

A History of the Virginia Democratic Party, 1965-2015

A Senior Honors Thesis

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I. Introduction

Of all the American states, Virginia can lay claim to the most thorough control by an oligarchy. Political power has been closely held by a small group of leaders who, themselves and their predecessors, have subverted democratic institutions and deprived most Virginians of a voice in their government. The Commonwealth possesses the characteristics more akin to those of England at about the time of the Reform Bill of 1832 than to those of any other state of the present-day South. It is a political museum piece. Yet the little oligarchy that rules Virginia demonstrates a sense of honor, an aversion to open venality, a degree of sensitivity to public opinion, a concern for efficiency in administration, and, so long as it does not cost much, a feeling of social responsibility.

- Southern Politics in State and Nation, V. O. Key, Jr., 1949¹

Thus did V. O. Key, Jr. so famously describe Virginia's political landscape in 1949 in his revolutionary book Southern Politics in State and Nation. At the time of his writing, the Old Dominion was as oligarchic as his writing made it seem. Power lay in the hands of the privileged few, led by Senator Harry F. Byrd, and restrictions upon the electorate were many. In Virginia, elections were essentially won in primaries, rather than on Election Day in November. Turnout was so low at the polls that slightly over one tenth of the adult population over 21, then the voting age, participated in primaries, essentially selecting the next round of elected officials.² The Democratic Party machine of Virginia was among the most disciplined and well-organized in the country. The party's success was aided by the opposition's inability to create a coherent message and find credible candidates. As such, the Democratic Party of Virginia retained control over

¹Key, V. O., and Alexander Heard. Southern Politics in State and Nation. Knoxville: U of Tennessee, 1984. Print, 19.

² Key, Southern Politics in State and Nation, 20.

nearly every aspect of political life in the Commonwealth until the party began to collapse in the late 1960s.

Southern politics over the course of the 20th century have seen some of the most drastic changes in the entire nation. Vast changes in the Southern electorate began in the middle of the century, and have altered the political climate of the South through the present day. Democrats, who once dominated the “Solid” South, now struggled to eke out victories throughout most of the region. The Southern electorate seemingly transformed from a Democratic stronghold to a hotbed of right wing, conservative, Republican politics.

The Southern Democrats’ ability to exclude their opponents, such as black voters, Republicans, and white populists, helped the Democratic oligarchy restrict the electorate. In turn, this allowed for Virginia’s political leaders to resist the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and early 1960s as federal laws, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 forced the South, Virginia included, to make their elections fair and open to the entire electorate. As a direct result, the Democratic coalition throughout much of the South fell apart. Moreover, many white Democrats identified with racial segregation. As laws mandating desegregation arose in the mid to late 1960s, many Democrats in the South found themselves abandoning their party for the quickly emerging new Republican right, led by Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. A champion of states’ rights, which many Southern Democrats understood to be pro-segregation, Goldwater quickly secured support throughout the Deep South. Although Goldwater was defeated in a landslide nationally, the election of 1964 marked the

beginning of a New South, politically speaking. This latest South would lend its support to conservative, Republican candidates who encouraged state autonomy from the federal government.

Yet, this transformation of Southern politics was not solely due to a change in race relations in the South. Important demographics in the South helped facilitate this drastic political realignment throughout the region. In 1920, 32% of the population in the South was black. By 1980, that number had shrunk to 20%.³ Blacks fled the South during these years to settle in the urban North. African-Americans, who tend overwhelmingly since the 1930's to support the Democratic Party, were leaving the South in record numbers, which weakened the Democratic base there in the 1970s. Thus, as part of its support shrunk throughout much of the region, so, too, did the Democrats' ability to attain electoral success in the South.

Additionally, the number of Southern whites born outside of the South increased from 8% in 1950 to 20% by 1980.⁴ This, aside from Northern whites wishing to retire in a warm place, can be attributed to increased militarization and urbanization of the South.⁵ As America entered an era of constant foreign policy concerns, military bases began popping up throughout the South. This caused drastic changes among the electorate there and its political identity. Furthermore, as the Southern economy evolved away from its agrarian roots to encompass trade and industries previously unseen, parts of the electorate

³ Black, Earl, and Merle Black. Politics and Society in the South. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. Print, 13.

⁴ Black, Politics and Society in the South, 17.

⁵ Black, Politics and Society in the South, 19.

began to emerge with different interests.⁶ Larger towns and cities began to appear in the South, decreasing the number of Southerners living in rural areas and small towns. The region's metropolitan population skyrocketed. In Virginia, 34% of the population lived in large metropolitan areas in 1952. By 1980, that number had increased to 57%.⁷ The related rises in militarization, white immigration, industrialization, and urbanization led to a new middle class in the South with different political concerns from the traditional, native white, agrarian electorate. These important demographic changes have led to the transformation of political identity within the South.

Most of these changes in Southern politics have occurred in the Deep South, which became strongly Republican. Undoubtedly, the entire region has changed dramatically since the 1960s. Yet, rim states in the South, such as Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia, have seen a different type of transformation. Moderately liberal Democrats have been successful in these states, while most of the rest of the region has only elected conservative candidates. Unlike the Deep South, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida have recently become crucial swing states in national elections, having given their support to both parties within the last decade.

Among these political transformations, Virginia has been perhaps the most fascinating. The Old Dominion emerged in the post-war era as a leader of Southern politics. Senator Byrd dictated much of the policy agenda at the national level on behalf of the Southern states. Moreover, Byrd seemingly selected a majority of Virginia's state elected officials through his control over the Virginia Democratic Party. As U.S.

⁶ Black, Politics and Society in the South, 23.

⁷ Black, Politics and Society in the South, 42.

Supreme Court decisions and federal legislation in the 1950s attempted to regulate state governments more and more, Byrd and other Southern political leaders pushed back. For example, when the Brown v. Board of Education decision was delivered in 1954, Byrd led a movement known as “Massive Resistance,” which opposed integrating Virginia’s public schools. Byrd’s adamant opposition to racial integration of Virginia’s public schools, along with his control over the structure of the Virginia state government, made him the dominant politician there for two decades.⁸ As that dominance began to fade in the 1960s, Virginia politics entered a period of far-reaching change.

Mills E. Godwin, Jr. was the last Byrd-era governor of Virginia. A staunchly conservative Democrat, Godwin was elected governor in 1965. He embodied the party machine’s ideals, yet struggled with how to cope with changing race relations in the Commonwealth during the late 1960s. An initial supporter of Massive Resistance, Godwin began to become increasingly more progressive on Civil Rights issues. While perhaps more open-minded than his predecessors, Godwin still embraced the same concern for states’ rights and fiscal conservatism that Virginia Democrats had expressed for decades. When Godwin was sworn in on January 15, 1966, the tide was already turning toward Republican success in Virginia. Although unsuccessful in his campaign in 1965, GOP gubernatorial candidate A. Linwood Holton would reemerge in 1969 with a coalition ready to swing Virginia toward the Republicans.

The party that had so thoroughly controlled Virginia since Reconstruction began to fall apart as the country rapidly changed. Thanks to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and

⁸ Wilkinson, J. Harvie. Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics: 1945-1966. Charlottesville: U of Virginia, 1968. Print, 7.

the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Commonwealth's electorate began to expand. Additionally, the 24th Amendment, which prohibited the poll tax, and redistricting decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court in cases Baker v. Carr and Reynolds v. Sims forced Virginia to create fairer, more competitive elections throughout the state. By 1969, Virginia had elected Linwood Holton as its first Republican governor in the 20th century. This election proved that Virginians would elect a Republican governor and suggested other southern states would do so as well. The election of Holton in 1969 was more than a personal triumph for him. Rather, it marked the true beginning of the present two-party system in Virginia and the start of a period of GOP dominance there at the statewide level. After 1964, Virginia would not vote for a Democrat for president again until the election of President Obama in 2008.

The fifty-year period from 1965 to 2015 has brought dramatic changes to Virginia's Democratic Party. Throughout the 1970s, the party faced serious setbacks as statewide Republicans repeatedly emerged victorious then. To be clear, the Virginia Democratic Party controlled both houses in the General Assembly until the 1990s. Yet, the party's inability to run successful statewide candidates during the 1970s added to the disunity within the Virginia Democratic Party. The Democrats worked tirelessly throughout the decade in attempts to become more electorally successful statewide. By 1981, Virginians elected their first Democratic governor since Mills Godwin in 1965, Chuck Robb. More astonishing, Virginians had gone heavily for the leader of the New Right, Ronald Reagan, in the presidential election held just one year earlier. Robb had been elected Lieutenant Governor in 1977 as the only successful statewide Democrat.

Helping him was the fact that he was the husband of President Lyndon Johnson's daughter, Lynda Byrd Johnson Robb. Chuck Robb was seemingly the perfect Democratic candidate for Governor of Virginia in 1981. A moderate Democrat, Robb was well liked for balancing the state budget without raising taxes, as well as for increasing funds for education significantly during his tenure. Moreover, he appealed to progressive Virginians by appointing record numbers of women and minorities to state jobs.⁹ Robb proved to be instrumental in creating a new Virginia Democratic Party coalition – one that would endure through the present day. Robb would go on to serve as a United States Senator from Virginia following his governorship.

Governor Gerald Baliles succeeded Robb in 1985. A fellow “New” Democrat in the Commonwealth, Baliles had served as Attorney General of Virginia during Robb's governorship. Virginia's state laws limit its governors to a single, four-year term in office. Thus, Baliles seemed to be the apparent successor to term-limited Robb. Baliles saw the challenges that Virginia would face due to rapid population growth, especially in Northern Virginia. As such, Baliles would spend his term as Governor overhauling transportation in the Commonwealth. Baliles pushed the legislation to approve a record number of dollars for improvement to highway transportation in Virginia, and is still credited for his efforts in improving transportation throughout the state. Much like his predecessor, Baliles continued to keep the Virginia Democratic Party successful by appealing to the moderates throughout the state, while still encouraging progressive reforms throughout the Commonwealth.

⁹ Atkinson, Frank B., Virginia in the Vanguard: Political Leadership in the 400-year-old Cradle of American Democracy, 1981-2006. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. Print, 46.

Governor Douglas Wilder succeeded Baliles in the 1989 election. Wilder was the first African-American governor elected in the nation since Reconstruction. Wilder, who had served as Baliles' Lieutenant Governor, narrowly defeated Republican Marshall Coleman in the 1989 election. In an unlikely series of events, Wilder, the grandson of a former slave, became the leader of the state that just thirty years prior had adamantly opposed integrating blacks into whites-only public schools. Wilder, much like his Democratic predecessors, was a moderate Democrat. He led major initiatives on gun control and anti-crime policies, and was in favor of the death penalty. More progressively, he was the "pro-choice" candidate in the election. The continuous success of the Virginia Democratic Party, however, would be interrupted at the end of Wilder's term.

