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# What do Virginia's election results mean for Nevada?



U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, left, and Gov. Steve Sisolak face potentially contentious battles as they seek re-election. (Las Vegas Review-Journal file)

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Could Nevada voters in 2022 follow Virginia's lead Tuesday, electing Republicans in statewide races next year even as both states have trended blue?

The answer might be more nuanced than most of Wednesday's quick-draw analyses suggest.

Partisans and pundits see Republican Glenn Youngkin's victory over former Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe Tuesday in the Virginia governor's race as a groundswell that portends similar results across the political landscape through next year. Youngkin's win anchored a GOP sweep in his state; elsewhere, Democrats on Long Island in suburban New York suffered similar losses, and in New Jersey, Democratic incumbent Gov. Phil Murphy Wednesday managed only a wafer-thin victory against an unexpectedly strong Republican challenger in a race no one thought would be that close.

Wasting no time, candidates and political observers set about Wednesday to reassess and refine strategies and recalibrate odds and expectations in Nevada's two top races next year, as incumbent Democrats Gov. Steve Sisolak and U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto seek re-election.

Among them, analysts at the University of Virginia's Center for Politics on Wednesday changed ratings in four key 2022 Senate races — including Cortez Masto's — moving it from “leans Democratic” to “toss-up” and calling Tuesday's elections “a horrible result from Democrats.”



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Cortez Masto's likely Republican challenger, Adam Laxalt, seized on the rating change to claim momentum amid signs that “the people of this country are hungry for change and Nevada is ready to deliver in 2022.”

## ‘Wake up call’

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The Sisolak campaign sent an early-morning appeal for contributions Wednesday, calling Youngkin's win a “wake-up call” for Democrats and a reminder that former President Donald Trump “still has strongholds in battleground states across the country.”

Former U.S. Sen. Dean Heller, one of a half-dozen Republicans seeking the nomination to challenge Sisolak, saw a different kind of bellwether, tarring Sisolak together with McAuliffe and President Joe Biden for supporting the “far-left priorities of today's Democrats.”

Another Republican strategist noted that where Biden won Virginia by 10 points in 2020, he won Nevada by less than three, making a reversal seemingly more within reach here next year.

There is plenty to suggest how Nevada could go the way of Virginia in 2022. But there is just as much or more to suggest otherwise. Here's a look at what's similar, what's different, and what remains to be seen.

## What's the same?

The big picture, for one. National political winds blow the same direction across the entire country. The question is which way the winds will be blowing a year from now.

Exit polling in Virginia Tuesday by the Washington Post showed Youngkin's win over McAuliffe driven by the state's independent voters, Biden's low approval ratings, and voter concern over the economy and education. A uniform rightward shift in all counties across the state, pollwatchers there said, pointed to general voter frustration with Democrats and the sluggish economic recovery more than to the impact of Youngkin's main talking points, which included tapping into partisan fear-mongering over dubious issues such as teaching critical race theory in schools.

The current American electorate is precipitously divided as well as notoriously fickle. Back in July, before COVID-19 illnesses and deaths began to climb again, and Democrats in Washington descended into infighting over potentially era-defining policy shifts, Biden and Sisolak shared similarly positive approval ratings that were both in the low 50s.

Now, in less than four months, Biden's approval has plunged into negative territory, the lowest of any president save Trump at this point in his presidency going back to the Dwight Eisenhower administration. There's no equivalent recent polling on Sisolak's rating, but it's not unreasonable to assume it might have been similarly affected, as Democrats take lumps for inflation, infection, and a seeming inability to enact their priorities.

Democrats in Nevada hold a government trifecta – the governor's office and both houses of the Legislature – and five of six statewide offices overall (with one currently vacant but subject to Sisolak's appointment). Unhappy voters blame the party in power, so political and economic uncertainty in Nevada and nationally could land squarely on Democrats if it persists through 2022.

Where will Americans – and Nevadans – be next year with regard to jobs, the economy, education and the pandemic? What will the prevailing political mood be if Democrats enact, or fail to enact, their social policy and infrastructure plans? Predictions, especially on the economy, can be a fool's errand. In Nevada, recent data suggest a strong if not uniform economic recovery from the darkest days of the pandemic last year, but unemployment, though half of what it was in 2020, is still twice its pre-pandemic levels.

Still, the same pollster who measured Sisolak's favorable rating in July found 6 of 10 Nevadans satisfied with the state's direction a month later. Much of what happens in Nevada next year will depend on events still to come.

## Tactics, strategy portable

A consistent, one-size-fits-all election strategy also is emerging. In Youngkin's candidacy, Republicans appear to have struck upon a winning formula to harness Trump's dynamite without blowing themselves up with it. After winning Virginia's unusual ranked-choice Republican convention in May, Youngkin in the general election largely kept the Trump genie in its bottle, releasing it only as needed and then in diluted form. The so-called “Trump Lite” strategy was seen as successfully countering the flight of suburban voters, women in particular, to Biden in 2020 in Virginia and elsewhere.

Nevada's Republican hopefuls are taking a similar tack, embracing themes that resonate with the party faithful, such as election integrity, but avoiding Trumpian histrionics.

The Democratic strategy of lashing Republicans to Trump at every turn also has been playing in Nevada, though Democrats might reassess the tactic given how little it appeared to help McAuliffe. Running against Trump, or really Trumpism, wasn't enough for him to win over Virginia voters.

## What's completely different

Youngkin as former co-head of a major private equity firm found freshness and wealthier professionals in suburban northern Virginia. Nevada's Republicans as of yet don't have an equivalent in the governor's race — it depends who wins next June's primary.

McAuliffe, a Democratic fundraiser who was Virginia's governor from 2014-2018, was an insider with a track record and somewhat scrambled campaign messaging. Sisolak is an incumbent whose handling of the pandemic overall has won more praise than condemnation.

With a net worth of \$480 million, Youngkin was also rich, loaning his campaign \$20 million and slightly outpacing McAuliffe overall, according to data through late October. No candidate in Nevada flashes that kind of cash.

Nor are Virginia's demographics much similar to Nevada's. The overall population distribution, along with urban-rural and partisan divides, differ in the two states. Virginia doesn't track party affiliation among registered voters, but exit polls Tuesday showed a 50-50 split in turnout between Democrats and Republicans. Nevada's registration numbers are 34 percent Democrat to 30 percent Republican, with 27 percent of voters nonpartisan.

In the latest census data, Nevada ranked as the third most diverse state, with a white population that shrank from two-thirds to about half the state total between 2010 and 2020. Virginia was 14th most diverse with a population that is 60 percent white, down from 69 percent a decade ago.

Finally, in the Nevada governor's race, Republicans will pick their candidate in a closed primary. In that match-up, candidates typically aim their message at the party's most active and partisan faithful, shifting back to the middle afterward if they win. Youngkin was chosen in an “unassembled” ranked-choice election via a party convention, winning on the sixth round.

The different methods, involving different constituencies, can produce similarly different outcomes — a candidate with Youngkin's background might not have fared well in a traditional primary. To win the nomination for governor, Nevada's Republicans are now trying to outflank each other on the right. Where the victor of that contest goes afterward depends on factors neither party can now predict, nor control.

Besides incumbency, Sisolak has one additional advantage: no primary opponent. He can use the months between now and June to raise money and immediately launch a barrage of attack ads once the GOP primary is over, before the bruised winner has time to regroup and respond.

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