Virginia 7: Roe, Roe, Roe to Re-election?

By Jacob Rubashkin

The Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* just three weeks ago, but the decision is already reverberating through congressional races across the country.

Democrats, facing serious headwinds nationally due to economic concerns and President Joe Biden's anemic approval ratings, are banking on newfound focus on abortion rights to generate enthusiasm among a disenchanted party, and to create opportunities to paint their GOP opponents as out of touch.

One of the places where this dynamic is most apparent is in Virginia's 7th District. Incumbent Democrat Abigail Spanberger faces a challenge from Prince William County Supervisor Yesli Vega, whose recent comments about abortion have put the issue front-and-center at the start of the general election.

The 7th was redrawn to include the Northern Virginia suburbs. It would have voted both for Biden in 2020 and for Republican Glenn Youngkin in 2021. In 2022, it could serve as a test case not just for the salience of abortion politics in a post-Roe world, but also for whether Republicans can claw back some of the suburbs that they have lost over the past decade.

The Lay of the Land

The new 7th District now reaches as far north as the southern half of Prince William County, in Northern Virginia. It includes all of Stafford, King George, Caroline, Spotsylvania, Culpepper, Orange, Madison, and Greene counties, as well as the independent City of Fredericksburg, and a single precinct in Albemarle County.

Prince William casts a plurality — 32 percent in 2020 — of the district's votes, and is the base of Democrats' strength in the district. Nearly 41 percent of all of Biden's votes in 2020 came from Prince William County.

The seat includes diverse and well-to-do outer suburbs of Washington, DC, a significant military presence in Quantico because of the Marine Corps base, and more rural counties north of Charlottesville

2022 House Ratings

Toss-Up (10D, 6R)

CA 22 (Valadao, R)	ME 2 (Golden, D)	NY 19 (Open; Delgado, D)	VA 2 (Luria, D)
CA 27 (Garcia, R)	MI 3 (Meijer, R)	OH 1 (Chabot, R)	WA 8 (Schrier, D)
CO 8 (Open, New)	NC13 (Open, R)	OH 9 (Kaptur, D)	
IA 3 (Axne, D)	NJ 7 (Malinowski, D)	PA 7 (Wild, D)	
KS 3 (Davids, D)	NM 2 (Herrell, R)	PA 8 (Cartwright, D)	

Tilt Democratic (8D, 1R)

IL17 (Open; Bustos, D)	NV 3 (S. Lee, D)
MI 7 (Slotkin, D)	NY 22 (Open; Katko, R)
MI 8 (Kildee, D)	PA 17 (Open; Lamb, D)
MN 2 (Craig, DFL)	VA 7 (Spanberger, D)
NH 1 (Pappas, D)	

Tilt Republican (4D, 2R)

AZ 6 (Open; Kirkpatrick, D)	TX 15 (Open; V. Gonzalez, D)
CA 45 (Steel, R)*	
MI 10 (Open; Levin, D)	
NY 1 (Open; Zeldin, R)	
OH 13 (Open; Ryan, D)	

Lean Democratic (9D, 1R)

CA 47 (Porter, D)	TX 28 (Cuellar, D)*
IL13 (Open; Davis, R)	
NC 1 (Open; Butterfield, D)	
NV 1 (Titus, D)	
NV 4 (Horsford, D)	
NY 3 (Open; Suozzi, D)	
NY 18 (Open; Maloney, D)	
OR 5 (Open; Schrader, D)	
RI 2 (Open; Langevin, D)*	

Lean Republican (2D, 3R)

AZ 1 (Schweikert, R)
AZ 2 (O'Halleran, D)
NE 2 (Bacon, R)
NY 2 (Garbarino, R)
WI 3 (Open; Kind, D)

Likely Democratic (18D)

AZ 4 (Stanton, D)
CA 9 (Harder, D)*
CA 13 (Open; Harder, D)
CA 49 (Levin, D)
CO 7 (Open; Perlmutter, D)
CT 5 (Hayes, D)
GA 2 (Bishop, D)
IL6 (Casten, D)
IL14 (Underwood, D)
IN 1 (Mrvan, D)
MD 6 (Trone, D)
NC 6 (Manning, D)
NC 14 (Open, New)
NH 2 (Kuster, D)
NM 3 (Leger Fernandez, D)
NY 4 (Open; Rice, D)
NY 17 (S. Maloney, D)
OR 4 (Open; DeFazio, D)
OR 6 (Open, New)
TX 34 (Gonzalez, D/Flores, R)

Likely Republican (5D, 10R)

AK AL Special (Vacant, R)
CA 3 (Open; McClintock, R)
CA 40 (Kim, R)
CA 41 (Calvert, R)
FL 5 (Rutherford, R)
FL 7 (Open; Murphy, D)
FL 13 (Open; Crist, D)
FL 15 (Open; Franklin, R)
FL 27 (Salazar, R)
GA6 (Open; McBath, D)
IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R)
IA 2 (Hinson, R)
MT 1 (Open, New)
NY 11 (Malliotakis, R)
PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)
TN 5 (Open; Cooper, D)

	GOP	DEM
Solid	187	167
Likely/Lean/Tilt	26	38
Total	213	205
Toss-up		17
Needed for majority		218

*moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans Takeovers in Italics

Republicans Have the Edge in Early House Projection

By Nathan L. Gonzales & Jacob Rubashkin

With less than four months before Election Day, the country is on track for a typical midterm election in which voters punish the president's party, particularly when it comes to House races.

