

## **All Eyes on Virginia**

*\*By Maria L. Fornella*

The November 3rd election for governor in Virginia is making headlines, as Obama rallies for Democratic candidate Creigh Deeds at Old Dominion University this week, in a last- ditch effort to close the gap that separates him from Republican candidate Robert McDonnell.

Taking place in an “off” year, this race is considered a harbinger of next year’s mid-term legislative elections, which in turn are a referendum on the popularity of the President himself. That is why it is being closely monitored by both parties and the media. The so-called “Old Dominion” has occupied a central role in the political history of the country since its early beginnings, through the Civil war and the Civil Rights movement of the 60s. Its state government, with the country’s oldest legislature, has consistently been ranked first in effectiveness among all 50 states. Virginians are politically savvy and their voting trends are considered of national significance. For example, in 1989 Virginia was the first state to elect an African-American as governor. In the last eight years, while still remaining a red state that voted Republican in national elections, it chose two consecutive Democratic governors. In the historical 2009 election, as a reflection of important demographic changes in the age and diversity of its voters, Virginia became a swing state: Barack Obama carried the state, and today Virginia’s two Senate seats are occupied by Democrats.

In spite of its importance as a bellwether of national politics, the contest for Governor this year has been a lackluster race, characterized by two candidates with little or no charisma, one of which had a clear advantage from the beginning. Indeed, for Republican Bob Mc Donnell the race has been easier from the start, since he faced no opposition during the primary season. He has therefore had enormous financial support from his party and has used the national debate on government spending to his advantage, capitalizing on public discontent with the lack of tangible results of Obama’s economic rescue plan on Main Street America. McDonnell has assailed his opponent aggressively as a tax-and-spend Democrat who, if elected, would run the state finances to the ground regardless of the cost to Virginians. Thanks to his party’s financial support he has been able to conduct an overwhelming TV advertising campaign focused on his own and his daughter’s military career (a smart decision in a state with large military bases and an even larger defense establishment), his concern for job creation programs and support for small businesses.

In contrast to his opponent, Democratic candidate Creigh Deeds had to face a tough three-way primary election this past summer, against Terry McAuliffe, a prominent party man who headed Hillary Clinton’s campaign last year, and Brian Moran, a county prosecutor and Virginia House delegate. In spite of running a poor campaign with sparse staff and minimum resources, and of

being outspent by at least one of his opponents (McAuliffe) two-to-one, Deeds, who had trailed in the polls for most of the race, finally won by a surprisingly wide margin (50%-26%-24%).

The current governor race is a re-match of the Attorney General race of 2005, which was very close and McDonnell finally won by a mere 320 votes. Asked about it, Deeds says that he holds no grudge against his opponent. Deeds, a state senator from Bath County with a strong Southern rural accent, is an honest but rather bumbling character, with tousled hair, a disheveled appearance, and a tendency to give muddled answers to questions. In contrast, Mc Donnell, a fit-looking former Army officer and prosecutor with strong ties to the Christian Right leader Pat Robertson, has run an orderly campaign, focusing mainly on issues that affect Virginians such as transportation and taxes, but also on the spending habits of national figures such as House and Senate leaders, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid. Indeed, Deeds has complained in interviews that his campaign has been negatively affected by the spending plans of the Democrats inside the Beltway.

In contrast to McDonnell's more general approach at attacking everything Democratic, Deeds has based his advertising campaign on more personal attacks, mainly aimed at McDonnell's 1989 master thesis in which he expressed ultra-conservative views on women, homosexuals and abortion. This is a tactic that may backfire as people are tired of negative advertising.

In later ads, Deeds has tried to portray his opponent as telling "untruths" and changing his policy position belatedly and dishonestly, only in pursuit of votes (the "flip-flop" strategy). Although still negative, these were more tailored to issues that matter to Virginians. For example, in arguably the most important policy issue the next Governor will face, namely, that of changing the redistricting state laws, McDonnell clearly changed his opinion once he decided to run for governor and now supports reform. 2010 is a Census year, and based on the Census results, state legislatures will engage in the decennial process of re-drawing political borders. In Virginia, the present system is skewed in favor of incumbents. There has been an important movement led by the League of Women Voters to reform the process so that redistricting is carried out by a bipartisan commission and not by the party in power. Deeds supports this reform, as do most Virginians, but McDonnell was against it until this year. Thus, the flip-flop allegation may prove to be a better angle of attack for Deeds than McDonnell's 20-year-old thesis on the role of women in society, although those negative ads have certainly gotten the attention of many young and professional women who will now come out and vote for Deeds.