Democrats in Virginia struggled during the Clinton era, including losing control of both houses of the General Assembly, but reemerged victorious with the election of Mark Warner as governor in 2001. Warner, along with his gubernatorial successor, Tim Kaine, both currently serve as Virginia's United States Senators. Both Warner and Kaine embraced policies similar to their new Democratic predecessors. Warner, a former executive of the telecommunications company Nextel, and Kaine, former Mayor of Richmond, Lieutenant Governor, and Linwood Holton's son-in-law, have led Virginia's Democrats to align more with their national counterparts. Virginia remains the only former Confederate state with two sitting Democrats in the Senate. As the national Democratic Party returned to the center in the Clinton years, the distance between it and the new Democrats of Virginia has lessened. Warner and Kaine are possibly a tad more

conservative than traditional, non-Southern Democrats of today, yet both have been mentioned as potential presidential and vice presidential candidates for the 2016 election, demonstrating the decreased distance between the national and state parties. Even more indicative of that shift is the current governor, Terry McAuliffe, who is the former Chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

As such, the Virginia Democratic Party has successfully transformed itself from a segregationist party in the 1960s to a moderately progressive and electorally successful, multi-racial party today. Few Southern Democratic parties have achieved the success that Virginia has seen in the last fifty years. Virginia Democrats, however, have not simply followed the track that their national counterparts have paved. This transformation in Virginia has, to be sure, relied heavily upon the traditional Democratic support groups, including women, African Americans, and labor unions. At the same time, however, Virginia Democrats have drawn crucial support from more morally traditional people than the national party has lately.

These historic changes that the Virginia Democrats have made have received little attention from scholars thus far. What studies have been done are mostly biographies of the Commonwealth's leaders. Few scholars have written political histories of contemporary Virginia, and these books generally aim to discuss politics in the Commonwealth as a whole, rather than delve into a specific party. Moreover, the literature on the changing politics of Virginia's state legislature is limited in scope. The absence of scholarly studies of Virginia politicians since 1965 is puzzling given its significance. American politics have changed a lot over the past half-century. As such,

there is a need for a more comprehensive history of the renovation of the Virginia Democratic Party, not just to illuminate what has happened there, but also to shed light on the southern and national patterns, too.

This study will examine how and why the Virginia Democratic Party transformed since itself 1965. This thesis will explore the ways in which the Southern political climate changed over the course of the second half of the 20th century, and how Virginia contributed to that transformation. Additionally, this thesis will explain how Virginia managed to change in a different way from most of the former Confederacy. The study of the events and people that helped the Virginia Democratic Party change successfully since 1965 is important not only to the past and current political landscape of the Commonwealth, but to the history and future of southern and national politics.

II. Mills Godwin, Linwood Holton, and the Rise of Two-Party Competition, 1965-1981

Labels as applied to one's political philosophy are often misleading because they mean different things to various people. I am a realistic conservative. My philosophy of government is basically conservative in fiscal affairs, and perhaps moderate in relation to those services, and to the extent thereof, that the government ought to provide for its citizens. I reject a liberal classification as generally understood by today's standards.

– Mills E. Godwin¹⁰

On January 15, 1966, Mills E. Godwin was sworn in as Governor of Virginia. Former Governor Albertis Harrison, Jr. had turned the office over to his lieutenant governor. Godwin's inauguration was the first one in nearly fifty years that was

¹⁰ Andrews, Miner Carl. No Higher Honor: The Story of Mills E. Godwin, Jr. Richmond: Dietz, 1970. Print, xix.

unattended by the late Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr, who was battling cancer. Byrd's death on October 20, 1966 opened up a new era in Virginia politics, one that would not be controlled by one man, nor one party, but rather an expanded electorate open to a broader range of viewpoints.

Many memories of the Byrd party machine focus on perhaps the worst thing Byrd did for the Old Dominion during his reign as an elected official of Virginia – staunchly supporting racial segregation. This undeniably dominates texts on Byrd today and is perhaps the only thing most remember about the late Senator. While his adamant opposition to integration, specifically that of Virginia's public schools, is a major flaw in Byrd's history, it is important to remember why and how the Byrd regime remained so powerful in Virginia for so long.

When Byrd was elected governor in 1925, his main initiative was to bring Virginia back to a state of national prominence. Virginia was widely influential prior to the Civil War, but the damage of the War and Reconstruction left Virginia's agrarian society lagging, and a once wealthy state saw its economic prosperity come to a standstill. Byrd saw his election as an opportunity to find public servants for Virginia who were capable of reviving the state's economic status, and modernizing Virginia in a way that much of the South so desperately needed then. Byrd saw the political machine he built as necessary to bring prosperity to the Commonwealth, despite the often-perceived notion that it was corrupt. The Byrd Organization, as noted by J. Harvey Wilkinson in Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966, gave

Byrd control of nearly every aspect of political life throughout the state.¹¹ Byrd successfully ran candidates throughout the state who won support even from areas far from their homes. His machine brought cohesion to Virginia politics. This is what separated Virginia from the rest of the South. Throughout the former Confederacy, local politics triumphed and political competition very much still existed.¹² Once Byrd arrived as governor, Virginia politics gradually became uncompetitive. Byrd selected the candidates and any opponents would be crushed in the Democratic primary, allowing the Byrd candidate easily to assume the office he sought. This is perhaps the reason why Virginia lacked dynamic political figures leading up to the 1960s, aside from Byrd. The rigid control over the state Byrd assumed allowed for a coherent development strategy to emerge and persist for decades. Additionally, as Republicans only mounted feeble competition in the general election, Byrd's control over the Democratic Party allowed him to maintain control of the state as well.

The main tenets of the Byrd machine's policy agenda centered on introducing better services to provide to Virginia's citizens. Education, transportation, health care, and welfare remained pivotal topics on which the future of the Commonwealth rested.¹³ These ideals were important to Virginians and encouraged voters to continue to support Byrd and his successors. Yet, Byrd was committed to maintaining a balanced budget and low taxes. The paradox between a "pay-as-you-go" system and a need for better public infrastructure would hinder Byrd's ability to revamp the state infrastructure that Virginia

¹¹ Wilkinson, J. Harvie. Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics: 1945-1966. Charlottesville: U of Virginia, 1968. Print, 35.

¹² Wilkinson, Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 36.

¹³ Wilkinson, Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 38.

needed in order to boost its economy. By 1963, Virginians were paying on average per capita state taxes \$234.77 per year, 43rd in the nation.¹⁴ Ultimately, Byrd's inability, or rather the unwillingness of Byrd's selected government officials, to spend more money left Virginia falling behind in public services, especially education, which the state spent the least amount of any of the former Confederate states. As the Washington Post noted on July 21, 1965, the Byrd regime created "a legacy of crowded colleges, or substandard mental hospitals, a legacy, in short, of neglected social services across the board."¹⁵

Much of the disparity in funding for public services comes from the vastly different demographics in Virginia. Wealthy, urban areas felt far less of a burden than rural areas throughout the state. As funding from the state government was inadequate to fund many services for Virginians, localities faced the burden of funding necessary institutions for its citizens. This perhaps was seen most obviously through education, where some of Virginia's rural public schools were among the worst in the nation. The transition during the Byrd era from an agrarian-dominated economy to a more industrial, business-oriented society demonstrated the difficulties in leading a state as diverse as Virginia successfully, especially if government taxing and spending were to be kept low. As the 1960s began to unfold, this problem would become increasingly apparent.

Mills Godwin entered Virginia's political scene in a time of great triumph for conservative Democratic politics, and aptly ended his career by switching parties and

¹⁴ Chapman, William, Washington Post, Staff Writer. "Byrd's legacy: A crisis in schools and hospitals." *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, July 21, 1965.

¹⁵ Chapman, William, Washington Post, Staff Writer. "Byrd's legacy: A crisis in schools and hospitals." *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, July 21, 1965.

then serving as a Republican Governor of the Commonwealth during the 1970s. Godwin, a native of Nansemond County, Virginia, now known as Suffolk, grew up on a farm. His formative years were spent attending a rural school in Chuckatuck, observing his father's political support for Harry F. Byrd, Sr., and playing baseball. In 1931, Godwin was set to head to college. Determined to attend the College of William and Mary, Godwin had to alter his plans as the effects of the Great Depression left his family poor and their farm in desperate need of help. Instead, Godwin moved in with an aunt and attended William and Mary's Norfolk campus, later to be known as Old Dominion. After one year, he transferred to the main campus at Williamsburg and studied history and government. In June 1938, he earned a law degree from the University of Virginia.

Elected to the House of Delegates in 1948 and moving over to the State Senate in 1952, Godwin was all too familiar with the Byrd Organization's way of controlling state politics. Yet, Godwin was a part of a new, younger Democratic coalition in Virginia. Whereas the older counterparts were unwilling to compromise on issues such as race and government spending, the new coalition seemed determined to move the Commonwealth forward in these years.¹⁶ This new coalition, known as the "Young Turks," was not necessarily considered rebellious. Instead, they were determined to work within the party to liberalize its approaches, especially in the area of education.

The story of the demise of the Democratic Party of Virginia really begins with the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954. Mandated to integrate Virginia's public schools, Virginia would make national history for being among the most unwilling states

¹⁶ Andrews, No Higher Honor, 35.

to allow blacks and whites to attend the same schools. Virginia Democrats were bound to Senator Byrd's adamant program of massive resistance in opposing the integration of Virginia's public schools. Several school districts, such as Charlottesville, Warren County, and Norfolk, actually closed their public schools in an effort to avoid integration of blacks and whites in the public school system. Yet, following a court decision that declared that shutting down the public schools of Virginia was unconstitutional, Virginia was forced to reopen the public schools and allow blacks to attend. This decision would embarrass the Virginia Democratic Party's reputation, and force Virginia to accept desegregation for the first time. Looking back on the period of time when Virginia refused to integrate, Godwin offered no remorse for his opposition. Godwin said, "No man could have survived in public office, especially in Southside, if he was 'soft' on integration."¹⁷ This was true for most politicians throughout the state as most voters in Virginia, and perhaps more importantly, Harry Byrd, Sr., would disprove.

Some elected officials in Virginia, however, still publicly resisted the federal government's order. These officials were among the minority. There were other officials, much like then Senator Godwin, however, who were opposed to integration, yet publicly would never acknowledge it. They would silently follow their party's leaders despite being opposed to open defiance of a U.S. Supreme Court decision. This group was not among the cohort deemed "school closers." These officials were willing to pursue other, less confrontational means to keep Virginia's public schools separated and keep Jim Crow laws alive throughout the Commonwealth.

¹⁷ Andrews, No Higher Honor, 37.

This division over how best to respond to federal pressure for integration created a division within the Democratic Party, both between the National and Virginia Democratic Parties, and a division *within* the Democratic Party of Virginia itself. That rift had first emerged as early as 1948, when Byrd opposed Harry Truman's re-election, thanks to Truman's support for civil rights. Truman ultimately won Virginia that year, but many Virginians voted for other candidates then, such as Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond and Republican Thomas Dewey. The 1948 presidential election marked the emergence in Virginia of what some historians have referred to as "Byrd Democrats." They were ones who voted Republican nationally, but Democratic locally and statewide.¹⁸ That became even clearer in 1952 and 1956, when Senator Byrd endorsed Republican presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower, who won Virginia both times. Virginia Democrats would usually remain divided in that way until the election of Charles Robb in 1981.

Such was the scene in the fall of 1964. Virginians were torn between supporting the current president, pro-civil rights Democrat Lyndon Johnson, or electing the ultra-conservative, anti-Civil Rights Act, Senator Barry Goldwater. To the extent Virginia Democrats approved of President Johnson, it was undoubtedly because the president, too, was Southern. Yet his increasingly liberal social stances, predominately on racial matters, left many conservative Virginians frustrated with their party's nominee for president. Byrd urged delegates to the 1964 Democratic National Convention to reject Johnson's nomination, but many Democrats in the Commonwealth were uncomfortable with abandoning the party's sitting president there. "Let's be Democrats from the courthouse

¹⁸ Andrews, No Higher Honor, 50.

to the White House,” Congressman W. Pat Jennings noted in an effort to encourage Democrats to unite behind the current president.¹⁹ Ultimately Jennings’ view would be the prevailing notion throughout the state. The conflict culminated in the rejection of the Byrd Organization at the state convention with the selection of Johnson as the presidential nominee.