Over the last century, the president's party has lost an average of 30 House seats in midterm elections. Midterm elections are typically performance reviews on the sitting president, and Joe Biden's job rating is in rough shape. He's at 39 percent approve and 56 percent disapprove, according to the latest *FiveThirtyEight* average, with no sign of a rebound.

Seventy-five percent of Americans believe the country is on the wrong track, compared with just 18 percent who believe the country is headed in the right direction, according to the *RealClearPolitics* average. That's usually not good for the party in power and Democrats control the executive and legislative branches of government.

When people are asked which party they want in control of Congress, Republicans have a 1.9-point lead in the *FiveThirtyEight* and *RealClearPolitics* averages.

Republicans may have eaten into their potential 2022 gains by outperforming expectations and gaining a dozen House seats in 2020. But they're still on track to do well.

With that political environment, we project that Republicans will gain between 12 and 30 House seats, with the potential for even larger GOP gains. They need a net gain of four seats for a majority. We'll modify or change our projection in the months ahead as the data and the races unfold.

Eagle-eyed readers will note that our individual House race ratings don't quite match up to that macro projection. It's true: if you tally all the races rated as Solid Republican, Likely Republican, Lean Republican, and Tilt Republican, and split the 17 Toss-up races, Republicans would have 221 seats. That would be a net gain of seven seats.

It's not unusual, however, for the individual ratings to lag. Many of the limited polls in individual races show Democratic candidates outperforming Biden's job rating by a significant margin. For now, voters appear to be making a distinction between their disapproval of the president and their congressional vote. That makes it difficult to "bury" Democratic incumbents in the ratings — rate them as underdogs with more than three months before Election Day — when they are running ahead of their GOP challengers.

The early data is also fueling Democratic hopes that their candidates have personal brands that can withstand the nationalization of congressional elections. While it's possible that that dynamic continues, it's more likely that the gap between Biden's job rating and Democratic performance closes between now and November, and Democratic candidates are pulled down by the weight of their president.

The House battleground, currently comprising 55 districts held by Democrats and 23 districts held by Republicans, will likely shift into more Democratic territory. Some seats currently held by Republicans will fall off the House battleground and be re-rated as Solid GOP, while some Democratic-held seats that were previously thought to be out of reach will be re-rated as competitive and added to the House playing field. And it's likely that Republicans win a disproportionately higher share of the Toss-up races.

There's still the potential for the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* to galvanize Democrats and a possibility that the court's decision will turn off independent voters and minimize the damage for Democrats. And an early 2024 presidential announcement by former President Donald Trump could complicate GOP efforts by taking attention away from the Democrats in power and giving voters a more clear choice between two unpopular options.

But for now, the majority of the data is pointing to a GOP House majority in the next Congress.

We're also making rating changes in a handful of races.

In **California's 45th District**, it's clear that Biden has a problem with voters that have rejected Donald Trump in the past, and GOP Rep. Michelle Steel is the beneficiary. Democrat Jay Chen is running a credible campaign, but Orange County might be reverting back to its GOP ways, at least this cycle. Move from Toss-up to Tilt Republican.

In **California's 9th District**, Democratic Rep. Josh Harder is facing Republican Tom Patti in a newly-drawn district that Biden would have carried in 2020. But total votes for Democratic candidates in the open, June primary only outpaced GOP candidates 50.1-49.1 percent. That sets the stage for a competitive race. Move from Solid Democratic to Likely Democratic.

Rhode Island's 2nd District will elect a Democrat under normal circumstances, but this isn't a typical cycle. A combination of a late, competitive, and crowded Democratic primary, the strength of likely GOP nominee Allan Fung, and the overall rough cycle for Democrats keeps making this race more competitive. Move from Likely Democratic to Lean Democratic.

In **Texas' 28th District**, Rep. Henry Cuellar narrowly survived the Democratic primary and now faces a credible challenge from Republican former congressional aide Cassy Garcia. There's mounting evidence that Democrats are struggling to maintain their advantage with Hispanic voters, and there's still no clarity on the FBI's raid on Cuellar's home in January. Move from Likely Democratic to Lean Democratic.

Gubernatorial Ratings Updates

ALASKA. Mike Dunleavy (R), elected 2018 (51%). Alaska's unique election system – the top four candidates in the August 16 all-party primary will compete on a ranked-choice ballot in November – make this race difficult to handicap. Dunleavy faces challengers from all sides. State Rep. Christopher Kurka and Kenai Peninsula Borough Mayor Charlie Pierce are running as Republicans, former state Rep. Les Gara is running as a Democrat, and former Gov. Bill Walker is running for his old job as an independent. Dunleavy, Walker, and Gara look well positioned to make it

Courtesy Bill Walker Campaign

Bill Walker

to the general election. Polling ranked-choice races can be tricky, but the limited data available suggests Dunleavy is hovering right around the 50 percent mark he'd need to win. But if he doesn't get there after either Pierce or Kurka are eliminated, there's the possibility that Walker or Gara could consolidate enough of the anti-Dunleavy vote to pull off an upset. The August primary will offer some more information about how this race is going. For now, though, it's worth monitoring. Move from Solid Republican to Likely Republican.

