

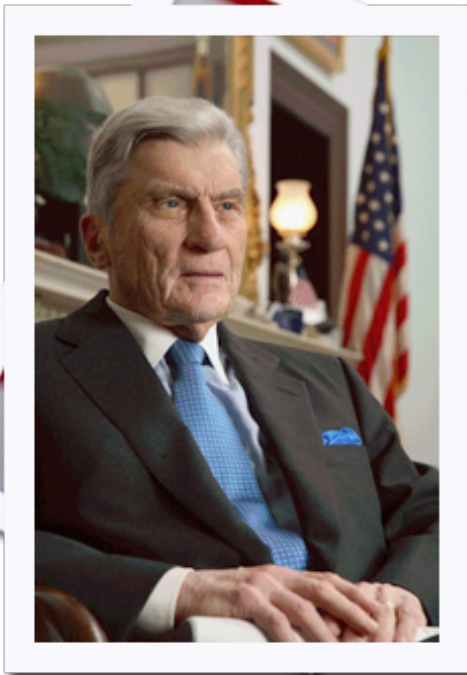
OPEN SEAT

John Warner (R) retires

CANDIDATES

Mark Warner (D), Jim Gilmore (R)

Virginia is a competitive, two-party state that offers viable choices in this year's race to succeed John Warner. But the impressive popularity and deep pockets of former Governor Mark Warner give him a big advantage over former Governor Jim Gilmore, who has faded from the limelight in recent years and is struggling to fund his campaign.



John Warner

Gilmore preceded Warner as Governor. Elected in 1997 on a promise to repeal the state property tax on automobiles, Gilmore partially succeeded in accomplishing that goal. The resulting stress on state finances threatened Virginia's triple-A bond rating and cleared the way for the 2001 election of Warner, who worked with a GOP-controlled legislature to vastly improve the state's budget situation. Warner left office with approval ratings off the charts, and his lieutenant governor, Tim Kaine, went on to win the governorship in 2005, thanks in part to Warner's popularity.

Shifting demographics are turning portions of Virginia blue and purple, especially in the vote-rich regions of Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. As a result, Virginia Republicans have lost the past two Gubernatorial campaigns in 2001 and 2005, George Allen's U.S. Senate seat in 2006, control of the state Senate in 2007, and 11 seats in the House of Delegates since 2003. This growing base of support for Democrats, along with Mark Warner's broad appeal among independent voters and GOP moderates, makes Warner a formidable candidate.

Before Gilmore dropped his brief campaign for the White House this year and jumped to the Senate race, U.S. Rep. Tom Davis was considered the favorite for the GOP nomination. But the state Republican Party, in a reproach to the moderate Davis, chose a nominating convention rather than a primary. With Gilmore heavily favored in a convention format, the seven-term incumbent Davis announced his retirement from politics. As it turned out, Gilmore barely survived a convention challenge from the right in his own party, securing the nomination with less than one percent over little-known Northern Virginia Delegate Bob Marshall. At the same convention, conservative Republicans sacked their incumbent state chairman, former Lt. Gov. John Hager, in favor of 32-year-old staunch conservative Delegate Jeff Frederick.

As the University of Virginia's Larry Sabato put it:

“The Virginia GOP has moved even further right at a time when the state as a whole has dramatically moderated, making the Republican party’s brand unpalatable to the key swing moderates and independents who determine the results of general elections, not to mention the band of Virginians who fund the candidates. All this is great news for the Democrats.”

Good news for the Republicans, however, comes in the form of John McCain who is widely expected to perform well in Virginia and should give Gilmore a boost. The Gilmore campaign is taking every opportunity to link Warner with Barack Obama, betting that Obama will not be appealing to a broad base of Virginia voters. Whether Obama proves a hindrance to the Warner camp remains to be seen, but certainly Virginia’s changing demographics, Mark Warner’s broad base, an unpopular war, and a weakened economy all point to a tough political environment for the GOP.

This contest is among the top targets of National Democrats looking to increase their narrow 51-49 margin in the U.S. Senate. Congressional Quarterly, National Journal, Roll Call, Robert Novak, Stuart Rothenberg and Larry Sabato all rate the outcome of this race as “Likely Democratic.”

Nationally, experts widely agree that the outlook for Republicans is bleak. In the Senate, there are 35 seats up this year, with 23 held by the GOP. Only 15 are truly competitive, and 13 of those are GOP seats. So Republicans have much more territory to defend, and if they could manage to break even in competitive races, they would still have a net loss of six seats.

According to Kiplinger.com:

Our latest survey of Senate races shows the GOP certain to lose one seat (Virginia), very likely to lose one other (New Mexico), and in real danger of losing two more (Colorado and New Hampshire). Two others are at best a toss-up (Mississippi and Minnesota). And Republicans have only a slight lead in Alaska, Maine, and Oregon. Even some Republicans who should be shoo-ins (John Cornyn in Texas, Pat Roberts in Kansas, Liddy Dole in North Carolina and Mitch McConnell in Kentucky) face challengers who are getting uncomfortably close in recent polls.”



Jim Gilmore



Mark Warner