This dynamic was especially interesting to Godwin, who was Virginia’s Lieutenant Governor in 1964. After being prompted by Governor Harrison, Godwin joined the First Lady of the United States, Lady Bird Johnson on her campaign train tour of Virginia. Godwin, abandoning Senator Byrd’s opposition to another term for Johnson, would never discuss that decision with Byrd.²⁰ Endorsing Johnson could have brought many political problems for Godwin, but Godwin himself noted that while it was not easy, it became “an excellent strategic move” for the state’s gubernatorial nominee in 1965.²¹ This strategy exemplified a greater shift in political ideology throughout the Virginia Democratic Party. The county was becoming increasingly polarized and while Virginia would remain more moderate in terms of its parties, a new conservative-liberal divide began to unfold throughout the Commonwealth. Ultimately, Virginia voted for President Johnson, but by a much narrower margin than he received nationwide. Johnson received 53.5% of the vote in Virginia, with Goldwater attaining 46.2%.²² Thus, in the

¹⁹ Wilkinson, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics*, 253.

²⁰ Atkinson, Frank B., *The Dynamic Dominion: Realignment and the Rise of Two-party Competition in Virginia, 1945-1980*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. Print, 161.

²¹ Atkinson *Dynamic Dominion*, 161.

²² American Presidency Project, 1964.

lead up to the 1965 gubernatorial election in Virginia, two-party competition at the state level was coming to Virginia.

Such was the political environment Mills Godwin faced when he assumed office in January 1966. Virginians were becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of government support for improving services throughout the state, yet were not ready to assume a heavier financial burden for them. Godwin remained part of the Byrd Organization, but promised Virginians change throughout his campaign. The fall of 1965 proved to be a pivotal moment in Virginia's history as the final Byrd-era governor would be elected, but would follow a path very different from that of his predecessors and ultimately help usher in a new era of Virginia politics.

Godwin was the first governor elected in Virginia by a general-election plurality, rather than a majority.²³ The election of 1965 featured three major candidates: Godwin, Republican A. Linwood Holton, and Conservative candidate William J. Story. Godwin won the election with 47.89% of the vote, with Holton receiving 37.71% and Story receiving 13.38%. Undoubtedly most of the votes received by Story would have been votes cast for Godwin had Story not been on the ballot. Regardless, it appears this election marked the true beginning of two-party competition in Virginia at the state level. *The Virginia News Letter* noted, "But for the first time in recent history, the Democratic candidates for Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia were forced by a vigorous, articulate, and responsible Republican campaign and outstanding Republican candidates at all levels to get out and campaign among the people; to meet them; to listen

²³ The Virginia Elections and State Elected Officials Database Project, 1776-2008.

to them; to find out what their problems were... and they were made unmistakably aware that the people of Virginia had had enough.”²⁴ As Holton commented following his defeat, “The Republican Party has become a stable and enduring force in Virginia politics.”²⁵ Holton’s foresight could not have been more accurate.

Despite being very much a part of the Byrd Organization, Godwin recognized that times were changing. Increasing pressure, therefore, to react to the growing Civil Rights Movement and the demands of Virginians for better government services, especially in education and health care, forced Godwin to move away from the traditional Byrd model of government. During his campaign, he sought African-American support, to the extent that African-Americans were voting, and gained the endorsement of both the NAACP and the AFL-CIO. Due to President Johnson’s success in the Commonwealth, Godwin saw Virginians giving their approval to the President’s platform, which was especially noteworthy given the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Thus, Godwin served as governor during an interesting transitional time in the history of the Virginia Democratic Party. Still supported by the traditional, conservative faction of the party, Godwin found support among African-Americans and labor that had largely been absent from the Virginia Democratic Party base in earlier years. Following the expansion of the electorate after the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Virginia began to feel the surge in voting among blacks. This expanded electorate brought a new demographic to the polls on election day. The editor of the *Richmond*

²⁴ Butler, M. Caldwell, “A Republican Looks at the 1966 Virginia General Assembly”, *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 42, No. 12. August 15, 1966, p. 45.

²⁵ Andrews, *No Higher Honor*, 56.

News Leader James J. Kilpatrick adequately summarized the magnitude and importance of what Godwin achieved on Election Day. He commented:

Here were Byrd Democrats, anti-Byrd Democrats, Goldwater Republicans, Negroes, whites, pro-labor and anti-labor, somehow tented together in an uneasy coalition based upon respect for Senator Byrd, Democratic habit, pure pragmatism, respect for Mr. Godwin, and a good deal of what's-in-it-for-me. Mr. Godwin's fearfully difficult and delicate task, as governor, will be to keep this political structure from becoming altogether unglued.²⁶

Critics would argue Godwin changed his stance from a “massive resistor” to a supporter of Civil Rights for opportunistic reasons, a view that may hold some merit. After all, Godwin had an illustrious career in Richmond in the General Assembly and a successful term as Lieutenant Governor under the Byrd Organization. Godwin, however, saw how Virginia was changing, especially given the state's support for Johnson in the 1964 election.²⁷ Increased support for racially progressive policies nationally would encourage Godwin to follow suit. Despite following trends to become more aligned with the national Democratic Party, it is obvious that Godwin's term proved to be the pivotal moment in which Virginia adopted two-party competition.

It should be noted that the Republican Party, which became established in Virginia by then, was also undergoing some changes of its own. The vibrant, passionate, and progressive Holton had attained success in the 1965 campaign despite not winning the election. Although disappointed in what appeared to him as the most puzzling of victories for Godwin, who pulled together the traditional, conservative Democrats while securing labor union and African-American support, Holton was perhaps more

²⁶ Wilkinson, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics*, 283.

²⁷ Atkinson, *Dynamic Dominion*, 171.

disappointed by the 1964 election. Barry Goldwater's extreme conservatism hindered the Republican Party in Virginia in that his conservatism was not aligned with Holton's more moderate stances on social issues and the role of the government. As some labor union leaders noted during the era, the Republican Party appeared to be moving towards "regressive politics," while the Democrats under Godwin appeared to be becoming more progressive.²⁸ Undoubtedly there was a growing movement towards the New Right in Virginia, which mostly aimed at converting Byrd-type Democrats into conservative Republicans, but the leadership of the Republican Party in Virginia rested in Holton's hands.

With Godwin's improbable victory in 1965 came new, and undoubtedly needed, changes to the Commonwealth. Godwin's slogan throughout the campaign was "Make Virginia First Again," which resonated well throughout a state that lacked modern education, infrastructure, and hospitals. Godwin was positioned to be able to effect real change throughout the state not only because he was willing to do so, but because he had the support from the Democrats in the General Assembly and the Courts, who were willing to support a man who had earlier allowed them to defy Brown v. Board. Even the *Richmond News Leader*, which regularly advocated for two-party competition noted, "The time for a change... is not yet."²⁹

To fund Virginia's desired new social programs, Godwin knew he must raise revenue for the state. As such, Godwin pushed through the adoption of a sales tax, which he had opposed just six years earlier. Godwin considered enacting the sales tax as one of

²⁸ Atkinson, *Dynamic Dominion*, 174.

²⁹ Atkinson, *Dynamic Dominion*, 176.

his greatest achievements as governor. Noting its unpopularity in some parts of the state, Godwin knew the sales tax was necessary to improve basic public services in Virginia. In his four years as governor, Godwin raised the state budget nearly 42%. His most pressing initiative was education. Godwin aided in the construction of new universities and community colleges to improve the skills of Virginia's workforce. These new education institutions included what now are George Mason University in Fairfax and Christopher Newport University in Newport News. His education overhaul was designed to create a system that he promised would be "quality plus quantity rather than quality versus quantity."³⁰ Many attribute Virginia's plethora of high-powered public universities throughout the state to Godwin's advances in education, with some even referring to him as "the education governor."

Funding for the state's public schools also increased 37.5% between 1966-1968.³¹ As Virginia became increasingly industrial in the 20th century, the need for top-notch public schools became ever more apparent. The Old Dominion was experiencing an increase in population and urban growth during the era, and to attract even more economic development during the years of the baby-boomer children, better public education was of the utmost importance. By providing more funds for public K-12 education, Godwin transformed the state's education system into a nationally competitive one. As M. Caldwell Butler noted in *The Virginia News Letter*, "Leading proponents of

³⁰ Andrews, *No Higher Honor*, 96.

³¹ Atkinson *Dynamic Dominion*, 181.

‘massive resistance’ became champions of public education.’³² During his tenure, funding for infrastructure would sharply increase as well, specifically for highways and hospitals throughout the state. He would market Virginia as a competitive state for business and industry, expand the role of Southeastern Virginia in the shipping industry, and help transform the entire economy of the Commonwealth.

Godwin’s first term as governor was marked by popular support for increased government spending and borrowing to fund the necessary public services to encourage investment in Virginia. Both new Democrats and Republicans supported Godwin throughout his term, despite backlash from old Byrd era party leaders. Godwin commented on transition this way:

You must choose what is to be preserved from the old, and what must be accepted from the new... It is no longer a Virginia of magnolias and mint juleps that awaits your decision, but a Virginia at last coming into her own after nearly three-quarters of a century of wandering in the wilderness of Reconstruction and rebuilding, a Virginia now sought after by new industry and new citizens alike.³³

Virginians were moving into the 20th century at last, this time by choice, and not a Court mandate.

As Godwin’s four-year term came to a close, the fragile coalition that got him elected began to come apart. The 1968 presidential election between Democrat, and then Vice President, Hubert Humphrey and Republican nominee Richard Nixon proved to be the beginning of a problematic decade for Virginia Democrats. Nixon was elected President nationally and by Virginia, continuing the state’s trend of regularly supporting

³² Butler, M. Caldwell, “A Republican Looks at the 1966 Virginia General Assembly”, *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 42, No. 12. August 15, 1966, p. 45.

³³ Andrews, *No Higher Honor*, 164.

the Republican nominees for president since 1952. With the notable exception of Johnson in 1964, the Commonwealth would support no Democratic presidential nominee again until 2008. Nixon's success was even more monumental given that he won the Commonwealth despite the presence of Southern Populist George Wallace on the ballot. Moreover, Godwin would ultimately endorse Nixon in the election. Ultimately, Nixon won Virginia with 43.4% of the vote to Humphrey's with 32.5% and Wallace's 23.6%. The Republican Party was on the rise, and Linwood Holton was ready to replicate its national success in the Old Dominion.

