

Trading Left Jobs

As Northern Virginia's clout in statewide politics increases, the Old Dominion is losing its Southern drawl.

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Two issues have defined Virginia's Senate election: insinuations by Democrats that Republican incumbent George Allen is racist, and charges by Republicans that Democratic challenger Jim Webb is sexist. Both assaults come not from the right but from the left—an unexpected development in a red state that was once part of the Confederacy.

Traditionally liberal social issues have managed to grab center stage because of the demographic transformation of the suburban-exurban collar surrounding the nation's capital. Virginia's portion of this terrain, covering the southwest perimeter of the Greater Washington metropolitan area, has become the single most influential factor shaping Virginia politics. Northern Virginia, which casts more than a quarter of the state's votes, was crucial to the Democratic gubernatorial victories of Mark Warner in 2001 and Tim Kaine in 2005.

"Virginia has become more and more like a Southern state with New Jersey and Connecticut suburbs attached to it," observes Robert Lang, founding director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. "Who would have guessed candidates would be answering questions from the left and going through these kinds of PC [politically correct] rituals? Northern Virginia is incrementally making it less of a red state," Lang said.

Northern Virginia, which is growing much faster than the state as a whole, is the southern extremity of an urbanized Atlantic Coast running all the way north to Boston, a coastline that has become reliably Democratic. Northern Virginia gained some 270,000 residents from 2000 to 2005; many of the newcomers work in the region's information industries. Hispanics and Asian-Americans have flocked to the area in recent years. According to 2005 census data, more than 30 percent of the adults in Northern Virginia's two largest counties, Fairfax and Arlington, speak a language other than English at home.

Qian Cai, director of demographics at the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center, reported recently that "10 localities in Virginia grew by more than 10,000 in the last five years," and that half of them are in Northern Virginia. "Loudoun County heads the list with a phenomenal population increase of 82,700—up 49 percent, followed by Prince William County (an increase of 74,500), and Fairfax County, the state's largest jurisdiction, with 52,400 new residents. Nearby Stafford and

Spotsylvania counties each gained close to 25,000," Cai wrote. In addition, Northern Virginia stands apart from the rest of the state in its two dominant sources of employment: high tech and public administration (government, trade associations, lobbying). In every other region, manufacturing employment exceeds high tech; in Northern Virginia, the technology sector employs four times as many workers as does manufacturing, according to the Weldon Center.

The voters of Northern Virginia have become especially important in gubernatorial elections, enabling Democrats to use such meat-and-potatoes issues as transportation and education to trump Republicans' wedge issues, such as the death penalty and abortion. University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato takes the analysis a step further: "Virginia is no longer a Southern state; it's a Middle Atlantic state. In a couple of presidential cycles, Virginia will be purple."

Northern Virginia's changing political allegiance is clear in gubernatorial contests. In 1997, when Republican James Gilmore won, he carried Fairfax County with 53 percent, Loudoun with 60 percent, and Prince William with 63 percent. Just eight years later, Democrat Kaine carried all three—winning Fairfax with 60 percent of the vote, Loudoun with 52 percent, and Prince William with 50 percent. In between those two elections, Democrat Warner won while carrying Fairfax with 55 percent but losing Loudoun with 46 percent and Prince William with 47 percent.

Just the Facts

- Northern Virginia is the southern extremity of an urbanized Atlantic Coast running all the way north to Boston.
- One-quarter of the state's votes are cast in Northern Virginia.
- Today, the 11 states of the Old Confederacy send just four Democrats to the Senate, down from 20 in 1964.

The Allen-Webb race will test whether Northern Virginia can produce a statewide Democratic victory in a federal election. Democrats haven't won a Senate race in Virginia since 1994 and haven't carried the state in a presidential election since 1964. Senate elections tend to be far less about easing traffic congestion and building new schools and much more about national issues that have, at least until recently, proven fertile ground for the Republican Party, especially when voters have focused on national security and terrorism.

The ranks of the Senate's Southern Democrats have dwindled. Today, the 11 states of the Old Confederacy have just four Democrats in the Senate. In contrast, when landmark civil-rights legislation passed in 1964, the Senate had 20 Southern Democrats. It's not surprising, then, that of the eight most competitive Senate races this year, the Democrats' prospects look weakest in Tennessee and Virginia. And the Virginia race is probably the steepest climb for Democrats. An October 10–12 *Washington Post* poll indicated that Webb had pulled statistically even with Allen; the incumbent's 2-point advantage was less than the margin of error. But across all recent public polling, Allen runs an average of 5 points ahead, according to *Pollster.com*.