Nonetheless, Deeds faces an up-hill battle for several reasons. Besides the advantage of an early start in fund-raising and campaigning, the whole Republican Party has rallied around McDonnell, who is perceived as a strong candidate that could initiate a much needed turnaround in the fortunes of the party. He has campaigned with McCain and will campaign with Mitt Romney next week. He is more articulate, better organized and a smoother debater than his opponent, and has known how to capitalize on the public discontent with Washington. He has run on a basic platform of job creation and lower taxes to favor small businesses, and would subsidize the urgently needed transportation projects by the novel idea of selling off state-owned liquor stores to private

owners. (In Virginia, one can only buy hard liquor and spirits at state-owned dispensers called ABC stores, which are closed on Sundays).

In contrast, Deeds, a cerebral policy wonk who does not shy away from intricate ideas and well thought out plans, and who does not speak in sound bites or buzz words, appears less eloquent and not as good a communicator. Although neither is a brilliant debater, during the live debates McDonnell looked more competent, less flustered and less tentative in his responses.

In addition, Deeds has not been able to unite the party behind him. Former Virginia Governor Douglass Wilder, the first African-American to occupy that office in the United States, has refused to endorse Deeds in spite of a plea from Obama to do so. The two men disagree on tax policy and gun control. The Democratic candidate has acknowledged he would raise taxes to pay for the transportation projects, while Wilder denounces his plan as reckless, given the state of the economy. On a totally different issue, they are also at odds. Deeds (perhaps because he represents Bath County, a rural district of Virginia) supports the repeal of a state gun-law that restricts the amounts of guns Virginians can purchase. Wilder, as do most Democrats, would like that law to stand. This kind of contradiction –in favor of higher taxes (a fiscally progressive stance) but against gun control (a conservative position) sums up of the kind of candidate Deeds is and explains why he has not gained the support of all Democrats. Ironically, the Republicans have been hailing Wilder's refusal to endorse Deeds on account of his stand on higher taxes, but they avoid mentioning the gun control issue, on which they would be obliged to concur with Deeds.

On Tuesday October 27th, exactly one week before the election, President Obama held a rally with Deeds at the Constant Center at Old Dominion University, in front of a crowd of 6,000. This represented a last effort by Obama to rescue Deeds by persuading the youth and African Americans to vote next Tuesday. It was only the second time the President campaigned for Deeds: he had done so once at the beginning of the campaign, in Northern Virginia.

Clearly, Obama understands the difficulties his party will face in the 2010 mid-term elections. The man earns his paycheck: this past week alone he has raised money for Democratic congressional candidates in Miami, New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut. He then rallied for incumbent Governor Corzine who faces a tough re-election battle in New Jersey and finally for Deeds in Southeastern Virginia. Some say that by spending so much time on the road doing the bidding for his party, the President loses credibility as an agent of change. But no one should underestimate Obama's capacity to handle many issues at the same time. As his meteoric rise in politics proves, he is methodical, disciplined and always focused on a long-term strategy.

Obama is quite aware that if his party loses seats in the 2010 elections, his own agenda and indeed, his own chances at re-election in 2012 will be in jeopardy. And as an avid student of political history, he knows that since the 1930s there were only two cases in which the sitting President's party did not lose seats in a mid-term election, so the odds are unmistakably against the Democrats. In the case of Virginia's gubernatorial races, a similar phenomenon has been

unfolding: in the last eight consecutive elections, governors have been elected from the party opposite to the one in the White House. To these historical precedents, one must add the state of the economy today, the fact that unemployment is running at 10% and that public opinion is showing high levels of discontent with political parties and politicians in general. (The president is still exempt from this malaise, at least for now, with last week's polls showing his support at 57%). Also, another factor that will weigh in on next year elections is that those independents in traditionally Republican-leaning districts who voted for Democratic candidates in 2006 and 2008 as a result of the anti-Bush backlash may very easily reverse that trend by voting Republican next year.

Very mindful of these challenges, Obama is exerting himself to the utmost to reap at least some early wins that would give new direction to the public mood.

In health care reform he seems to be very close to victory. A win in the gubernatorial races would certainly reinforce that trend and give some positive signals for 2010.

In Virginia, this election will also test the depth of that transformation from red state to swing state. The main trial for Democrats is to get people energized enough to go to the polls next Tuesday. After eight years out of the Governor's mansion in Richmond, this time Republicans are much more attuned to the gubernatorial race than Democrats, and they are also much more enthusiastic about their candidate than Democrats are about Deeds. All eyes are therefore on Virginia. The last Rasmussen Reports taken a few hours after Obama's visit, found McDonnell at 54% to 41% for Deeds, with 4% undecided. Creigh Deeds has run as the underdog before and recovered in time to win. He may still surprise us again, but this time he needs a miracle.

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