Riding on the heels of the Nixon election, and additionally as a Nixon campaign supporter, Linwood Holton would succeed Governor Godwin in the 1969 election. Holton faced off in the election against Democrat William C. Battle. Battle, the son of former Byrd-era Governor John Battle, was a leading moderate among Virginia Democrats. Politically inexperienced in the Commonwealth, Battle's close friendship with President Kennedy and his leadership on the former president's campaign lent Battle some name recognition throughout the state, but ultimately was not enough to overcome the Republican wave sweeping through Virginia in the late 1960s. Holton would prove to be the moderate, progressive leader that Virginians needed. His term the first Republican governor was hindered to an extent by being the first Republican governor given that the legislature remained overwhelmingly in Democratic hands. Yet, his willingness to support African-Americans publicly in Virginia was revolutionary for a governor of the state. Holton would send his children to a heavily African-American public school in Richmond once elected and appoint more African-Americans to government positions in

Virginia than ever before. He proved to be a more progressive continuation of the Godwin policies of the previous administration. In a surprising twist, Godwin then became Holton's Republican successor. In Godwin's second election in 1973, the Virginian Democratic Party failed even to run a candidate, although former Democrat and Populist Henry Howell, Jr. ran as an Independent.

Godwin's republicanism differed greatly from his Republican predecessor. Rather than approaching Virginia politics like Holton, Godwin aligned more with the New Right. In Holton's memoir, he never speaks ill of Godwin. After all, together they ushered in a new wave of two-party competition in Virginia, as well as created a lasting Republican Party in Commonwealth. Yet, Holton was never able to come to grips with Godwin's inability to recognize the African-American community of Virginia. Reflecting on the 1973 gubernatorial election in his memoir, Holton writes:

I also asked him [Godwin] if he could explain why Russell Carneal, a senior member of the House of Delegates who had represented the Williamsburg area for many years, had been defeated. Again: "It was all that black vote." I just didn't have the heart, because Mills was so sensitive and so easily offended, to say what I wanted to say. But I thought it: "You fellows realize they count that vote now?" It is a fact that many like Godwin, who had spent a lifetime as part of the racist Byrd organization, simply could not grasp the reality that votes from the black community could now have a significant effect on the outcome of a statewide election."³⁴

This rift between Holton Republicans and old Byrd Democrats who now identified as Republicans ultimately disappointed Holton immensely. When elected in 1973, Godwin chose not to expand upon the recent success the Republican Party had in the African-American communities across the state. Rather, Godwin would return to the

³⁴ Holton, A. Linwood. Opportunity Time. Charlottesville: U of Virginia, 2008. Print, 160-161.

era of ignoring the black population. Undoubtedly, as Holton alludes to in his memoir, this was because of growing Democratic support among black voters – white resistance to civil rights. Most notably, Douglas Wilder emerged victorious as a State Senator from the Richmond area in 1969.

Additionally, there was Dr. W. Ferguson Reid, co-founder of the Richmond Crusade for Voters in 1956, which aimed to register and mobilize black voters. Reid was the first black elected to the General Assembly since Reconstruction in 1967. Affectionately called “Fergie” by his peers, Reid embodied the change in Democratic politics in Virginia by bringing together votes from the black and white community in Richmond to successfully attain the party’s nomination, and later a seat in the House of Delegates. Reid understood that changes in voting rights in Virginia would lead to a changing composition of the political parties there. Speaking on the era in which he entered Virginia politics, Reid commented:

As a result of that, now the Republican Party has become more like the old Byrd Machine, more conservative than the original Republican Party was. They got Linwood Holton in as a Republican. But that faction has now given over to the religious right and the old Byrd Machine, so we have a stumbling Democratic Party because we don’t have a leader, and in order to have a strong party or strong movement, you have to have a leader, someone to set the pace, somebody to come up with a plan and somebody who is interested in building a party.³⁵

When Godwin left office for the first time in January 1970, the Democrats would not control the Governor’s Mansion again until 1982. This twelve-year span was marked by frustration among Democrats in Virginia about where the party should head. While the end of the first Godwin administration left progressive Democrats hopeful about the

³⁵ Carrington, Ronald E., “Interview with Dr. W. Ferguson Reid.” VCU Libraries, March 21, 2003.

future, conservative Democrats were frustrated by the rapid loss of control by their faction of the party. Internal divisions among liberal, progressive Democrats and older, conservative ones left the party divided throughout the 1970s and in desperate need of a new identity. This era is perhaps the most influential in creating the new Democratic Party of Virginia's identity. Godwin's more progressive term as governor allowed for a new wing of the Democratic Party to emerge even more liberal than Godwin's Democratic governorship. Additionally, the death of Senator Byrd, Sr. allowed for more discussion within the party about the role of the government, specifically as it pertained to government services and civil rights. To the extent that a two-party system emerged in Virginia, it was primarily due to the dialogue among Democrats during the late 1960s and 1970s about the party's future direction. While most of the rest of the South eventually abandoned the Democratic Party, first nationally, then at the state and local levels, Virginia was neither abandoning the party completely, nor continuing to adhere to it. Rather, Virginia Democrats were able to assess the needs of the Commonwealth and revitalize the party's image and programs to conform to changing times. By the early 1980s, Virginia Democrats were ready to reclaim Richmond.

III. Democratic Resurgence in the Reagan Era, 1981-1993

The great leap of faith Virginians made was not in electing a black... but in electing Robb [as governor] in 1981. For a decade Virginians had seen a Democratic Party run by liberals... [Robb] reopened doors that had been shut to the business and money crowd; he firmly established the proposition that it was possible to be both fiscally responsible and socially enlightened... [H]e redefined what it meant to be a Virginia Democrat.³⁶

– Dwayne Yancey

Despite not holding the Governor's Mansion during the 1970s, the Democrats retained control over the General Assembly. The immense role that seniority has over legislative politics in Virginia caused the shift to the GOP in the General Assembly to be more gradual. Certainly, however, older, conservative Democrats were ideologically aligning with Virginia's new-found Republican Party. Virginia Democrats had spent the decade reevaluating their party's values and goals. By the 1980s, they were ready to take charge of Richmond, and specifically to reclaim the governorship. The party had become increasingly liberal, which in some ways aided the Democratic Party's ability to reach new voters in the state. By appealing to African-Americans in mass amounts, much like their national counterparts, and encouraging reforms of Virginia's public entities, the party's liberal wing emerged dominant after the 1970s. Yet, the Commonwealth was known for its fiscal responsibility and relative conservatism. As such, this left Virginia Democrats, at least at the statewide level, unsuccessful during the decade. The 1970s kept Virginia moving forward from its antiquated days of segregation and small government, but in most respects, was profoundly uneventful in terms of political achievements.

³⁶ Yancey, Dwayne. *When Hell Froze Over: The Untold Story of Doug Wilder: A Black Politician's Rise to Power in the South*. Dallas, TX: Taylor Pub. in Association with the Roanoke Times & World-News, 1988. Print, 373.

In 1977, Republican John N. Dalton was elected governor of Virginia. Having previously served as lieutenant governor during Mills Godwin's second term, Dalton continued Godwin's philosophies of limited government taxing and spending. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States with 53% of the vote in Virginia. The trend of voting Republican statewide had continued throughout Virginia. By 1981, however, Chuck Robb would be elected governor with 53.52% of the vote, despite being outspent by opponent Republican J. Marshall Coleman \$6.47 million to \$5.35 million.³⁷ Coleman, who was the first Republican to be elected Attorney General in Virginia's history, appeared to be the natural successor to Governor Dalton. This stunning turn of events shocked many. Perceiving a Dalton victory, the Virginia Democrats, Larry Sabato, Professor of Political Science at the University of Virginia, noted "may find themselves in the political wilderness indefinitely."³⁸

Robb had served as the Lieutenant Governor during Dalton's tenure in Richmond, from 1978 until assuming the governorship in 1982. Robb's excellent reputation in Virginia spread quickly, and was undoubtedly aided by his popular marriage to Lyndon B. Johnson's daughter-in-law, Lynda Byrd Johnson Robb. Chuck Robb impressively recreated the same coalition that earned his father-in-law a victory in the Commonwealth nearly 20 years prior. Robb's notable victory propelled the Democrats back onto the political scene in Virginia and brought with it more than a decade of political success for the once dominant party.

³⁷ The Virginia Elections and State Elected Officials Database Project, 1776-2008.

³⁸ Atkinson, Frank B., Virginia in the Vanguard: Political Leadership in the 400-year-old Cradle of American Democracy, 1981-2006. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. Print, 3.

The struggle in this election was not necessarily that the incumbent Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General were squaring off against each other. The struggle was due to the ideologies of the candidates. Robb appealed to moderate and liberal voters well and appeared to be a return to the old days of Democratic politics in Virginia without the emphasis on segregation. Coleman, on the other hand, was able to appeal to moderates and conservatives. The battle initially appeared to be over which candidate could win the moderate electorate's vote. The Republican Party of Virginia's success over the last decade, however, was in attracting conservative voters throughout the state. Therefore, for Coleman to be successful he would need to run a campaign emphasizing conservative values, rather than moderate ones, and attack Robb as a liberal. Yet, Robb's ideals were far from those of the National Democratic Party. Ultimately, Coleman failed to convince voters either that conservatism was what Virginians needed, or that Robb was a liberal. Consequently, Robb won enough votes from the center of the political spectrum to cost Coleman and the Republicans the election and control over Richmond for the next twelve years.

This division between Robb and Coleman exemplified the changes occurring in both the Republican and Democratic Parties of Virginia. Democrats, after suffering from serious setbacks during the 1970s, were attempting to rebrand themselves, without abandoning such party ideals as fiscal conservatism. Continued government spending for necessary services would be among their major tenets, but maintaining fiscal responsibility, too, would be a high priority. Just as the Democratic Party of Virginia during the 1970s, in absence of true, unifying leadership had turned to their national

leaders for guidance, the Virginia Republican Party did the same in the beginning of the 1980s. Conflicting wings of the Republican Party made it difficult for Coleman to create a coherent, stable coalition. Moderately conservative Republicans sought to keep control of the state. Yet, the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 and an ever-growing strongly conservative faction of the Virginia Republican Party, the so-called movement conservatives, attached to Reagan caused a major problem for the party. The Republicans in Virginia became divided, especially on social issues, such as women's rights and abortion, beginning in 1981 until their reemergence in the 1990s. That shift led to three straight Democratic sweeps in the statewide offices in 1981, 1985, and 1989.

Robb's success in the 1981 election may have not been that astonishing, but it certainly was a game changer for the Democratic Party. The 1981 breakthrough echoed a similar trend that began in Virginia after Harry Byrd had first been elected governor. Democrats throughout the South continued to have more success at the local level, due to less pronounced ideological differences between major-party candidates.³⁹ Nationally, Southerners would continue to support Republicans in overwhelming numbers. Virginia Democrats, however, would be rebranding their state party into a hybrid of the old and the new.