Alaska Survey Research (D), July 2-5 (LVs)(online)— General Election ballot: Dunleavy (R) 44%, Gara (D) 26%, Walker (I) 20%, Pierce (R) 11%. Ranked choice simulation: Dunleavy (R) 51%, Gara (D) 26%, Walker (I) 23%.

Lake Research Partners (D) for Gara campaign, May 5-11 (LVs)(mixed mode)— General Election ballot: Dunleavy (R) 40%, Gara (D) 20%, Walker (I) 18%, Pierce (R) 5%.

GEORGIA. Brian Kemp (R), elected 2018 (50%). Kemp continues to outpace his longtime adversary, 2018 gubernatorial nominee/former state House Minority Leader Stacey Abrams, in public and private polling; he leads in the *FiveThirtyEight* average by 6 points. Abrams has already spent $18 million on TV ads, including $10 million since the May 24 primary. In the wake of mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, Uvalde, Texas, and Highland Park, Illinois, she's gone on offense over a permitless concealed carry bill Kemp signed into law earlier this year. Abrams reported $18.5 million in her campaign accounts on June 30, so she's not likely to slow her pace anytime soon. .

Abrams' haul is a lot more than the $7 million Kemp reported on June 30. Along with his allies, the governor has aired just $4 million in ads since defeating former Sen. David Perdue in the GOP primary. This is set to be one of the most expensive races in the country, especially with a highly competitive Senate race happening at the same time. Tilt Republican.

FabrizioWard (R)/Impact Research (D) for AARP, July 5-11 (LVs)(mixed mode)— General Election ballot: Kemp over Abrams, 52% - 45%.

Data for Progress (D), July 1-6 (LVs)(online/text)— General Election ballot: Kemp over Abrams, 53% - 44%.

Quinnipiac University, June 23-27 (LVs)(live caller)— General Election ballot: Kemp and Abrams tied at 48%.

MINNESOTA. Tim Walz (DFL), elected 2018 (54%). Republicans won't officially have a nominee until August, but former state Sen. Scott Jensen won the party endorsement on the ninth ballot at the May state party convention, after which all of his major opponents dropped out. Walz had a significant cash-on-hand advantage at the end of May, with $4.5 million in the bank compared to Jensen's $663,000. And Jensen, a physician, has been the center of controversies around his downplaying of Covid-19 over the past two years.

This isn't a top-tier pickup opportunity for Republicans, or even a second-tier opportunity. But the national environment makes this less safe for Democrats compared to races in states such as New York, Rhode Island, or even Colorado. The presence of two different legal marijuana parties on the fall ballot is another headache for the governor — those parties, which have been accused of being GOP cutouts, tend to siphon away votes from Democrats. Walz should be alright, but keep an eye on the Land of 10,000 Lakes. Move from Solid Democratic to Likely Democratic.

Change Research (D) for MinnPost, June 3-8 (LVs)— General Election ballot: Walz over Jensen, 42% - 40%. "The candidate from either one of the legalize marijuana parties" 7%. McTavish (Independence) 3%.

SurveyUSA for KSTP, KAAL, WDIO, May 5-10 (LVs)— General Election ballot: Walz over Jensen, 44% - 39%.

NEW MEXICO. Michelle Lujan Grisham (D), elected 2018 (57%). Republican weatherman/2020 Senate nominee Mark Ronchetti won a resounding victory in the GOP primary, and looks like a credible threat to Lujan Grisham this fall. *Morning Consult* found in April that Lujan Grisham had one of the lowest approval ratings of any governor in the country, at just 48 percent approve/45 percent disapprove. Recent polls from

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Michelle Lujan Grisham

both Democratic and GOP firms show a highly competitive race. And Ronchetti also outraised Lujan Grisham in June, though she has twice as much cash-on-hand as he does.

This could be a contest where the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* could play significantly, since New Mexico, which has no restrictions on abortion, is poised to become a sanctuary for abortion-seekers from Texas and elsewhere. Democrats are already on the offensive, and as *New Mexico Politics*' Joe Monahan points out, even in 2013, Albuquerque voters handily rejected a post-20 weeks abortion ban, and those electorally significant suburbs have only grown more Democratic since.

But Lujan Grisham's campaign has also made a few unforced errors that have given Republicans opportunities to needle her. The governor is still the favorite but this is one to watch if a true red wave develops. Move from Likely Democratic to Lean Democratic.

Public Policy Polling (D) for New Mexico Politics, June 13-14 (RVs)— General Election ballot: Lujan Grisham over Ronchetti, 45% - 42%.

Public Opinion Strategies (R) for Ronchetti campaign, June 11-14 (LVs)— General Election ballot: Ronchetti over Lujan Grisham, 46% - 45%.

OREGON. Open; Kate Brown (D), term-limited. A spate of new polling, both public and private, show independent candidate Betsy Johnson, a former state senator, winning a sizable portion of the vote. At the moment, polls show a three-person race between Johnson, Democratic nominee/former state House Speaker Tina Kotek, and former state House Minority Leader Christine

Courtesy Betsy Johnson Campaign

Betsy Johnson

Drazan. But Johnson has been advertising heavily on TV for the general election since April, to the tune of $3 million, while Kotek and Drazan both ran smaller buys of $1.1 million ahead of their May 17 primaries. Moreover, in the post-primary period Johnson has spent $1.6 million on TV while Kotek and Drazan have been off the air. That's made both Democratic and Republican strategists skeptical Johnson has a path to victory outright, since she's had the airwaves to herself for two months and is at best in a tied race.

