

OUR ENDORSEMENTS

Kaine for governor; McDonnell for AG

Many Virginians appear stuck in deciding how to vote in the Nov. 8 election for governor. That's understandable.

Neither of the major party candidates — Democrat Tim Kaine nor Republican Jerry Kilgore — has accentuated a progressive vision for the future of Virginia. While everyone knows where the pair stands on the death penalty, even active partisans approach Election Day unaware that Kaine's chief education initiative is preschool for 4-year-olds, while Kilgore's is merit pay for teachers.

Instead, Kilgore seems intent on diverting attention from primary issues, including sound fiscal policy, by dwelling on peripheral powder kegs such as guns and illegal immigration. Meanwhile, Kaine seems so determined to insulate himself against charges of liberalism that he has left some voters wondering what, if anything, he believes.

Such is the sad state of modern campaigns.

If voters want to reward the candidate who has run the most intellectually honest race, then they will vote for independent Republican Russ Potts.

But campaigning and governing are two separate things. Potts is not the best-suited by temperament or experience, to craft the coalitions and compromises that are essential to political progress.

That distinction falls to Kaine and Kilgore, either of whom we trust — and much of the record suggests — could prove a principled and competent chief executive. Kaine, a Harvard-trained lawyer now serving as lieutenant governor, offers intellectual nimbleness and a grasp of complexity. Kilgore, a southwest Virginia native and recent attorney general, exhibits an impressive regard for government in the sunshine. Both have the essential capacity to elevate pragmatism over ideology. Both men are better than their campaigns. We prefer Kaine for these reasons:

First, to judge where someone is headed, see where he has been. The important test isn't guns, abortion or the death penalty, which have next to nothing to do with the day-to-day operations of the commonwealth.

For a genuine measure, look to the 2004 budget debate, in which Kaine took the politically perilous, but correct, position of advocating for higher taxes for schools, public safety and health care. That aligned him with Virginia's longstanding bipartisan tradition of fiscal prudence, an approach validated by the financially reckless detour Virginia took in the late 1990s.

At the hour of decision, Kilgore decided the wrong way. He first advocated massive borrowing for school construction, then urged a voter referendum to settle what informed legislators were far better equipped to judge. Even now, he disingenuously insists that higher taxes weren't needed.

Second, Kilgore's need to satisfy the anti-tax wing of his party forces him to embrace unsound ideas, such as statewide voting on tax increases.

To Kilgore's credit, he has refused to sign Grover Norquist's poisonous no-tax-increase-ever pledge. But to address a crisis in transportation funding, particularly in Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia, he would unwisely raid the bank account for education, public safety, health and the environment.

He would also let regional authorities and local voters dictate critical decisions on taxes, tolls and bonds. Most astonishingly, he would remain mute in the debate. That is not leadership. Nor does a loose network of regional plans substitute for a coherent statewide transportation policy.

Kaine counters with a safer, time-tested embrace of separate bank

accounts for transportation and other priorities, such as education. He prefers more centralized transportation planning and urges stronger anti-sprawl power for local officials,

a compelling idea in an era when paving alone won't do. Unfortunately, Kaine sidesteps a severe transportation cash shortage. He has cracked the door to tax increases during his term, but so narrowly that if he does join legislative leaders in calling for higher taxes for roads in 2006, he'll be rightly criticized for misleading voters.

This is our greatest disappointment in Kaine's campaign.

Third, life experience gives Kaine an important edge. As a former Richmond mayor, he is intimately familiar with the details of school funding formulae, wastewater treatment requirements, incentives for regional cooperation and the like. He is more attuned to Virginia's fast-growing metropolitan regions than Kilgore, whose roots are rural and whose primary policy initiatives involve public safety.

And, finally, as is being amply demonstrated in Washington, D.C., one-party government carries enormous risk. Kilgore's

coming-of-age in a minority party in the state's most remote region lends him the sensibility of an outsider. But today's Virginia GOP

is triumphal, not an underdog. With Republicans controlling both legislative chambers, a Democratic governor could offer a check on absolute power.

In the attorney general's race, Democratic Sen. Creigh Deeds of Bath County is a personable, accomplished legislator who could serve well.

But Virginia Beach GOP Del. Bob McDonnell merits election as one in a tiny pantheon of legislators with the intellect and the energy to have advanced a broad range of substantive legislation. He worked tirelessly to implement welfare-to-work reform, a tough-love approach to juvenile justice, performance reviews for judges, and to close the cracks through which repeat DUI offenders were escaping.

His workhorse mind-set, coupled with an uncommon willingness to recognize the shortcomings of his limited government ideology, make him a cut above.

If McDonnell were asking to set the state's agenda, as is Kilgore, his opposition to the 2004 tax increase would be a serious obstacle. But his broad experience in the military, private enterprise, the local prosecutor's office and the legislature elevate him as the better candidate to run the state's legal department.

As with Kaine, McDonnell has the advantage of greater intimacy than his more rural opponent with the challenges and demands facing Virginia's metropolitan regions.

Finally, both Republicans and Democrats fielded a candidate for lieutenant governor from their party's ideological edge. Liberal Democrats will find comfort with former Congresswoman and ex-state lawmaker Leslie Byrne. Far-right Republicans will welcome the candidacy of Hanover Sen. Bill Bolling.

By abandoning Virginia's mainstream, the political parties failed the state. Here's a solution: In his independent bid for governor, Russ Potts has demonstrated courage, passion and fiscal integrity. Virginians should reward him by mounting a serious write-in campaign to elect Potts as Virginia's next lieutenant governor.



KAINE



MCDONNELL

The most important test facing the next governor isn't guns, abortion or the death penalty, but how to keep Virginia from making the same reckless financial mistakes it made in the late 1990s.