

Losing the Virginia's governor's race may help to trigger a shift towards the center for the Republican party.

On the 5th of November, Virginia goes to the polls to elect a new governor. Victory now seems almost certain for the Democratic candidate Terry McAuliffe, who holds a significant polling lead over his Republican rival, Ken Cuccinelli. Samuel Blyth argues that this likely election outcome, in what had previously been a state with Republican leanings, illustrates the importance of the demographic changes currently underway in America that are likely to leave the Republican party increasingly out of touch with mainstream voters. A heavy defeat for Cuccinelli may be enough of a wakeup call for the GOP for it to begin a move back towards the political centre.

With less than a month to go before the Virginia gubernatorial election, there appears to have been a decisive shift toward Democratic candidate Terry McAuliffe. [Polling](#) conducted on behalf of the Politico website shows that voters are now backing McAuliffe 44 to 35 against Republican hopeful and current state Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli.

The current projections are just the most recent setback for Cuccinelli who has seen his Democratic rival take advantage of frustration among Virginians at current Governor Bob McDonnell and his scandal hit administration – McDonnell and his wife have been under federal investigation for taking gifts from a large donor. This has no doubt rubbed off on Cuccinelli although he has been cleared of any wrongdoing.

Whilst factors such as the above have led to GOP fatigue among voters, there are wider changes happening among Virginia's demographic which suggest any Republican would have been fighting a lost cause. As the [New York Times](#), among others has noted, this scandal has happened to coincide with a gradual yet increasing change in the electoral make-up of the state. After decades of being a 'red' state, demographic changes have meant that President Obama has carried the state in the last two presidential elections. This trend has continued during the 2013 gubernatorial contest. McAuliffe



Terry McAuliffe By Miller Center [CC-BY-2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

has led in the majority of polls throughout the electoral contest. This lead has been to this point consistent if small suggesting a hardening of voter intent toward Democratic candidates across the state.

Virginia is just one example across the United States where demographic changes have led to previous strong or leaning Republican states coming into play. Much has been written about the theoretical changes taking place especially in the Obama era and the rapidly approaching post-Obama world. However, this theory is now becoming a reality across the country. For Virginia read Colorado, Nevada and Florida among others. Even Texas at some point in the not too distant future could turn blue, especially if the Hispanic vote really fires up.

Nationally, this creates a dilemma for the Republicans, where they are now having to defend instead of attack. It also means that they will have to reconsider the party's policy positioning across a range of social and economic

issues in order to stay relevant. This is why, to the outside observer, the race in Virginia is interesting. It could be exactly what the GOP needs in order to fully digest how out of touch they have become with the mainstream American voter.

Taken in this light, the Republicans are in a similar position that that of the Conservative Party in the UK back in the 2000s. The loss of consecutive national elections taken together with blow after blow at regional and local level meant that the leadership finally woke up to the fact that the party needed wholesale change – at least at a superficial level.

Of course, the major difference between the Conservative Party in the UK and the Republicans in the United States is that the Republicans have power at a Congressional level. Unfortunately, instead of acting in the public interest, rampant Tea Partyism and an unquenchable desire to spite President Obama has damaged the Republican brand to a significant extent. Indeed, the recent government shutdown has turned into a public relations nightmare for the GOP leadership with [polling](#) revealing that it is the Republican caucus and not the White House that is blamed for the mess that engulfs Washington. Even the most recent offer of a six week salvation is seen as little more than a political stunt designed to force the Obama administration into a corner.

For their part, the GOP leadership is likely to understand this and that the loss of the Virginia election could be just the spur they need to drag the rest of the party with them. Indeed, some senior figures within the party have already begun to distance themselves from the more right-wing members of the caucus. A heavy defeat in Virginia could see a decisive shift to a more central policy plateau in order to offset the gains made by Democrats in states that have seen similar demographic shifts. Looking beyond November, a defeat in the polls could open the way for a centralist candidate for 2016 to emerge who can put those traditional red states firmly back in the Republican column. As such, while Democrats may rejoice at winning in Virginia they would be unwise just yet to assume that this is the new political reality.

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