates in most districts in the southwest, plus Gubernatorial candidate Ralph Northam visiting a field hospital in Wise and explaining the need to expand Medicaid, this perception can be shattered. A swing to the left in 2017 is unlikely for this particular area, but it could be possible in the future by building on this year’s renewed efforts.

Prospects for 2017

While projecting a final number of seats is difficult, it’s possible to estimate a likely range of seats we could win.

First of all, we are guaranteed 22 seats in which we are running an uncontested candidate. In addition, there are five races in which victory is very likely because we’re facing third-party or independent opponents with little chance of success (Districts 53, 69, 74, 77, and 89). From here, it’s a matter of how individual races break down.

I’ve identified 13 races which I’d consider “potential pick-up” seats because the Republican won in 2015 with under 60% of the vote, and the general attitude of the country is trending more Democratic right now (this could be particularly true in Virginia after the tragedy in Charlottesville). In fairness, however, there are five races which we won by similarly low margins. In the worst-case scenario, we could win few of these close races, and lose a few of our closely-held seats, leaving us in the low thirties in seats. In a more optimistic scenario, the close Democratic races hold, while many narrow Republican races flip. Supposing half do (7), we’d be at 41 seats, enough to be a viable minority party. I would say that 41 seats is a conservative goal for this election. More are certainly possible, but massive shifts rarely happen...although if any race could have a massive shift, this would be it.

Of course, it’s possible that everything goes perfectly, and we get a few surprises. For example, Districts 51, 67 and 84 were all within a 60-40 margin in 2013, but we inexplicably chose not to run candidates in any of them in 2015. All three districts have Democratic candidates in 2017. Also, Districts 28 and 64 will lose their Republican incumbents, leaving a slim possibility open

for us to flip them. Finally, there's potential for vote splitting in some three-or-more-way races with Libertarian and Independent candidates, such as Districts 20, 59, 73, 88, and 94. While I doubt this would happen, if absolutely everything went right - we won all 13 potential pick-up races, defended our own seats, and won the ten districts I just mentioned with unusual circumstances, we'd be looking at 57 seats and control of the HoD. This scenario is of course unlikely, but it should inspire us to strive for great things this year!

I'll split the difference and say that we should aim to pick up ten seats, leaving us down 44-56 in the HoD, and in position to flip control with a strong 2019.

Potential pick-ups for 2017

Focusing in a bit closer on the races we narrowly lost in 2015:

- Southwest (District 12): This particular district is home to Virginia Tech and Radford Universities. These colleges could be a place to register young, mostly liberal voters. However, in an effort to reach beyond our traditional base, promoting the Medicaid expansion and better healthcare will be important to small-town and rural voters. A respect for coal will be important here.
- Richmond area (District 27): Suburban district that's 66% white and 21.5% black. In this district, a pro-healthcare and education platform will appeal to many. Democratic candidate Larry Barnett is a counselor with a Master's degree who has chosen to make mental health and education centerpieces of his campaign.
- Newport News (District 94): A middle-class district who will probably also respond to a pro-health, pro-education message.
- Eastern Shore (District 100): This district was once Democratic, and could swing back. Candidate Willie Randall is a former Army Major, and former director of the Eastern Shore United Way and Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce.
- Northern Virginia (other orange districts): These districts are the sort which Democrats have nearly broken through in recently; mostly suburban with some rural areas. Replicating successful campaigns from nearby districts will help. Many of these target districts voted for Clinton but backed Republicans at the state level, so resist the temptation to make the race about national issues. Focus on what the community wants and needs.