Stumbling out of the Starting Gate

By most estimations, the Virginia race would never have become a real contest if not for George Allen's missteps—most famously, his videotaped reference to a Webb aide as “macaca.” The macaca controversy, and allegations that Allen, while in college, had routinely used a racial epithet to describe African-Americans, strengthened Webb's prospects in much of the state, especially in Northern Virginia. But Webb supporters privately acknowledge that the Democrat's lack of cash prevented him from effectively capitalizing on Allen's vulnerability while the Republican's fumbling on racial, religious, and ethnic issues was dominating local and national news.

Peter Brodnitz, Webb's pollster, noted that Allen “shot himself in both feet and then in the head.” But instead of burying its opponent, the Webb campaign allowed Allen time not only to regain his footing but also to retake the offensive. Webb, who began the contest as a virtual unknown in the state, has been forced to invest most heavily in what Brodnitz describes as “defensive” ads responding to Allen's attacks on two fronts: taxes and Webb's past opposition to allowing women to enroll in U.S. military academies and to serve in combat roles.

“The funny thing about this race is that, in important ways for us, we are not fully up to speed yet,” Brodnitz said, adding that as of October 16, with only 22 days left, the campaign had not yet run television commercials presenting Webb's agenda on such issues as Iraq, income inequality, and vanishing jobs, and it had not invested in a large-buy, full-scale biographical commercial introducing the candidate to voters.

Webb's biography is his crucial selling point: a decorated Vietnam War veteran; a Reagan Democrat who served as secretary of the Navy; a gun-loving Scots-Irish American with deep

family roots in rural Virginia—and, perhaps most important, a renegade who will not be a guaranteed vote for his party's leadership, an ideal image for a Democrat running statewide in Virginia.

The Allen campaign's success in trumping Webb's bio and regaining the initiative came as no surprise to those familiar with Allen's top three strategists, all hardball players who specialize in destroying their adversaries. Chris LaCivita engineered the creation of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, the organization that smeared John Kerry, winner of three Purple Hearts, as a coward in Vietnam. Media consultant Scott Howell won fame for his 2005 gubernatorial campaign ads suggesting that Tim Kaine would commute a death sentence for Adolf Hitler. Dick Wadhams, Allen's manager, described by his last client as “the best pit bull out there,” goes by the motto: “Always get and stay on the offensive. Never let them get ahead of you.”

George Allen, their current client, the son and namesake of the former Redskins and Los Angeles Rams coach, is no slouch himself when it comes to bare-knuckled political fights. At the Virginia Republican Party's 1994 convention, then-Gov. Allen gleefully declared, “My friends—and I say this figuratively—let's enjoy knocking [Democrats'] soft teeth down their whiny throats.”

In unexpected ways, Webb presented the Republican incumbent and his trio of strategists with an ideal target. Despite his considerable achievements, Webb was largely unfamiliar to Virginia voters, and the cash-rich Allen operation was positioned to launch a pre-emptive strike, flooding the airwaves with ads portraying Webb as supportive of same-sex marriage, backed by labor bosses in a right-to-work state, and financed by Hollywood liberals.

As it turned out, though, the Allen offensive got delayed: In the crucial weeks before and after Labor Day, the campaign suffered through a series of setbacks. Instead of flexing their tough-guy muscles, LaCivita, Howell, and Wadhams were stymied by Allen's self-inflicted wounds. Their candidate threw himself on the defensive, over and over again. “We have all been frustrated,” Wadhams told *National Journal* in mid-September.

The Allen camp's problems began at an August 11 rally in rural Breaks, Va., when the senator single-handedly changed the course of the campaign. He pointed to Webb aide S.R. Sidarth, 20, who was videotaping the event, and told the crowd, “This fellow over here with the yellow shirt, macaca or whatever his name is, he's with my opponent.” Smiling directly into the camera, Allen added, “Let's give a welcome to macaca here. Welcome to America, and the real world of Virginia.” Allen later offered an apology. He was forced to repeat it almost everywhere he went, including in debates and appearances on local and national television.

