

# **From internal leadership battles to accusations of coronations and messaging failures, Republicans confront a deep identity crisis following Democrats' return to power**

Rick Buchanan didn't expect to walk out before the first session even ended.

The chair of the 5th Congressional District GOP Committee had arrived at the Donald W. Huffman Advance — the Republican Party of Virginia's annual flagship gathering — at The Forum Hotel in Charlottesville on Dec. 6, 2024, hoping the event would offer a clear roadmap heading into a pivotal election year.

Instead, he said, he witnessed what felt like an early coronation of Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears, who had launched her gubernatorial bid that September and, in his view, had already been handpicked by Gov. Glenn Youngkin as his successor.

"I sat there and watched it," Buchanan said. "I had breakfast, and then went to the first real gathering of the troops, at lunch, and that's when the coronation began. And I packed my stuff up and left, I didn't want to hear any more."

The program, he said, offered little for local organizers seeking help to compete in difficult districts. "There was nothing for us grassroots supporters," he said. "You know what the program was about? Furthering Youngkin's agenda."

One year later, after Democrats swept all three statewide offices in November 2025 and picked up more than a dozen seats to solidify a 64-seat House of Delegates majority, Buchanan's concerns have become the center of a widening debate inside a party struggling to process the magnitude of its losses — and to figure out what comes next.

## **A statewide collapse that mirrored a national trend**

The scale of the GOP's collapse stunned both parties.

Democrat Abigail Spanberger defeated Winsome Earle-Sears by a commanding 15-point margin in the governor's race, while Democrats flipped

more House seats than most analysts predicted — a sweeping repudiation of Republican candidates and messaging.

Attorney General Jason Miyares, the Republican incumbent, fell short in his bid for a second term, losing to Democrat Jay Jones despite efforts to make his campaign about the law and order contrast and highlighting Jones' resurfacing text-message scandal.

Veteran political analyst Bob Holsworth said the results were part of a national pattern.

“First and foremost, this election was a national wave,” he said, pointing to Democratic gains in New Jersey, Mississippi, Pennsylvania and Georgia. But Virginia's situation, he said, reflected deeper structural problems for Republicans.

“You had Abigail Spandberger, a seasoned candidate who ran an extraordinarily disciplined campaign,” Holsworth said. In contrast, he argued Earle-Sears “spent most of the campaign as a culture warrior... and she just wasn't where people are.”

Federal budget cuts and the prolonged government shutdown also played a role, he added. “We were ground zero in Virginia,” Holsworth said. “You saw an increased level of not only Democratic votes, but turnout in general in Northern Virginia.”

Holsworth also credited House Speaker Don Scott, D-Portsmouth, with orchestrating one of the most effective legislative campaign operations he has seen in recent Virginia politics.

“He raised enormous sums of money, targeted 13 races and pitched the perfect game,” he said.

### **Tensions grow over Youngkin's influence**

Inside GOP circles, much of the lingering anger is aimed at Gov. Glenn Youngkin.

Buchanan and other activists say Youngkin's early public support for Earle-Sears discouraged other potential candidates — particularly Miyares — from entering the primary for the top spot of the Republican ticket.

Holsworth said that criticism is “well placed.” Miyares, he argued, “would have been a far stronger candidate,” with more experience and a broader ability to compete in suburban regions where Democrats dominated.

Youngkin's decision to urge Republican lieutenant governor nominee John Reid to withdraw from the race — after controversy over an old social media post — further inflamed the perception that top leaders were shaping the ticket rather than allowing a competitive, open primary process.

“Youngkin did that,” Holsworth said, adding that the move made it “impossible” for Reid to fundraise or establish a statewide operation.

### **Peake pushes back: “We don’t coronate someone”**

Republican Party of Virginia Chair Mark Peake flatly rejects the idea that Youngkin or party leadership pushed challengers aside.

“We don’t have the authority or the ability to just coronate someone,” Peake told The Mercury in a phone interview last week.

Peake also noted the timing: he took office in April 2025, just weeks before filing deadlines. “Primaries were open to anyone,” he said. “Nobody can make you not run.”

Peake said candidates who jumped in late simply failed to gather enough signatures to qualify.