But even if Johnson has a ceiling of around one-third of the vote, her presence in the race is a true wildcard. That's because, though she's a former Democratic legislator, her aggressively centrist messaging seems to be pulling real support from Republicans as well as Democrats. So both parties — not just Democrats — are already stepping up their attacks on Johnson, in addition to gearing up against each other.

Oregon is a Democratic state, but gubernatorial races can be close, and Johnson's big spending (and backing from Oregon's wealthiest man, Nike founder Phil Knight) makes Kotek's life more difficult. Move from Likely Democratic to Lean Democratic.

Cygnal (R) for Oregon State Senate Republican Caucus, June 28-30 (LVs) (mixed mode)— General Election ballot: Drazan 32%, Kotek 31%, Johnson 24%.

GS Strategy Group (I) for Johnson campaign, June 23-29 (LVs)(live caller)— General Election ballot: Kotek 33%, Johnson 30%, Drazan 23%.

Nelson Research (R) for Oregon Catalyst, May 25-27 (LVs)(live caller)— General Election ballot: Drazan 30%, Kotek 28%, Johnson 19%.

WISCONSIN. Tony Evers (D), elected 2018 (49.5%). The GOP primary to take on Evers is hardly recognizable from just a few months ago. Republican power players tried hard to clear the field for former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, but businessman/2018 Senate candidate Kevin Nicholson and state Rep. Tim Ramthun both jumped in anyway. Then, construction company CEO/2004 Senate nominee Tim Michels made a late entrance in April, started spending millions of his own money on TV ads, and received a coveted endorsement from former President Donald Trump. And just a few weeks ago Nicholson, who had backing from GOP mega-donor Dick Uihlein, dropped out.

Now the contest is shaping up to be a two-person race between Michels and Kleefisch, with Ramthun, who is a major promoter of Trump's unfounded claims of a stolen election, much further back. That's relatively good news for Evers, who doesn't face a challenge in the primary and started advertising for the general election in early May. He's already spent $2.6 million on TV, while Republicans won't have a nominee until mid-August. But Wisconsin races are always close. Toss-up.

Marquette University, June 14-20— GOP Primary ballot (LVs): Michels 27%, Kleefisch 26%, Nicholson 10%, Ramthun 3%. General Election ballot (RVs): Evers over Kleefisch, 47% - 43%. Evers over Michels, 48% - 41%. Evers over Ramthun, 51% - 34%. IE

2022 Governor Ratings

Toss-up (2D, 1R)

AZ Open (Ducey, R)	Evers (D-Wisc.)
Kelly (D-Kan.)	

Tilt Democratic (3D)	Tilt Republican (1R)
PA Open (Wolf, D)	Kemp (R-Ga.)
Whitmer (D-Mich.)	
Sisolak (D-Nev.)	

Lean Democratic (3D, 2R)	Lean Republican
MA Open (Baker, R)	
MD Open (Hogan, R)	
Mills (D-Maine)	
Lujan Grisham (D-N.M.)*	
OR Open (Brown, D)*	

Likely Democratic (1D)	Likely Republican (3R)
Walz (DFL-Minn.)*	Dunleavy (R-Alaska)#
	DeSantis (R-Fl.)
	Sununu (R-N.H.)

Solid Democratic (7D)	Solid Republican (12R)
HI Open (Ige, D)	NE Open (Ricketts, R)
Newsom (D-Calif.)	Ivey (R-Ala.)
Polis (D-Colo.)	Little (R-Idaho)
Lamont (D-Conn.)	Reynolds (R-Iowa)
Pritzker (D-Ill.)	Noem (R-S.D.)
Hochul (D-N.Y.)	DeWine (R-Ohio)
McKee (D-R.I.)	Stitt (R-Okla.)
	McMaster (R-S.C.)
	Lee (R-Tenn.)
	Abbott (R-Texas)
	Scott (R-Vt.)
	Gordon (R-Wyo.)

*Takeovers in Italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans*

Continued from page 1

and Richmond. Just half of the population is white, while 24 percent is Black, 17 percent Latino, and 7 percent Asian.

Politically, the new 7th is narrowly divided though it would have tended toward Democrats in recent years. In 2016, Hillary Clinton would have carried it by 2 points, 48-46 percent, over Donald Trump. In 2017, Democrat Ralph Northam would have won it by 5 points, 52-47 percent, over Republican Ed Gillespie in the gubernatorial race. In 2018, Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine would have swept it by 13 points.

In 2020, Joe Biden would have carried it, 52-46 percent while Democratic Sen. Mark Warner would have won it, 54-46 percent.

In 2021, Republican gubernatorial nominee Glenn Youngkin would have carried the 7th by 6 points, 53-46 percent, en route to a narrow 2-point victory statewide over Democrat Terry McAuliffe.

But within the district, voters did not swing evenly between the 2020 and 2021 elections.

In a few places in Prince William County, such as Triangle, Dumfries, Leesylvania, and Cherry Hill, McAuliffe actually overperformed Biden. Overall, McAuliffe won the Prince William County portion of the district by 32 points, just 4 points less than Biden did in 2020.

But outside of the densely populated Northern Virginia suburbs, Youngkin significantly overperformed Trump's margins from just a year earlier: in the non-Prince William portion of the district, Youngkin beat McAuliffe by a whopping 20 points, compared to Trump's 6-point margin over Biden in 2020.

Redistricting

For Spanberger, redistricting proved a mixed bag.