Undoubtedly, the politics of this era were shaped by the rapid suburban growth, much of it the result of newcomers to the state, in Northern Virginia, and to a lesser extent the Tidewater area. Rural areas had traditionally dominated Virginia politics. Now, however, Virginia was becoming increasingly metropolitan. Fairfax County's population,

³⁹ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 11.

for example, went from 275,002 in 1960, to 596,901 in 1980. By 1990, that number had reached 818,584.⁴⁰ During the 1980s, Virginia's population grew by more than 800,000.⁴¹ Most of the new Virginians settled in Northern Virginia, or in the Southeast corner of the state, and over half of these new residents came to Virginia from another state. This new cohort of Virginia voters held jobs that ranged from real estate to new technology. These areas were heavily reliant on the federal government, which provided a significant boost in support for the Virginia Democratic Party. As federal and federally-privatized jobs moved out of Washington into Northern Virginia, and military bases grew along the coastline and in Northern Virginia as well, the size of Virginia's economy expanded dramatically, leading to higher disposable incomes and new opportunities for Virginia. The importance of this demographic change in Virginia for the Democratic Party was becoming increasingly apparent in each election cycle. In 1981, Robb carried 54.4% of the urban corridor from Northern Virginia through Richmond and Tidewater. Moreover, 56.9% of all votes cast in Virginia in 1981 were cast there.⁴²

Interestingly enough, the success of the Reagan Administration in encouraging fiscal responsibility nationally could not have played out better for the Democratic Party in Virginia. As the state's economy grew, so did Robb's popularity. This economic boom throughout the Commonwealth allowed for the Virginia Democratic Party to sustain the fiscal responsibility it touted for decades in the state and still have more money to spend. Emphasizing more spending on education helped Virginia's workforce become more

⁴⁰ U.S. Census Data

⁴¹ U.S. Census Data

⁴² Sabato, Larry J., "The 1981 Gubernatorial Election in Virginia", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 58, No. 6. January 31, 1982, p. 24.

skilled and made the state even more attractive to newcomers. Both trends tended to make Virginia more prosperous, and nowhere more so than in Northern Virginia.

Robb's tenure as Governor of Virginia, and later as one of the Commonwealth's United States Senators, was marked both by fiscal conservatism and social progressivism. Robb successfully appealed to elements of the old, conservative Virginia Democratic Party, while including social progress that many in the state, including women and minorities, had been demanding for so long. Robb's former aide and strategist H. Benson Dendy III noted that during the 1970s there were two Democratic Parties. The legislative Democratic Party, Dendy commented, was conservative and fiscally responsible, yet the emerging liberal wing was so weak throughout the 1970s that in 1973 it did not even field a candidate for governor. Dendy said regarding the election, the Democratic Party was in such disarray, "that even Henry Howell who was the darling of the liberals didn't want the Democratic nomination because he felt like it would hurt him."⁴³ Even after Howell did run as the Democrats' candidate for governor four years later, he lost to John Dalton.

Robb would appoint record numbers of women and minorities to positions throughout the state during his four years as governor. United States Senator Mark Warner commented that Robb brought the party back to life and redefined what it meant to be a Virginia Democrat.⁴⁴ By reviving old party ideals and introducing new progressive initiatives to the Commonwealth, Robb helped save the Virginia Democratic Party. Legislator Hunter B. Andrews in 2001 commented, "We... Democrats owe a

⁴³ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 45.

⁴⁴ Senator Warner interview.

tremendous debt of gratitude to Chuck Robb. He put it all together. It became respectable again to call yourself a ‘Democrat’.”⁴⁵

Robb’s tenure as governor, however, would not be without political conflicts within the Democratic Party. The 1982 U.S. Senate race proved to be nearly disastrous to the party. Virginia Beach Delegate Owen Pickett had been the party’s favorite to be the nominee. Yet, L. Douglas Wilder, a State Senator from Richmond and the voice of the African-American community in the General Assembly, was angered by some of Pickett’s remarks in the General Assembly and values that Wilder deemed to be “anti-black”.⁴⁶ Wilder declared he would run as an Independent should Pickett stay in the race. Robb knew a division like this within his party would ruin the coalition he had put together just one year prior. Ultimately, Robb convinced newly elected Lieutenant Governor Richard Davis to run for Senate. It likely would not have mattered who ran for that seat in the Senate, as Republicans were fairly confident their candidate, Paul S. Tribble, Jr., would win given the Virginia GOP’s success at the national level. The Republican Party’s prediction was correct. This division, however, proved how fragile the coalition Robb had created based off of the one his father-in-law established really was. Moreover, this clash would show that Douglas Wilder was serious about Virginia politics, but also that his stubbornness might end up harming the Democratic Party in the coming years.

Finding a successor to Robb proved to be a difficult task for the Democratic Party due to Robb’s immense popularity. Many people sought the nomination for governor, but

⁴⁵ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 46.

⁴⁶ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 49.

the real problem would be Wilder, who had his sight set on the nomination for Lieutenant Governor. Despite lacking support from the party, Wilder was determined to attain the nomination. Throughout the process and against backlash from many party members, Wilder went so far as to threaten to deny the black vote to even the gubernatorial nominee should Wilder not win the nomination for the number two spot.⁴⁷ Ultimately, Attorney General Gerald Baliles would be the party's nominee for governor, with Mary Sue Terry, a delegate from Patrick County, as the attorney general nominee. Wilder would have his way yet again, and be the Democratic Party's nominee for Lieutenant Governor.

The Republican Party had not changed too much in the four years since the last statewide election in 1981. Still bitterly divided between old moderates like Holton, and the conservative faction comprised of anti-abortion, pro-school prayer, anti-Equal Rights Amendment, and New Right supporters, the Republicans struggled to gain votes from those who had previously supported them almost exclusively because of their candidates' stances on social issues. Women's issues in Virginia had become hot-topic issues over the last decade, as a growing Evangelical movement sought to place restrictions upon abortions, as well as prevent Virginia from ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment. These issues would polarize the Virginia electorate and create vibrant policy debates in Richmond over how to assess these controversial topics.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Yancey, *When Hell Froze Over*, 53.

⁴⁸ Joyner, Nancy D., "The Commonwealth's Approach to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 50, No. 9. April 30, 1974, p. 33-36.

At the top of the 1985 ticket was former Delegate Wyatt B. Durrette, Jr. During the course of the campaign, the Republicans would make a few costly mistakes that would alienate voters throughout the state. The first such mistake was not made by anyone on the ticket, but by former Governor Mills Godwin. The state song of Virginia, “Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny,” was written by an African-American in 1875 and recounts the days of plantation life and slavery.⁴⁹ The song was said to have been popular in older, white communities, but the black community of Virginia did not feel the same nostalgia for it. In 1970, while a state senator, Wilder unsuccessfully proposed to end the song’s designation as Virginia’s official one. In a statement in the summer of 1985 at Hampden-Sydney University, Governor Godwin made the grave mistake of commenting on Wilder’s push to do so. Godwin said, “I have a hard time seeing how Jerry Baliles could... espouse the record of this man (Wilder). Why he actually introduced a bill to repeal the state song.”⁵⁰ Godwin had not only criticized Wilder’s desire to erase a racially sensitive part of Virginia’s history, but also reminded voters throughout the state of his experience with “massive resistance”. Now, as the Democratic ticket looked to move forward and become increasingly progressive, Virginia Republicans were perceived as wanting to move the state backward in a way that could hurt its image.

Additionally, as the socially conservative movement being led by the White House spilled over into the Commonwealth, Virginia’s Republican Party began losing support among voters who saw themselves closer to the middle than the New Right. Yet, social conservatism was amplified in the Commonwealth as its leaders, Pat Robertson

⁴⁹ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 49.

⁵⁰ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 65.

and Jerry Falwell, were both native Virginians. The creation of the Christian Coalition ushered in a new era of religious politics in Virginia and its influence can be seen throughout the state from Virginia's churches to Liberty University in Lynchburg and Regents University in Virginia Beach. Durette became outspoken in favor of anti-abortion laws, at a time when the Democratic Party had a woman on the statewide ticket. Evangelicals throughout the Commonwealth revered Durette for his support on this hot-topic issue, but by associating the party with the likes of Robertson and Falwell, Durette lost support of many moderate voters throughout the state, and especially relative newcomers to the state who lived in Northern Virginia.

To the extent the 1985 election was significant in Virginia history, it revolved primarily around the lieutenant governor's race. Voters were more intrigued by Wilder's presence on the ballot, due partly to the controversial way in which he claimed the nomination, but also because he was vying to become the first African-American elected statewide in Virginia history. Baliles was the natural successor to Robb, and as such the election of Virginia's newest governor was hardly dynamic. His campaign slogan, "New Dominion" signified exactly what Robb had begun to create during his time as governor. Baliles was committed to remaining fiscally responsible, but socially progressive. His ticket itself exemplified the "New Dominion," as his running mates included both an African-American and a female.

All three Democrats won their statewide races. Baliles carried the state with 55.2% of the vote, while Durette had 44.79% of the Commonwealth's support.⁵¹ Wilder

⁵¹ The Virginia Elections and State Elected Officials Database Project, 1776-2008.

and Terry both easily won their offices as well. As such, the watershed moment for the Democrats in 1985 was hardly the sheer fact that they had retained all three statewide offices and were elected with the highest share of the vote since the 1960s, but that Virginians were ready to accept an African-American male as their Lieutenant Governor, and a woman as their Attorney General. Moreover, this election propelled blacks into the Democratic coalition for good and it proved just how passionate they were about a candidate of their own, including electing Wilder with margins higher than Baliles in some precincts.⁵² In a way, this was the last and greatest triumph of Chuck Robb's administration.

Baliles had perhaps one of the more quiet governorships in Virginia history. His greatest achievement, and one that still needs to be addressed today, was reforming Virginia's abysmal transportation system. Once assuming office, Baliles sought to reform Virginia's highways to accompany the rapid population and economic boom occurring throughout the state. Initially, Baliles hoped to fund new roads throughout the state via bonds, yet this would abandon the "pay-as-you-go" system that had been in place in Virginia since the days of Harry Byrd.⁵³ As such, Baliles was forced to abandon his plan of no new taxes in Virginia. Bonds would pay for some of the new roads, but so, too, would new revenues. Perhaps one of his biggest critics for raising the average annual revenue collected by the state by nearly half of a billion dollars annually was Lieutenant Governor Wilder. Wilder became increasingly outspoken against Baliles' actions, in part

⁵² Sherwood, Tom and Moore, Molly, Washington Post, Staff Writers. "Baliles Wins as Democrats Gain Historic Virginia Sweep." November 6, 1985.

⁵³ Bowman, Gary M. Highway Politics in Virginia. Fairfax, VA: George Mason UP, 1993. Print, 23.

because he was looking toward the 1989 gubernatorial election, and in part because he believed it to be bad policy to renege on promises one had made throughout the campaign.⁵⁴ Wilder's actions were criticized by many throughout the Democratic Party, and even led to another feud with former Governor Robb. Donald Baker of the *Washington Post* summarized this conflict superbly. He wrote:

As Wilder neared the end of his first year as lieutenant governor, he was engulfed in controversy, nearly all of it of his own making. As a result of challenges, first to former Governor Robb and then to Governor Baliles, he had handed the Republicans sure-fire fodder for the 1989 gubernatorial campaign. He was denounced by fellow Democrats as a coward, a Monday-morning quarterback, a johnny-come-lately and a sandbagger. But Wilder didn't blink, because the attacks were part of a high-risk strategy to establish conservative credentials and show his independence from Robb and Baliles, who Wilder believed were likely to support Attorney General Mary Sue Terry against him if an intra-party fight developed for the gubernatorial nomination in 1989.⁵⁵

Scholars often overlook Baliles' tenure as the Robb-Wilder feud often distracted attention from Baliles' legislative accomplishments. While governor, he increased funding for services such as mental health and childcare, as well as led eight foreign trade missions to promote economic development in Virginia.⁵⁶ This pattern of increasing foreign trade and economic development in the Commonwealth, especially by utilizing the port area in Southeastern Virginia, has lasted through today. Senator Mark Warner would note that these achievements are part of the reason Virginia is still so economically prosperous, and marked it as a point of success in the Virginia Democratic Party's

⁵⁴ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 72.

⁵⁵ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 73.