“If you’ve got to have somebody else give you approval to run, then you’re not a leader,” he said.

He added that the party spent months strengthening turnout infrastructure: “All RPV has done is reach out to grassroots, reach out to voters, and go after the Trump supporting voters. That is what RPV is.”

But many activists say the party’s efforts lacked message discipline and statewide unity — a contrast to Democratic campaigns that emphasized abortion rights, cost-of-living issues and government stability.

### **Grassroots anger erupts into open revolt**

Possibly no Republican voice has been louder in the weeks since the election than Loudoun County GOP Chair Scott Pio.

In a lengthy post on X, formerly Twitter, Pio accused state party leadership of failing to build a coherent statewide message and of instructing unit chairs not to engage in issue-based communication.

“So while the Democrats have a messaging machine ... the Republican Party personally mandates that they are not allowed to talk policy,” Pio wrote.

He then demanded the resignation of Peake, in addition to the GOP State Central Committee’s executive leadership and any member who “has taken a check from a candidate in the last five years.”

Peake pushed back against Pio’s move.

“The best step would be for Pio to resign,” he said in the interview, calling him “part of the problem” and saying he “has not gotten over that crushing defeat I delivered to him” in the RPV chair election in the spring.

Pio, in an interview with The Mercury, rejected that characterization.

“Why didn’t (Peake) find all the House of Delegate candidates?” he asked. “It’s unforgivable that he’s just blaming other people.”

He also said the party is failing to reach fast-growing voting blocs — particularly Latino, Muslim, Arab, Indian and younger voters — and warned the GOP will continue to lose unless it modernizes.

“There needs to be a fundamental rewriting of the Republican Party in Virginia,” Pio said. “If they don’t get their act together, it’s over.”

## **Leadership tensions spill into the House of Delegates**

The Republican post-election reckoning is also affecting the General Assembly.

Del. Mike Cherry, R-Colonial Heights, challenged Minority Leader Terry Kilgore, R-Scott, for his leadership position in a recent closed caucus meeting but was unsuccessful. Cherry declined to comment for this story.

Kilgore did not respond to messages but said in a statement after the vote that Republicans would “rebuild, reconnect, and deliver a message that resonates with voters across Virginia.”

Democrats, meanwhile, are already moving to consolidate their gains. Just days before the election, they advanced a constitutional amendment that could allow the General Assembly to redraw Virginia's U.S. House districts ahead of the 2026 elections — sidestepping the independent redistricting commission voters approved in 2020.

The move immediately alarmed Republicans, who warned that a mid-decade map rewrite would deepen the party's struggles with candidate recruitment, messaging and suburban competitiveness at the very moment they are trying to regroup.

In the days since their sweeping victory, Virginia Democrats have wasted no time launching a progressive agenda.

They unveiled a fresh slate of bills last week that include raising the state minimum wage to \$15 by 2028, mandating paid sick leave statewide, enshrining access to birth control, creating a task force to remove barriers to energy-efficient upgrades for low-income households and giving localities first right of refusal on affordable-housing sales.

Among these is a bill from Sen. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William, to fully repeal Virginia's right-to-work law — a move that could stir intraparty tensions as moderate Democrats and business-friendly factions raise alarms.

Despite these challenges, Peake believes the party can recover from its devastating election losses. He predicts Democratic proposals on gun regulation, labor law and social policy will spark voter backlash.

“Republicans in Virginia are never done,” he said. “We will always fight.”

He also rejected the idea that Virginia is now reliably Democratic. “I disagree with that assessment completely,” Peake said. “It’s just a matter of organizing and getting our message out there.”

Holsworth, the political analyst, was more guarded.

“They need a party that can compete in the suburbs,” he said, noting that Virginia's population centers — Northern Virginia, Henrico and Chesterfield, and parts of Hampton Roads — now strongly favor Democrats. Still, he said Republicans could regain competitiveness with strategic recalibration.

“Things can change,” he said. “But they need a rethinking that’s along the lines of Virginia demographics.”

For Buchanan, who left last year’s Republican Advance convinced the party had lost touch with its voters, the message is simple and unvarnished.

“Once we select personality over policy, we’re toast,” he said.