By partisanship, her new district is several points more favorable to Democrats than her previous district, as the old 7th voted for Biden by just 1 percent. In a tough cycle for Democrats, that extra cushion could prove valuable.

But geographically, Spanberger's district saw the most significant changes of any in the commonwealth.

The old district was a Richmond-based constituency. It began in Nottoway County, in Southside Virginia, and stretched due north through Central Virginia, picking up Richmond suburbs in Chesterfield and Henrico counties, before terminating in Culpeper County at the very edge of Northern Virginia.

Overall, just 24 percent of the old 7th's population lives in the new 7th, according to Daily Kos Elections. Spanberger herself is not among them; she does not live within the new district lines but has said she will move. (Constitutionally, House members only need to live in the state they represent, and Spanberger's opponent also does not live in the new lines.)

That means Spanberger will have to introduce herself to three-quarters of the district for the first time. She'll have to spend more money to do so, since the Washington, DC media market is more expensive than Richmond.

The Democratic Incumbent

Spanberger, 42, was first elected to the House in 2018, and the former CIA officer's national security credentials, outspokenness, and success in defeating a conservative darling made her an instant "rising star" on Capitol Hill.

Born in Red Bank, New Jersey, Spanberger lived up and down the East Coast before her family settled in Virginia in the early 1990s. She graduated from University of Virginia in 2001 and moved to Germany to teach English, where she also earned an MBA from a dual-degree program run by the German International School of Management and Administration and Purdue University in 2002.

Spanberger returned to the U.S. and applied to the CIA; while undergoing the intense vetting process, she worked as an inspector for the Postal Service, investigating narcotics and money laundering cases. In 2006, she began work as an operations officer in the CIA; she remains relatively tight-lipped about her eight years there.

In 2014, Spanberger left the CIA and moved back to Henrico County, where she began working for David Bradley's Advisory Board Company, doing higher education consulting.
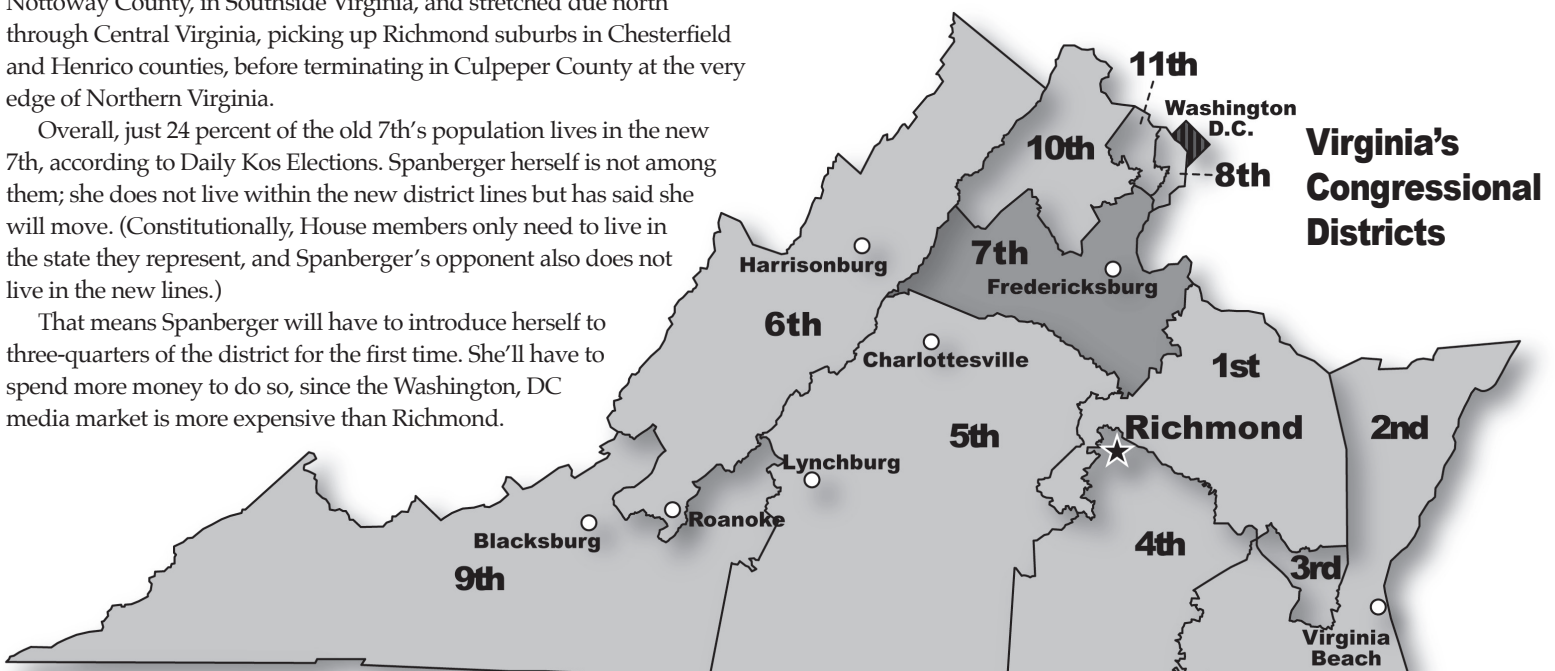
Spanberger began considering a run for office following Trump's election in 2016, and decided to challenge GOP Rep. Dave Brat after Brat voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act in 2017. (Brat famously defeated then-Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the 2014 GOP primary in a massive upset.)