Then, on September 24, *Salon*, a Web-based publication, reported that former associates of Allen accused him of repeatedly using the word “nigger” as a college student and a young adult. In addition, a former friend said that Allen had placed the severed head of a deer in an African-American family's mailbox. Allen, supported by members of his family and a number of former college teammates, adamantly denied both the deer head story and the racial epithet allegations.

ANNUAL EDITIONS

But for seven weeks, the racial-ethnic controversies handcuffed the Allen campaign. “I must tell you that as a strategist, I have never been through anything like this,” Wadhams said.

An unexpected sequence of disclosures concerning Allen’s concealed Jewish ancestry on his mother’s side compounded his difficulties. Allen initially claimed ignorance of his religious heritage, and when he told reporters in mid-September that he had recently learned that his mother was Jewish, he said it had not changed his daily life. Allen mentioned that he “still ate a ham sandwich” that day, and noted that his mother made “great pork chops.”

Seemingly on the ropes, Allen and his aides bounced back with a vengeance. On September 28, just four days after the furor over the *Salon* racial epithet report, the Allen campaign began running a statewide TV ad in which three female graduates of the Naval Academy bitterly criticized Webb for a 1979 *Washingtonian* article in which he wrote, “I have never met a woman, including the dozens of female midshipmen I encountered during my recent semester as a professor at the Naval Academy, whom I would trust to provide those men with combat leadership.” In the article, Webb, an Annapolis graduate, described the academy’s Bancroft Hall, “which houses 4,000 males and 300 females,” as “a horny woman’s dream.”

In the Allen ad, Kathleen Murray, class of 1984, tells viewers that the Webb article “was demoralizing from a perspective that only a woman could understand.” Carolyn Slowikowski, class of 1982, said, “James Webb accused the women of the Naval Academy of being promiscuous,” and Mara Matthes, class of 1982, added, “Mr. Webb’s viewpoints absolutely showed disrespect toward women.”

The commercial, damaging in its own right, was particularly destructive to Webb’s ability to carry Northern Virginia by a large enough margin to compensate for expected losses in other regions of the state. Northern Virginia, according to Virginia Tech’s Lang, has an exceptionally high percentage of working women. In addition, among socially liberal suburban voters, accusations of sexism against Webb mitigated some of the harm done to Allen by charges of racism.

Allen’s ad attacking Webb’s 1979 views on women at the Naval Academy forced the challenger to defend himself with a commercial featuring testimonials from military women. Retired Army Brig. Gen. Clara Adams-Ender tells viewers, “George Allen’s attacks on Jim Webb are a disgrace.” Christine Gromek, U.S. Naval Academy, class of 1984, adds, “Jim Webb broke down barriers, and he changed things as Navy secretary.”

Before Webb could take back the offensive, however, Allen was on the air pushing another line of attack: With pictures of Democratic Sens. John Kerry, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Edward Kennedy on-screen, the announcer says, “There are some people in Washington who think you don’t pay enough taxes, and they all support Jim Webb. Jim Webb wants to raise taxes on married couples and families with children, costing the average Virginia family \$2,000.”

Once again, the Webb campaign was forced to play defense. And, once again, it ran a counter-commercial, this time declaring, “George Allen’s lying again. This time, about Jim Webb. The press calls Allen’s ads ‘political sewage,’ ‘short on honesty.’

Truth is, Jim Webb’s plan cuts taxes for middle-class families and veterans. It’s George Allen who voted to raise taxes on retirement savings, make college more expensive, and give billions in tax cuts to oil companies.”

The problem for Webb, even as both campaigns’ ads flash by on voters’ TV screens, is that he is not well known to Virginia voters. An enigmatic figure who wrote well-received novels after serving in Vietnam, Webb switched to the GOP shortly after Ronald Reagan won election to the White House in 1980. He switched back to challenge Allen.

Although Webb’s advocacy of gun rights, his criticism of some Democratic orthodoxies, and his military credentials provide him with the kind of resume that can help a Democrat running in Virginia, his campaign has gotten very little of this information out to most of the state’s voters. In addition, Webb is by no means a natural politician. Rather than bounding into political gatherings to woo potential supporters, he cautiously holds back. In debates, he has performed adequately but lacks the ease of a politician experienced in that sort of give-and-take. And his positions on issues of economic fairness and other domestic matters were hurriedly stitched together after he entered the contest, late in the season.