⁵⁶ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 75.

history.⁵⁷ Baliles' legislative successes as governor did not lead, however, to prominence on the national political scene. Following his term, he would return to practicing law and later become the Director of Miller Center at the University of Virginia, having stepped down at the end of 2014. Content to remain a major player at the state level in Virginia, Baliles expressed little interest in moving beyond that realm.

Democrats continued to experience success statewide as Robb was elected to the United States Senate in 1988. It appeared the coalition of moderate suburbanites, liberal whites, women, and minority groups would be able to last for the long haul.

Simultaneously, Republicans continued to struggle to create a coherent ideology. The party became branded as the party of the past on social issues especially, despite having attained success less than twenty years earlier. Yet, the old Byrd Democrats who converted to conservative Republicans continued to remind Virginia of the regressive policies of that time, and the New Right proved to be too extreme socially for many voters throughout the state. As such, Wilder was positioned well for his long-awaited gubernatorial race in 1989.

Wilder would run a campaign similar to his 1985 bid for lieutenant governor. He would appeal to Virginians as the natural successor to the popular Baliles, and the Democratic Party establishment would support his candidacy, especially after Mary Sue Terry declared she would seek reelection for her post as attorney general. Terry, knowing full well her potential nomination as governor would anger Wilder and cost her the black vote in the state, opted to let Wilder run for governor and to seek the nomination for

⁵⁷ Senator Warner interview.

herself in 1993. Already benefiting from his term as lieutenant governor, Wilder would also benefit from the appeal of making history. Voters were aware that they had the opportunity to elect the first African-American governor in American history. The chance to position oneself on the “right” side of history was especially appealing to many voters who looked to make Virginia as progressive and modern as ever in the eyes of the nation. Wilder would square off against Marshall Coleman, who was seeking his comeback to Virginia politics following his defeat by Robb in the 1981 gubernatorial election.

Wilder very narrowly won the governor’s race in 1989, despite what many thought would be the Republicans’ best recent opportunity to seize control of the governor’s office once again. Coleman ultimately lost in part because his negative campaign was unappealing to many voters, as was his staunch anti-abortion stance.⁵⁸ The abortion debate lingered throughout the campaign. The Wilder team dealt with it mostly by changing the subject to crime, and refuting Coleman’s charge that Wilder was weak in that area. The candidates made little mention of racial issues during the campaign due to Coleman’s strategy of avoiding any statement that could link the Republican Party back to racial bigotry. This, however, did not stop the media from romanticizing the notion of history making in the state most known just a few years ago for its unabated racial prejudices. Of the issues most important to voters, race relations ranked sixth, gaining 9% of the sample in a poll. Rather, the most important issues to voters in the 1989 election were abortion (33%), education (22%), and crime (22%).⁵⁹ Wilder prevailed narrowly,

⁵⁸ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 97.

⁵⁹ Sabato, Larry J., “Virginia Governor’s Race, 1989”, *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 66, No. 7. January 31, 1990, p. 2.

with 50.13% of the vote to Coleman's 49.76%.⁶⁰ The closeness of the election was unexpected by many. Theories have emerged as to why it was so close. Some argue racial bigotry still existed throughout the Commonwealth, and no one was willing to say that to pollsters. Others assume that the historical significance of this election caused pollsters to miscalculate surveys, due to own perceived biases or too much confidence in an electorate that may have been hesitant to say its true political preferences.⁶¹

On January 13, 1990, Wilder took the oath to become Governor of Virginia. The significance of that moment, and of his governorship, cannot be overstated. Proclaiming himself, the "son of Virginia," Wilder had overcome incredible obstacles to stand as the leader of the Commonwealth as her 66th Governor. The grandson of former slaves, a Korean War veteran with a Bronze Star, and a graduate of Howard University Law School, Wilder became the highest-ranking black official in America, and the first statewide black elected official in the South. His success is even more astonishing when remembering his struggles within the state Democratic Party itself. Wilder's improbable journey to the Governor's Mansion sealed his name in the history books before his term had even begun.

Despite the historic significance of his election, Wilder remained unpopular amongst Virginians. Warren Fiske, a reporter for the *Virginian Pilot* commented at the conclusion of Wilder's term on the central paradox of Wilder's career: "If Doug Wilder hadn't been so confrontational, he might be spending his final weeks as governor enjoying the praise Virginians traditionally reserve for fiscal conservatives instead of the

⁶⁰ The Virginia Elections and State Elected Officials Database Project, 1776-2008.

⁶¹ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 102.

barbs that go with being the most unpopular chief executive in memory. If Doug Wilder hadn't been so confrontational, he never would have been governor."⁶² Wilder's four years as governor were marked with economic crises in the state, and Wilder's response to that situation seemed nonexistent to many voters. His opposition to the Persian Gulf War in 1990 and his push for racial hiring quotas made him unpopular among whites in the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, as recession spread throughout the nation, Virginians were hit especially hard due to the state's proximity to and relationship with the federal government. This was especially seen in the military. As defense spending shrunk during Wilder's term, military bases and their surrounding areas felt an increased economic burden throughout Virginia. Instead of trying to repair his relationship with Virginians, Wilder set out to gain more stardom nationally as a presidential hopeful in the 1992 election.

As the 1990s began to unfold, it was apparent Wilder would become one of the least liked governors in Virginia's history. After just eighteen months in office, his approval rating was at 32% and would only decline from there.⁶³ Wilder seemed uninterested in Virginia's opinion of him as he gained national attention for being an alternative to the Jesse Jackson-type black politicians. He became increasingly interested in becoming the Democratic nominee for president despite his lack of popularity in his own state. His name recognition soared above Senator Robb, who was seeking the Democratic nomination for the presidency himself. Wilder touted a "New Mainstream" which he believed could lead America to more prosperity by combining fiscal

⁶² Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 106.

⁶³ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 108.

conservatism, social progressivism, a tough stance on crime, and pragmatic politics.

Despite his ardent campaigning nationally, Wilder would never catch up to the growing popularity of Bill Clinton. Wilder would withdraw from the race to tend to things back in the Commonwealth. This, however, was too little too late for many Virginians. Wilder would leave the Governor's Mansion in 1994, by which point his party was in turmoil.

The transformation the Virginia Democratic Party underwent in the 1970s led it to its political and legislative successes of the 1980s. Virginians had grown to appreciate the new Democratic ideology of fiscal responsibility and social progress and it seemed the party's coalition was nearly unstoppable. Yet, the biggest racial triumph in Virginia, the election of Douglas Wilder to Lieutenant Governor in 1985 and then Governor in 1989, was paradoxically linked to the downfall of the Virginia Democratic Party. The success of electing a black official to a statewide office was ultimately undermined by Wilder's personal ambitions. Had Robb forced Wilder aside in the 1985 election, perhaps the party's success could have sustained through the 1990s with Democratic President Bill Clinton. Instead, the Virginia Democrats conceded to Wilder's demands and ultimately let him run the party into temporary disarray. The political factions that emerged in the Virginia Democratic Party often appear rooted in policy differences, yet it is clear that Wilder's ideologies were often times inconsistent and merely used whenever convenient for him. Wilder's national ambitions would cost Virginia economically and cost the Democratic Party control over Richmond. The downfall of Wilder marked the downfall of the Virginia Democratic Party for the next decade.

Despite the setbacks that Wilder's governorship ultimately gave the Virginia Democratic Party, Wilder's election was a breakthrough moment for Democratic politics in the Commonwealth and for blacks nationally. This election would solidify African American support for the Virginia Democratic Party through the present, while also bringing this demographic to the polls in mass numbers. Moreover, this election proved that blacks could be elected to high-ranking positions. When asked what his greatest contribution as an African American leader was, Wilder replied, "To the extent that I've been given opportunity, I've not abused it. To the extent that I've had chances to occupy positions, I've shown that it's possible for people to serve in these positions and be fair, be judgmental to the extent of exercising the fairness that some people thought might not have been the case."⁶⁴ The real disappointment of 1989 to many was not electing a black governor, but the fact that there was not a better-equipped black alternative in the Commonwealth. The significance of Wilder's election in the black community of Virginia, despite being politically unsuccessful, cannot be overstated.

On Wilder's desk sits a sign that says, "I don't get mad. I just get even." This simple phrase defines Wilder's political philosophy of leadership. Wilder notes on politics, "You do what you need to do to get the upper hand. Politics is a give-and-take thing. It's not a hateful thing. It's a matter of the art of the possible."⁶⁵ Wilder was a byproduct of the "art of possible" of Virginia's politics. His clever tactics led him to the most powerful position in Virginia. Yet, Wilder's potential was masked by his inability to unite Virginians throughout his tenure. Wilder proves to be the cautionary tale of the last

⁶⁴ Julian Bond "Interview with L. Douglas Wilder," University of Virginia.

⁶⁵ Julian Bond "Interview with L. Douglas Wilder," University of Virginia.

decade of allowing personal agendas to interfere with party coherency, ultimately causing the party to suffer more than it ever had.

IV. A Return to the Right, 1993-2001

Virginians know that government policies have been diminishing opportunity and stifling initiative under the heavy, grimy boot of excessive taxation and spending regulation. The problem in Virginia today is not that the people have lost touch with reality – It is that our government has lost touch with the people.⁶⁶

- George Allen

If the 1980s marked a period of success for the Virginia Democratic Party, the 1990s could not have been more different. Two failed candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, a cocaine and partying scandal, and loss of control over the General Assembly were among the biggest concerns of the 1990s for the Democrats. The Democratic Party of Virginia was utterly dysfunctional and failing as the Republican Party reemerged stronger than ever. Virginia Democrats succeeded under Republican presidents Reagan and George Bush, Sr., but as the White House turned to the left with the election of President Clinton in 1992, the Commonwealth ran to the right.

The downfall of the Democratic Party of Virginia began with Wilder's failed attempt at running for president in 1992, which ultimately contributed to his unsuccessful tenure as Governor of Virginia. At the same time, Senator Robb became engulfed in a scandal including cocaine and mistresses. Robb had been accused of attending numerous

⁶⁶ Baker, Peter, & Baker, Donald. "Allen Assails Democrats at Inauguration". *The Washington Post*, January 16, 1994.

parties in Virginia Beach, at many of which cocaine was alleged to be present. As the coverage of this scandal began to pick up, so too did allegations of Robb's "special friend" Tai Collins, a former Miss Virginia and Playboy star, who gave the governor a "massage" in a New York hotel.⁶⁷ These damning allegations also led to problems with Robb's staff attempting to cover up these episodes, and Robb later admitted to some foul play and conduct "not appropriate for a married man."⁶⁸ Aside from damaging the Senator's reputation, and later hurting him in his reelection bid in 1994, it embarrassed the Virginia Democratic Party immensely. By 1992, the Virginia Democrats' two biggest stars had fallen out of the national spotlight.

The 1993 election for governor proved to be the beginning of a long struggle for Democrats in Richmond. The race pitted two-time Attorney General Mary Sue Terry against rising Reagan Republican star George Allen. Winning 58.27% of the vote, Allen's decisive victory would linger throughout the Commonwealth for over a decade. Allen's outspoken nature against women's rights and his support for school prayer gained him immense support among Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell's followers. Despite Terry's desire to deter swing voters from Allen due to his relationship with fundamentalist Christian leaders, this strategy played out in favor of Allen. On election day, 34% of voters were white, evangelical/born-again Christians. In the presidential election one year earlier, only 18% of the electorate identified as such.⁶⁹ Allen brought the evangelical movement to the polls in mass numbers, resulting in increased power for

⁶⁷ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 111.