In the Democratic primary, Spanberger faced Marine fighter pilot Dan Ward, who was running on a more progressive platform that included support for single-payer health care. She won, 73-27 percent.

In the general election, Spanberger hammered Brat over his vote to repeal Obamacare and ran ads focusing on her time in the CIA and her role as a mother and Girl Scout troop leader. She flatly rejected calls to abolish the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, and pledged not to vote for Nancy Pelosi as House speaker. (She voted for Illinois Rep. Cheri Bustos in 2019 and voted "present" in 2021.)

Ultimately, Spanberger ousted Brat, 50-48 percent.

Virginia's Congressional Districts

Along with four other freshman women with military or intelligence backgrounds who flipped GOP-held seats — fellow CIA veteran Elissa Slotkin, Navy veterans Mikie Sherrill and Elaine Luria, and Air Force veteran Chrissy Houlahan — Spanberger received sizable national media coverage in early 2019. Some of that coverage posited Spanberger et. al. as a more moderate counterbalance to the "Squad" led by freshman Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (a framing Spanberger would later lean into following the 2020 election).

In 2019, Spanberger and several other "national security Democrats" penned a *Washington Post* op-ed announcing their support for impeaching Trump over his phone call with the Ukrainian president.

In 2020, Spanberger faced a competitive re-election campaign against state Del. Nick Freitas. She won that race, 51-49 percent.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 elections, Spanberger teed off on House Democrats' messaging in a call with her colleagues, warning the party would get "[f-ing] torn apart in 2022" unless they stopped talking about "Defund the Police" and "socialism." The comments became a flashpoint following Democrats' dozen-seat loss, with Ocasio-Cortez calling Spanberger "irresponsible" for saying them.

In Congress, Spanberger serves on the Agriculture Committee (the only Virginian to do so) and Foreign Affairs Committee; she is the chairwoman of

Abigail Spanberger

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

the subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry. She is a member of the moderate/centrist Blue Dog Coalition, and a vice chairwoman of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus.

Her campaign team includes David Eichenbaum of Eichenbaum Skinner for media, Matt Canter of Global Strategy Group for polling, and Jeff Gumbinner of GDA Wins for direct mail.

The GOP Challenger

Vega, 37, was elected to the Prince William County Board of Supervisors in 2019. The daughter of Salvadoran immigrants who arrived in America in the 1980s, Vega was born in Houston and moved to Virginia as a child.

Following several brushes with gun violence that left a friend murdered and her brother seriously wounded, Vega became a police officer in 2011; she would go on to serve in the Alexandria and Manassas Park police departments.

In 2015, Vega earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from American Military University, a for-profit online college not affiliated with the federal government, and she became a deputy in the Prince William County sheriff's department.

In 2019, Vega ran for an open seat on the Prince William County Board of Supervisors. She easily won the primary for the GOP nomination in the Coles district. In the general election she defeated auto shop owner Raheel Sheikh, 56-43 percent in the general election — even as the Democratic candidate for board chairwoman ran even in the district.

On the board, Vega quickly drew some national media attention

Rating Virginia's New Districts

DISTRICT	INCUMBENT	INITIAL RATING
1st	Rob Wittman, R	Solid Republican
2nd	Elaine Luria, D	Toss-up
3rd	Bobby Scott, D	Solid Democratic
4th	Donald McEachin, D	Solid Democratic
5th	Bob Good, R	Solid Republican
6th	Ben Cline, R	Solid Republican
7th	Abigail Spanberger, D	Tilt Democratic
8th	Don Beyer, D	Solid Democratic
9th	Morgan Griffith, R	Solid Republican
10th	Jennifer Wexton, D	Solid Democratic
11th	Gerry Connolly, D	Solid Democratic

for her conservative stances on issues including immigration. The *Washington Post* called her "a new provocateur" and a "lightning rod" while chronicling her relationship with the county's burgeoning Latino population (25 percent, with Salvadorans the largest single subgroup at 8 percent). She also served as the chairwoman of the "Latinos for Youngkin" outreach effort in 2021.

Vega announced her congressional bid shortly after Virginia's state Supreme Court finalized its new congressional map. The initial frontrunners for the nomination were Fredericksburg state Sen. Bryce Reeves and former Green Beret Derrick Anderson. Self-funding Stafford County Supervisor Crystal Vanuch was also a late entry in the race.

In early June, Vega secured several key endorsements, including from neighboring GOP Rep. Bob Good, former Rep. Brat, and Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, adding on to support from Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and former Virginia attorney general Ken Cuccinelli. Vega outspent all her rivals on TV in the final three weeks of the race, and ultimately won with 29 percent of the vote. Anderson (24 percent) and Reeves (20 percent) finished second and third.

Vega locked in her victory by dominating in Prince William County with 52 percent of the vote. Her 2,418-vote margin over Anderson in Prince William was greater than her overall margin of victory districtwide.

Vega's campaign team includes general consultant Sean Brown of Axiom Strategies (which is also handling direct mail), pollster Amanda Iovino of WPAi, and Poolhouse for media. All three firms worked on Youngkin's successful 2021 gubernatorial run.

How It Plays Out

Democrats kicked off the general election by zeroing in on recent comments Vega, who is pro-life and supported the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, made regarding abortion resulting from rape.

