

# **Introduction to Virginia Politics: Overview**

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It is tempting to focus on national politics when we're trying to understand what's going on in the country. The emergence of a 24-hour news cycle, along with the increasing influence of social media (what I like to call the "unmediated media") provides us with a seemingly unmanageable amount of information; adding state and local politics to our political landscape seems impossible.

However, in an era when the political dialogue often focuses on moving programs to the states rather than basing them in Washington, it is more important than ever for us to know what's going on at the state level. But all too often, even people who have lived in a state for a long time – much less the people who are recent immigrants to the state – don't have much information or insight into how their state government operates, who their elected officials are, and what issues their state emphasizes. This thought process led me to develop this class.

Virginia has played a long and storied role in American History, starting with the first permanent English colony in America at Jamestown in 1607. During the colonial and revolutionary period, Williamsburg and other parts of Virginia played an important role in determining America's founding principles. Many of the most significant actors in early United States history – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, Patrick Henry, to name a few – were Virginians. Historic sites – including nearby Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown – are inescapable in Virginia

Virginia continued to provide leadership during the early years of the Republic. Four of the first five Presidents of the United States were Virginians – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. The first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall, a cousin of Jefferson, was also from Virginia. Many of the most well-known historic homes in America are in Virginia – Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Gunston Hall, to name just a few.

During the Civil War, Virginia was impacted more than any other state in either the North or the South; depending on how you count the battles of this war, as many as 1/3 of them were located in Virginia. Both the first battle of the war (Manassas/Bull Run in 1861) and the last major event of the war (Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865) occurred in Virginia. A Virginian named Wilmer McLean was present for both of these events; many of the events of the Battle of Bull Run took place on his farm, and Lee surrendered to Grant in the parlor of the home McLean had moved to in order to avoid the war. Again, many of the most famous names associated with the Civil War – Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, JEB Stuart – were Virginians.

Given Virginia's storied past, it is tempting to ask of Virginians "So what have you done for us lately?" I was asked that question about a year ago by a friend I had come to know through the Christopher Wren Association (the precursor to Osher), and that was another impetus for putting this class together. After the Civil War, the reconstruction era challenged Virginians to re-integrate with the Union, and in subsequent decades Virginia and the rest of the country

faced a period of growth and change associated with industrialization and urbanization. After World War II, Virginia experienced a period of dramatic demographic change that has extended into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Virginia's population grew and became ethnically more diverse.

In this class, I want to accomplish several things.

First, I want to give you a few pieces of basic information about politics in Virginia – the demographics of the state, the structure of state government, and some ground rules that underpin how Virginia does things. I'm assuming that although some of the people taking this class are probably long-term residents of the state, many of you are recent or at least not-so-distant transplants to Virginia and may not understand how Virginia does things.

Second, I want to help you understand the processes of politics in Virginia – for example, how our electoral districts are configured, when we hold elections, and some recent changes to the Virginia political system.

Third, I want to introduce you to some significant Virginians – both current office-holders and people whose recent contributions to the state have been significant.

Fourth – and probably most importantly – I want to encourage you to get involved in the political process in Virginia. We have statewide elections in Virginia coming up this fall – in Virginia, it's always an election year. We're all aware that politics and governance in the United States are undergoing serious challenges, and it's up to us to keep it working. As Benjamin Franklin famously said at the conclusion of the 1787 Constitutional Convention, we have a republic "if we can keep it." You may be from another part of the country originally, but you're a Virginian now, and we need you.

### **Useful Websites:**

These are only a few of the sources available to help you understand how Virginia works. I suggest you take some time to explore these sites. A sentiment often attributed to Thomas Jefferson goes something like this: "A properly functioning democracy depends on an informed electorate." Although Jefferson probably never said or wrote these exact words, he certainly supported the sentiment. Modern information silos create a situation where Americans don't always agree on "the facts" of a situation, which makes it virtually impossible for us to arrive at mutually agreed-upon solutions. You want to be the person with the facts.

- Virginia Places: <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/>, which describes itself as "an exploration of Virginia's history and geography." This site provides links to all kinds of information about Virginia; it will keep you occupied for days.
- Virginia General Assembly: <https://virginiageneralassembly.gov/>, where you can find all sorts of information about how laws are made in Virginia. You can use the "Who's My Legislator" function on this site (<https://whosmy.virginiageneralassembly.gov/>) to find out not only who your state and federal representatives are, but also how to contact them.
- The Commonwealth Institute: <https://thecommonwealthinstitute.org/>, a source invaluable to all the data nerds out there. Subscribe to their "Half-Sheet" to get a regular, up-to-the-minute, fact-based newsletter analyzing the economic impacts of legislation in Virginia, both as bills are being considered and after they are enacted.