⁶⁸ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 112.

⁶⁹ Sabato, Larry J., "Virginia's 1993 Elections: The 12-Year Itch Returns", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 70, No. 2. December 31, 1993, p. 5.

religious politics in Virginia through the modern day. Intra-party conflicts combined with Terry's inability to unite Northern Virginia Democrats and Democrats from Southside was her biggest problem in the election. Unlike Robb in 1981, Terry lost the urban corridor, only carrying 44.1% to Allen's 55.1%.⁷⁰ An activist speaking to the Washington Post in August of 1993 commented: "It's a Catch-22 problem with Clinton. Clinton is killing her down state but when she criticizes him up here, she turns off a lot of loyal party people."⁷¹ Yet, it is difficult to say that anyone else could have done better. The Virginia Democratic Party had self-imploded by 1992, and any Democrat would have faced a tough time winning in Virginia's newly conservative political climate.

Conservatives Republicans would decisively take over the state throughout the 1990s, including gaining control of the General Assembly in 1999 for the first time ever. Allen's legislative initiatives included strengthening the criminal justice system, increasing funding to education, and establishing tax cuts throughout the state. Undoubtedly partisan, the 1990s became amongst the most polarizing times in General Assembly history. More controversial topics, including anti-abortion legislation, would rise in the General Assembly during this era, but increasing Republican presence in both houses along with Allen's popularity allowed for Republican legislative achievements throughout the decade. Democrats would continue to struggle in the 1997 statewide elections, and its star, Senator Robb, would lose his U.S. Senate seat in 2000 to Allen.

⁷⁰ Sabato, Larry J., "Virginia's 1993 Elections: The 12-Year Itch Returns", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 70, No. 2. December 31, 1993, p. 5.

⁷¹ Baker, Donald, & Harris, John "Terry Told to Step Up Campaign." *The Washington Post*, August 19, 1993.

The 1990s would continue the seemingly contradictory trend of one party controlling the national government and the opposite party controlling Virginia. Despite President Clinton's success in Washington, the Republicans had taken over Virginia, and it appeared there was no end in sight to GOP rule there. A major problem for the Democratic Party of Virginia then was its lack of coherent leadership of the party. The Robb-Wilder feud of the late 1980s and early 1990s created divisions based on ideology and personality. To add to their feud, Wilder challenged Robb in the 1994 U.S. Senate race. This challenge never amounted to Wilder truly seeking the seat, but Wilder speaking out against the sitting governor only exacerbated existing party conflicts. As Robb and Wilder both went through their own personal collapses of popularity, the Democratic Party saw its two most dynamic figures of the last decade slowly fade away from their national stardom. Moreover, the party in some ways lost its sense of identity. Commenting on the era, former Virginia Democratic Governor, current U.S. Senator, and then Virginia Democratic Party Chairman Mark Warner noted that the Democrats of Virginia struggled too hard to align themselves with the national party, and in turn lost support of many of its supporters.⁷² Eventually, Mark Warner would run for governor in 2001, rescue the party from its doldrums, and become one of the most popular governors in Virginia history.

It is difficult to pinpoint the real source of all of the problems the Virginia Democratic Party faced during this era. As an increasingly "red" state, it seemed natural that Virginians would support Governors Allen and Jim Gilmore during the 1990s.

⁷² Senator Warner interview.

Additionally, as the role of the Virginia government expanded during the 1980s, a campaign encouraging the reduction of state government could be appealing to many Virginia voters. Economically, especially after the economic setbacks of the Wilder era, a return to fiscal conservatism and pro-development policies allowed Allen to reclaim Virginia and revive the Republican Party. The extent to which Allen's social policies, particularly those regarding abortion, were widely supported is unclear. It is likely that voters allowed for these initiatives to go through because they supported the Allen-Gilmore economic plans. Perhaps, however, Virginia was truly becoming more socially conservative as the rise of the Evangelical Right was growing. Social conservatives in Virginia were undoubtedly unsatisfied with the state and nation's leaders, as both Robb's and Clinton's extramarital affairs left the morally traditional gravely concerned. These events aided the desires of evangelical and socially conservative Virginians to retain control over state politics in order to enforce their own political agendas. The extrapolitical scandals in both the Virginia and National Democratic Parties propelled the Allen-Gilmore duo to unparalleled GOP success in the Old Dominion.

Failures to capitalize on demographic changes for the Virginia Democratic Party during the 1990s also contributed to the rapid downfall of the once dominant party. As population growth and urbanization continued in the Commonwealth, the Virginia Democratic Party struggled to retain the support it had once had by its 1980s coalition. By 1990, 58% of Virginia's residents now lived in Northern Virginia, Richmond, and

Hampton Roads.⁷³ In-migration to Virginia had taken off at the end of the 1980s, contributing to this population transformation. Virginia was one of only six states to gain over 200,000 new residents from 1985-1990, with only Florida, California, and Texas receiving more new residents.⁷⁴ This population growth had contributed to the Democratic Party's success in the 1980s, yet this group was now voting more favorably for the Republican Party. Additionally, the election of Wilder in both 1985 and 1989 had solidified African American support for the Democratic Party in Virginia. With the black vote going over 90% for the Democratic Party in the 1980s, the Democratic Party had found a new, loyal support base. Yet, both George Allen and Jim Gilmore received nearly 20% of the African American vote in both 1993 and 1997.⁷⁵ Although this percentage difference was not radically higher, it was electorally significant. The Virginia Democratic Party was rapidly losing votes that had seemed safe just a decade earlier, especially as more energized Christian conservatives were regularly participating in elections.

As such, the 1990s proved to be abysmal years for the Virginia Democratic Party. The loss of control over the General Assembly was perhaps the biggest disaster for the party during this decade and is a problem the Democrats are still trying to overcome. In 1973, Virginia Democrats held 71 of the 100 seats in the House of Delegates. By 2003, Virginia Democrats controlled just 34, two more than they currently hold. The

⁷³ Martin, Julia H. & Tolson, Donna J., "Virginia's Population: Changing Patterns of Growth", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 72, No. 3. April 30, 1996, p. 2.

⁷⁴ Spar, Michael A. & Tolson, Donna J., "Domestic Migration in Virginia: Historic Patterns and Demographic Change", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 74, No. 2. February 28, 1998, p. 1.

⁷⁵ Sabato, Larry J., "A Century in the Making: The 1997 Republican Sweep", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 74, No. 1. January 31, 1998, p. 12.

Democratic Party of Virginia's loss of the General Assembly has had lasting implications for Democratic policy successes in the Commonwealth, despite electing several candidates statewide. If there is a bright side to the struggles within the party during the 1990s it is that Mark Warner would take control over the state. Warner's popularity would lead to a decade of progress for both the Democratic Party and the entire Commonwealth. Virginia Democrats spent the 1990s searching for a way to regain prominence. By 2001, the party was ready to reclaim the Governor's Mansion and create a lasting coalition through the present.

V. Warner, Kaine, Bipartisanship, and Progressive Politics, 2001-2015

As Virginians, we have been revolutionary when necessary; loyal when called and determined when the mission is before us. My fellow Virginians, it is time – once again – for a little revolution – a revolution based not upon a desire to separate or tear apart, but upon the need to unite and come together. And, because in any revolution, there must be a first shot fired – let us begin by changing the way we do business in Richmond. Mr. Speaker and Mr. President Pro Temp of the Senate – on behalf of all Virginians – I extend to you the hand of friendship and cooperation. Consider what we can create together.⁷⁶

- Mark Warner

After the 1990s' political disasters for the Virginia Democratic Party, the 2000s found the Democrats reclaiming their lost power. In 2000, Virginia continued its trend of voting Republican for national offices by helping to elect George W. Bush to the White House and George Allen to replace Chuck Robb in the U.S. Senate. Despite the support for Republicans, Virginia was beginning to return towards the left. The end of Gilmore's term as governor appeared to be leading the Commonwealth into an economic downfall.

⁷⁶ Warner, Mark, "The Sensible Center," Notes from the Sausage Factory, April 15, 2005, p. 288.

Moreover, as the Republicans now exclusively ran the state, the Democratic Party of Virginia could effectively blame the economic setbacks on their colleagues across the aisle.

Mark Warner was ready to take control over the Commonwealth's politics. A former telecommunications executive, Warner was prepared to restore fiscal responsibility to a state that had been enacting immense tax cuts and, as a result, hurting its economy. What Warner lacked in political inexperience he made up for in his desire to move Virginia forward. Despite losing in 1996 to Senator John Warner (no relation), Mark Warner's impressive showing in the race, with 47.39% of the vote against a popular incumbent, gave Democrats hope that Mark Warner could become the new face of the Democratic Party of Virginia, and perhaps the new face of the Democratic Party nationally.⁷⁷ (Note: unless specified otherwise, "Warner" will refer to Mark Warner for the remainder of this essay).

Warner's strategy in the 2001 gubernatorial election was not to appeal solely to suburban voters in Virginia, but also to retain the party's presence in rural Virginia, specifically in Southwest Virginia. Additionally, Warner presented himself to Virginians as a new kind of Democrat to Virginians. He focused on returning the state to fiscal responsibility, which he argued meant using as much money as necessary to fund only the essential services to Virginia. Helping his credibility was the single fact that Warner was a most unusual kind of Democratic gubernatorial candidate – a successful businessman. Warner was not necessarily against or for tax cuts, but he realized that the

⁷⁷ US Election Data

tax cuts enacted under Allen and Gilmore, while pleasing some individuals throughout the Commonwealth, were not responsible and in fact caused more harm to Virginians as the Commonwealth's economy was lagging and the state lacked adequate funding for key services such as education. Amid conflicts within the Virginia GOP over the choice of Gilmore's successor and enacting a new state budget, Mark Warner would be elected Governor of Virginia over Republican Mark Earley. Warner won 52.16% to the former attorney general's 47.03%.⁷⁸ Also helping Warner win the election was undoubtedly his bank account. The former CEO was able to self-finance many aspects of the campaign. Elected with Warner would be Democrat Timothy Kaine as Lieutenant Governor and Republican Jerry Kilgore as Attorney General. The two would square off in the gubernatorial election in 2005.

Warner's success in Virginia is key to understanding the Democratic Party of Virginia today. Like his predecessor, Robb, Warner was able to draw support from progressive liberals and fiscal conservatives by appealing to the moderates throughout the state. Warner would dub this the "sensible center," a center that continues to support Democrats throughout the state today.⁷⁹ Despite applauding Wilder for not increasing taxes during his term as governor, Warner saw a slowing economy nationally and in Virginia as something that needed to be addressed with certain tax increases. By 2004, Warner enacted a widespread tax increase of \$1.4 billion.⁸⁰ One may assume the tax increase would be unpopular amongst voters, but by taking a risk to help stimulate

⁷⁸ The Virginia Elections and State Elected Officials Database Project

⁷⁹ Warner, Mark, "The Sensible Center," Notes from the Sausage Factory, April 15, 2005, p. 288.

⁸⁰ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 278.