In audio reported by *Axios*, Vega downplayed the possibility of a pregnancy resulting from rape, saying she had only encountered one such instance in her time as a police officer, and in response to a question theorized that rape was less likely to result in pregnancy "because it's not something that's happening organically."

Spanberger and her allies seized on the remarks, which also received widespread media coverage. The congresswoman herself took to MSNBC's "Morning Joe" to discuss the story, her campaign is currently running Facebook ads featuring Vega's quote targeted at Virginia

women, and the DCCC paid for a billboard in the district highlighting the quote.

Democrats around the country are optimistic that the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe* motivates their voters and helps keep suburban women in the fold.

In Virginia's 7th, it's part of a larger strategy Democrats hope to employ to paint Vega as too extreme for the district. Beyond the specific comment about abortion, which will likely be a feature of paid media hits on Vega through Election Day, Democratic strategists will try to tie Vega to the positions of the hardline House Freedom Caucus, especially Rep. Good, the Charlottesville conservative next door who has become a bogeyman for Virginia progressives. Democrats may also point out several Board of Supervisors votes on affordable housing issues in which Vega was the sole "no" vote among both Democratic and Republican members.

Spanberger's success will also depend on how successfully she has been able to distance herself from an unpopular national party and a president who is, at best, double-digits underwater in this district, by establishing her own brand as a no-nonsense former CIA officer. Spanberger has worked hard to cultivate such an image — *National Journal* recently called her "House Democrats' harshest internal critic" — by speaking out against

Yesli Vega

Courtesy Yesli Vega Campaign

the left wing of the party, not voting for Pelosi, and most recently, not saying if she would back BIden in 2024. That's a notable change in position from earlier in the year, when Spanberger hosted Biden for an event in Culpeper County.

Early Spanberger advertisements highlight her high bipartisan rating from the Lugar Center, and her allies point to her vote to lower prescription drug costs, as well as the Lower Food and Fuel Costs Act, which includes a meatpacking-focused rider Spanberger co-wrote with Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson of South Dakota. Democrats will also highlight Spanberger's outspokenness on banning members of Congress from owning individual stocks.

Performance in the more rural parts of the district, the areas where McAuliffe severely underperformed Biden, is crucial to Spanberger's path to victory. While those counties lean Republican, they're also the counties Spanberger already represents, which her allies hope gives her a leg up relative to McAuliffe (whose campaign, which spent much of its time tying Youngkin to Trump, is near universally derided by Virginia Democrats eight months later).

But private polling suggests Spanberger has work to do to introduce herself to the district's new voters, all of whom live in the expensive Washington, DC media market. Democratic strategists note that, even though those voters haven't seen Spanberger on the ballot before, the congresswoman has had to run DC media market television ads in her previous races. Spanberger and her allies spent $3.2 million on DC television in 2020, according to data from Kantar/CMAG. But voter memories are short, especially for a politician from another part of the state.

Republican strategists plan to run the same playbook in this district as they are in districts across the country: focusing on economic issues such as inflation and gas prices, with a secondary focus on crime and immigration. And they'll be sure to mention as many times as they can that Spanberger votes 100 percent of the time with Biden, according to *FiveThirtyEight*.

Vega's allies believe her background in law enforcement and her personal story as the child of refugees give her a solid platform to address crime and immigration. Much of her promotional materials includes images of her in her sheriff's uniform, and she often talks about being a military wife.

Vega is also one of several Latinas running for Congress this cycle. Most recently, Mayra Flores — a Mexican immigrant and wife of a Border Patrol officer — won a low-turnout special election in a historically Democratic South Texas district.

Spanberger is also a fluent Spanish speaker and will look to have a presence on Spanish-language media.

There's concern among some GOP strategists that Vega — who emerged late in the primary as a serious contender — still hasn't fully gained her sea legs as a federal candidate, and acknowledge that slip ups such as the abortion comment have given Demcrats an opportunity to go on offense at a time when Vega doesn't have the resources to respond. And while national GOP strategists believe economic messaging is the key to winning this district, the potential for Vega's positions on social issues (not just abortion but also gay marriage) to generate unfavorable news cycles is a danger.

In contrast, Spanberger and her team have run two tight, successful campaigns that impressed even Republicans. One longtime Virginia GOP operative not involved in the race said that "if any Democrat can win this cycle, it's Spanberger," and that "she's ruthless, and wouldn't have made the mistake Vega made."

One advantage Democrats will look to press immediately is Spanberger's financial edge. The incumbent reported $4.3 million in the bank on June 1. Vega reported just $120,000 on that date, and subsequently spent $140,000 on television advertising over the next month to win the primary, leaving her with few resources heading into the general election.

GOP sources say that while they don't expect Vega to keep pace with Spanberger's fundraising, she likely needs to raise at least $4 million over the course of the race. She raised $511,000 through May.

While neither candidate has reserved broadcast TV time yet, both national parties have signaled heavy investment in the district. Looking ahead to the fall, the GOP Super PAC Congressional Leadership Fund has reserved $4 million earmarked for this district, while the Democratic Super PAC House Majority PAC has reserved $1.3 million. Those ad buys are subject to change.

The Bottom Line

Democrats acknowledge that this race is going to be more difficult than they had hoped considering redistricting left Spanberger with a friendlier district. Pointing to Biden's sagging approval rating, one Democrat said "Spanberger should be up 6 points, but she's not."