In an interview, Webb said that he was drawn back to the Democratic Party while researching the history of Scots-Irish Americans, and especially the views and politics of Andrew Jackson, for his most recent nonfiction book, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*. “I’m like a lot of people. Call them Reagan Democrats. I was sort of looking for the best place to identify. . . . I just decided that the answer would be in the traditional Democratic Party.” Jackson, according to Webb, believed that “you measure the health of a society not at its apex, but at its base.” And by that measure, Webb says, American society is suffering and needs new leadership.

The War Takes a Backseat

Webb’s strong opposition to the war in Iraq was the driving force behind his decision to challenge Allen. The former secretary of the Navy, whose 24-year-old son, Jimmy, is serving in Iraq, was against the war from the start, believing that the invasion would inevitably lead to a quagmire that would weaken the United States. “The invasion of Iraq was a double strategic blunder,” Webb states in a campaign position paper. “First, it was a diversion from, not a response to, the war against international terrorism. Second, it has tied down our military in a costly occupation, fighting an insurgency that has strengthened not only the Shia population of Iraq, but also Iran itself.” According to Webb, Allen, whom he supported in his 2000 Senate race, “has made it clear that, no matter how things are going [in Iraq], he will not question, let alone review and re-examine, the policies of the Bush administration.”

On his Web site, Allen declares: “In Iraq, our troops have done a tremendous job helping Iraqis build a democracy in a formerly oppressive, terrorist-friendly dictatorship. Immediately withdrawing our military from Iraq would be forfeiting to the terrorists, and I disagree strongly with those who suggest that we should leave precipitously.”

Despite Webb's original intention, this contest has focused more on personal character traits and domestic policy than on the war. Webb says that one overarching principle helps him know where to take a stand on such controversial issues as sexual privacy, abortion, and gun ownership: "My belief is that the power of the government stops at the front door unless there is a compelling reason for it to come inside." That belief led him to come down on the side of abortion rights, and to declare that the nation needs "to do better on rights for gays" by, for example, approving civil unions. And, he says, "I am pro-gun. I got my first rifle when I was 8 years old."

On affirmative action, Webb has developed a politically risky position. He argues that because, in his view, affirmative action is meant to remedy wrongs inflicted by slavery, such programs should be restricted to African-Americans and should exclude all other groups, including women. In the case of women, Webb says, "I think that situation [of discrimination against women], whatever inequities were in it, has been resolved."

But though Webb now supports affirmative action for African-Americans, he has been sharply critical of race-based preferences in the past. Virginia's black political community gave him only lukewarm support during the primary. The Allen campaign, seeing an opportunity to capitalize on Webb's problems with black voters—and to try to get beyond its own—has put together a compilation of Webb quotes that includes the following excerpt from an article Webb wrote in the May 22, 2000, *Wall Street Journal*:

"Affirmative action, which originally sought to repair the state-induced damage to blacks from slavery and its aftermath, has within one generation brought about a permeating state-sponsored racism that is as odious as the Jim Crow laws it sought to countermand. A Soviet-style bureaucracy of political commissars now monitors every level of our society to ensure that racial and gender 'diversity' matches preordained models, using the awesome powers of government to make certain that white males are not 'overrepresented' in education, employment, or government contracts."

Although the Allen campaign is spotlighting Webb's misgivings about affirmative action, Wadhams told *The Washington Post* that Allen favors only a very mild, nonintrusive form of affirmative action: He "supports affirmative recruitment, actively seeking out opportunities for minorities. He does not support quotas."

As the contest enters its closing weeks, polls indicate that most voters have already made up their minds. *The Washington Post's* mid-October poll of likely Virginia voters showed the race tied, with just 2 percent undecided. And, ironically, women will likely determine whether Jim Webb gets to have a career in politics. According to detailed analyses by the Webb campaign, the undecided are disproportionately white, churchgoing women—a demographic group that in past elections has supported the Republican Party generally and Allen specifically. So, even though Allen's own blunders put a serious scare into his campaign and his party, the GOP is likely to hold on in the Old Dominion, despite Northern Virginia's growing clout.

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