Virginia's economy, Warner attained record high public approval ratings, including reaching 74% in the summer of 2005.⁸¹ Warner not only redefined what it meant to be a Virginia Democrat, he challenged national Democratic leaders to reevaluate what it meant to be a Democrat in America. Frank Atkinson writes:

Warner's moderate stance on values-laden social issues, his emphasis on fiscal discipline, and his conciliatory, bipartisan tenor had made him successful and popular in the Old Dominion, and the fact that his stock was high in conservative Virginia in turn made him a rare political property—and rising star—in a struggling national Democratic Party that had lost back-to-back presidential contests.⁸²

Warner's successes in rolling out new taxes for Virginians and, by doing so, becoming increasingly popular in a newly “red” state made his star power soar. This popularity would later lead to a successful bid for U.S. Senator against another former governor, Jim Gilmore, in 2008. Warner's appeal to the center would prove to be an essential strategy for Democrats in the 2005 election and help lead colleague Tim Kaine to the Governor's Mansion in 2005. Mark Warner is perhaps the most successful Virginia Democrat in the last fifty years, not solely because of his electoral successes, but because of his widespread popularity throughout the Commonwealth. His close reelection in 2014 against Republican Ed Gillespie may appear on the surface as contradictory to Warner's widespread popularity. The closeness of the election was in part due to low turnout throughout the Commonwealth, but also because the Republican Party of Virginia had run a sensible candidate for the first time in several years. Warner remains well liked

⁸¹ Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 280.

⁸² Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard, 282-283.

throughout Virginia today, and is praised for his bipartisan efforts in the Senate by colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

The early 2000s were not nearly as unifying as Warner's popularity, however. The anti-abortion movement remained at the forefront of Virginia's legislative politics. During the 2003 General Assembly, 26 anti-choice provisions were introduced, along with five budget amendments impeding a women's right to choose.⁸³ This measure, among other controversial topics, shows how conservative the Republican Party of Virginia had become. Christian Evangelicals now had an increased presence within the Virginia GOP, and therefore more power to pursue their conservative and religious policy agendas.

Virginia law limits its governors from serving consecutive terms. This rule, as demonstrated throughout this paper, has often times left parties divided and increased pressures upon the sitting party to mount a successful bid to stay in power. It is perhaps because of Warner's success that Tim Kaine would find himself sitting in the Governor's Mansion in 2006. Kaine, the son-in-law of Virginia's first Republican governor, Linwood Holton, had been labeled a liberal throughout his career. In order to appeal to Warner's "sensible center", Kaine would be forced to become more moderate. Kaine, however, would not rely as heavily upon rural, Southwestern Virginia for his election. Instead, Kaine focused on gaining the voters in the continuously growing Virginia suburbs, especially those of Northern Virginia and Tidewater, to be elected in 2005. It did not hurt Kaine, however, that Republican father-in-law, Holton, would campaign for him

⁸³ Greenberg, Ben, "The 2003 General Assembly Session: Attacks on Reproductive Rights", *The Virginia News Letter*, Vol. 79, No. 2. June 30, 2003, p. 1.

throughout the state. In his memoir, following Kaine's election in 2005, Holton wrote, "I know that Tim is optimistic; his enthusiasm almost bubbles. He will be able to bring these elected prima donnas (all elected officials are prima donnas!) together and successfully conclude one of the truly outstanding gubernatorial terms in Virginia's history."⁸⁴

Additionally, Kaine would emphasize his Catholic faith throughout the election, which not only helped connect him with certain voters throughout the state, but also diminished the allegations of him being strongly liberal. His Catholic faith, however, caused concerns among Christian Evangelical voters in Virginia. Yet, as the population in Northern Virginia continues to rise, the power of the Evangelical vote in Virginia diminishes proportionately. As such, Kaine's success in Northern Virginia helped propel him to victory, despite his lack of support among Virginia's most morally traditional. Although Warner would be upset with Kaine's lack of attention to rural Virginia, he would applaud the new governor for talking about his values and reaching out to various faith-based communities in the state.⁸⁵ Kaine's strategy, despite differing from his predecessor's, got him elected Governor of Virginia with 51.72% of the vote over his opponent, Republican Jerry Kilgore.⁸⁶ The Democratic Party of Virginia, however, would ultimately lose both the lieutenant governor's race to Bill Bolling, and the attorney general's race to Bob McDonnell. As such, Warner was credited with much of Kaine's electoral success, and rightfully so. Without Warner, the scene would not have been set

⁸⁴ Holton, *Opportunity Time*, 216.

⁸⁵ Atkinson, *Virginia in the Vanguard*, 290.

⁸⁶ The Virginia Elections and State Elected Officials Database Project

for Kaine to appeal to a broad range of Virginians, including those who find themselves at the ideological center. Warner propelled Kaine from lieutenant governor to governor, and in doing so established himself as a potential national candidate for president in 2008.

The Warner-Kaine successes of the 2000s have lasting implications for the Virginia Democratic Party. Both are now the current U.S. Senators of Virginia. Democrats control the governor's, lieutenant governor's, and attorney general's offices of Virginia. Barack Obama was elected in both 2008 and 2012 by receiving Virginia's Electoral College votes. Southern, former Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton lost Virginia in both 1992 by 4% and 1996 by 2%. This historic shift from solidly red to purple has now created a new political dynamic in Virginia that is of the utmost importance in presidential elections.

Despite Republican control of Virginia from 2010-2014, the last fifteen years have been remarkably promising for Virginia Democrats, except at the state legislative level. Undoubtedly, gerrymandering has some influence over the Republicans recent success, as well as the regularity with which strongly conservative voters head to the polls. Yet, if there is something to conclude from this, it is that none of it would have been possible without Mark Warner. Undeniably, Virginia Democrats have benefited from growing demographic changes in the state, including increased women, minorities, and suburban and urban voters, yet Mark Warner was the first to unite them successfully since the 1980s. Warner created a new coalition for Virginia Democrats that, although somewhat different than 2001, is still in tact. Without Warner's breakthrough election in

2001, the Virginia Democrats might well have become the kind of permanent minority party that they now are in so many other southern states.

VI. Conclusion

The current state of the Commonwealth has made making any coherent conclusions immensely difficult. Former Republican Governor Bob McDonnell is facing several years in prison for using the Office of the Governor to promote a friend's business, while also accepting gifts from the same man. McDonnell is the first Governor of Virginia ever to be convicted of a felony and its implications on the highly respected Virginia government are numerous. His wife, Maureen, also is facing jail time for the same crime. Virginia's current governor, Terry McAuliffe, is the former chairman of the DNC in a state whose Democratic Party hardly ever aligns completely with its national counterpart. His first two years have hardly been easy, dealing with a Republican controlled General Assembly and pressing issues in the Commonwealth such as Medicaid expansion and sexual assault reforms. Senator Warner nearly lost his reelection bid in 2014 despite his perceived popularity throughout the Commonwealth, thanks to a low-turnout election. And, to complicate Virginia politics even more, the General Assembly has an election in November 2015 and the Republican Party currently controls the Senate by one seat. All of this is to say that Virginia is changing, and no one is really sure which way it is heading at this moment.

What is clear, however, about the state of Virginia politics is that it is unique. In the last 50 years, the Virginia Democratic Party has undergone some of the most significant changes in any state party history while maintaining its electoral success.

From the party of segregation to the party of social progressivism, Virginia has transformed from a “blue” state to a “red” state, and now perhaps a “purple state”. By redefining its objectives, the party has become among, if not the most, successful Democratic Party of the South.

Virginia’s proximity to Washington D.C. certainly has contributed to the Virginia Democratic Party’s success. As the federal government’s size increases, the proportion of Virginians in favor of large government does as well. Moreover, as the federal government grows and expands out of Washington D.C. and into Northern Virginia, the Commonwealth has experienced steady, and substantial, population growth. The continually growing economy has allowed for Virginia’s major metropolitan areas, most notably in Northern Virginia, Richmond, and Tidewater, to expand drastically over the last 50 years.

Additionally, a strong black voting population in Virginia has encouraged the Virginia Democratic Party to remain a key player in state politics. Women, too, have found a spot in the Virginia Democratic coalition, as ever more conservative policies emerge from the New Right. The evangelically dominated GOP in Virginia now has pushed many women into supporting the Democratic Party. Lastly, strong candidates, with national ambitions, have given the party the strength and leadership it has needed to sustain over the last half century. Even times of leadership crisis for the Virginia Democratic Party, including the seemingly twelve year rift between Robb and Wilder, allowed the party to refocus its strategies and values to emerge successful later on.

These major factors have collectively created a Democratic Party in Virginia that remains strong and successful in the new millennium. This complex dynamic created in the Commonwealth is a result of all of the aforementioned causes, and likely others, that have encouraged liberal politics in a former Confederate state. It is very possible that without any one of these causal factors, Virginia would have followed its southern trajectory and remained a solidly “red” state. Instead, Virginia has emerged in 2015 as the only state in the South that has regularly supported Democratic politics in the last 50 years, with the notable exception of Florida.

These changes have widespread implications for Southern politics. Virginia differs greatly from its former Confederate allies due to its proximity to the North and consequently to Washington D.C. Yet, rural Virginia and urban Virginia still, to an extent, reflect the rest of the South’s population. Using Virginia as a model for what a state Democratic Party can truly be could have groundbreaking implications for other southern states. Undoubtedly, some of the factors contributing to the rise of the Virginia Democratic Party cannot be transferred to other southern states. Alabama cannot magically be geographically dependent on the federal government, nor can Arkansas rely on the economic prosperity of a shipping industry along the Atlantic Ocean. Southern Democratic parties, however, can look to Virginia as a model for their platforms. Virginia has proven time and again that nominating fiscally conservative and moderately progressive candidates has encouraged the rise of the Virginia Democratic Party. These candidates have a broader appeal to the electorate than many of their national counterparts; yet, they still embody Democratic values and traditions. The Virginia

Democratic Party has not been successful because of an alliance with the Democratic National Committee; it has been successful because it has assessed the needs of Virginians and catered to them. The Virginia Democratic Party's successes, and failures as well, have been largely due to its own analysis of how to best serve the citizens of the Old Dominion. This analysis in other southern states could potentially lead to a more prominent Democratic presence in the South, especially as urban, southern cities continue to grow in the coming years. It appears certain that the Democratic Parties will not be booming throughout the South anytime soon, but should southern states create a broad coalition of voters, much like that in Virginia, the national political climate could change immensely.

If Holton was the creator of the modern Virginia Republican Party, the Democratic Party also owes much of its success to him. By making politics competitive in Virginia again, he forced the Democratic Party to reevaluate its goals and ideals. To the extent that Holton forced the Democratic Party to recreate itself if it wanted to remain successful, Chuck Robb saved the party. He made being a Democrat in Robert E. Lee's home state an acceptable idea once again. This time, the Democrats of Virginia would be champions of racial and gender equality, and redefine the meaning of liberal politics in Virginia. Virginia Democrats today owe much thanks to Mark Warner, for saving the party from its disastrous period in the 1990s and creating a sound, formidable Democratic Party in the new millennium. Together, Robb and Warner have kept the Democratic Party relevant, and without them Virginia perhaps would be solely run by the GOP, much like the rest of the South.

Virginia's rich political history has undoubtedly been transformed since the 1960s. From one party control of all aspects of state government to an intensely competitive political environment today, Virginia has now emerged as one of the biggest swing states in the nation. It is too soon to tell if this trend will continue, but I would argue that the Democrats' success nationally and at the statewide level in Virginia despite Republican strength locally will encourage more competition within the state. If urban voters continue to be swing voters, the future of Virginia's politics is evermore purple.

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