Ultimately, this race may come down to whether a well-funded incumbent can still develop a strong enough personal brand, distinct from her party, to counteract the national environment. Spanberger isn't the only Democrat to pin their hopes on distinguishing themselves,

but she has a credible case dating back to her breakthrough in the 2018 election.

A win by Vega would have several implications for the Republican Party. Along with other similarly suburban districts, a flip here could signal that with Trump out of the White House, voters that fled the GOP are squarely in play once again.

A Vega win would also further diversify the GOP at a moment when the party is trying hard to move past its old, white and male image by elevating younger women of color.

And perhaps most importantly, if Vega is able to show extra strength among the district's Latino population, it could provide a blueprint for Republicans to actually flip districts with prominent Latino populations outside of South Florida and South Texas, where their biggest successes have been to date.

For the moment, Spanberger has a few advantages, and Vega's comments are a real opportunity for the Democrat to go on offense and keep the conversation on favorable ground. But if Biden's approval slips further, even well-heeled incumbents such as Spanberger will be in for long nights come November. **IE**

Senate Polls
The latest polling from the most competitive races

Georgia	*FabrizioWard (R)/Impact Research (D) for AARP, July 5-11 (LVs)(mixed mode)— General Election ballot: Raphael Warnock (D) over Herschel Walker (R), 50% - 47%.*
Nevada	*Emerson College for KLAS-TV & The Hill, July 7-10 (RVs)(mixed mode)— General Election ballot: Catherine Cortez Masto (D) over Adam Laxalt (R), 44% - 41%.*
Washington	*SurveyUSA for Seattle Times et. al., July 6-9 (LVs)(online)— General Election ballot: Patty Murray (D) over Tiffany Smiley (R), 51% - 33%.*
Alaska	*Alaska Survey Research, July 2-5 (LVs)– General Election ballot: Kelly Tshibaka (R) 43%, Lisa Murkowski (R) 35%, Pat Chesbro (D) 17%, Dustin Darden (AIP) 5%. Ranked choice simulation: Murkowski over Tshibaka, 52% - 48%.*
Iowa	*Change Research (D) for Franken campaign, June 30-July 4 (LVs)(online)– General Election ballot: Chuck Grassley (R) over Michael Franken (D), 49% - 44%.*
North Carolina	*Trafalgar Group (R), June 29-July 1 (LVs)– General Election ballot: Ted Budd (R) over Cheri Beasley (D), 48% - 45%.*
Ohio	*Impact Research (D) for Ryan campaign, June 27-30 (LVs) – General Election ballot: Tim Ryan (D) over JD Vance (R), 48% - 46%.*
Arizona	*Change Research (D) for Future Majority, June 24-27 (RVs)– General Election ballot: Mark Kelly (D) over Blake Masters (R), 48% -39%. Kelly over Jim Lamon (R), 47% - 41%.*
Wisconsin	*Marquette University, June 14-20 (RVs)– General Election ballot: Mandela Barnes (D) over Ron Johnson (R), 46% - 44%. Johnson over Alex Lasry (D), 45% - 42%. Sarah Godlewski (D) over Johnson, 45% - 43%. Tom Nelson (D) over Johnson, 44% - 43%.*
Pennsylvania	*FabrizioWard (R)/Impact Research (D) for AARP, June 12-19 (LVs)(mixed mode)— General Election ballot: John Fetterman (D) over Mehmet Oz (R), 50% - 44%.*
Utah	*WPAi (R) for Lee Campaign, June 14-16 (LVs)– General Election ballot: Mike Lee (R) over Evan McMullin (I), 52% - 33%.*

2022 Senate Ratings

Toss-up

Cortez Masto (D-Nev.)	Warnock (D-Ga.)
Kelly (D-Ariz.)	

Tilt Democratic	**Tilt Republican**
Hassan (D-N.H.)	PA Open (Toomey, R)
	Johnson (R-Wisc.)

Lean Democratic	**Lean Republican**
	NC Open (Burr, R)

Likely Democratic	**Likely Republican**
Bennet (D-Colo.)	Rubio (R-Fl.)
Murray (D-Wash.)	

Solid Democratic	**Solid Republican**
VT Open (Leahy, D)	AL Open (Shelby, R)
Blumenthal (D-Conn.)	MO Open (Blunt, R)
Duckworth (D-Ill.)	OH Open (Portman, R)
Padilla (D-Calif.)	OK Open (Inhofe, R)
Schatz (D-Hawaii)	Boozman (R-Ark.)
Schumer (D-N.Y.)	Crapo (R-Idaho)
Van Hollen (D-Md.)	Grassley (R-Iowa)
Wyden (D-Ore.)	Hoeven (R-N.D.)
	Kennedy (R-La.)
	Lankford (R-Okla.)
	Lee (R-Utah)
	Moran (R-Kan.)
	Murkowski (R-Alaska)
	Paul (R-Ky.)
	Scott (R-S.C.)
	Thune (R-S.D.)
	Young (R-Ind.)

*# moved benefiting Democrats,   * moved benefiting Republicans   Takeovers in Italics*

CALENDAR

July 19	Maryland Primary
Aug. 2	Arizona, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Washington Primaries
Aug. 4	Tennessee Primary
Aug. 9	Connecticut, Minnesota, Vermont, Wisconsin Primaries
Aug. 13	Hawaii Primary
Aug. 16	Alaska, Wyoming Primaries
Aug. 23	Florida, New York (House) Primaries