

# Voters Are Done With COVID-19 and Pandemic-Powered Officials

Panicked Americans surrendered a lot of authority during the pandemic. Now they want their country back.

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(Sue Dorfman/ZUMAPRESS/Newscom)

Politicians have been on a high over the last year-plus, wielding extraordinary power with the approval of voters fearful of viral infection. Democrats, in particular, championed draconian restrictions on life and often won praise for doing so. Going into this week's election, Terry McAuliffe, Phil Murphy, and other politicians had every reason to expect voters to cheer similar

interventions in other areas. But voters, it turns out, are over their pandemic panic and want something closer to a traditionally restrained government minding its manners and paying attention to the public's concerns.

"From Virginia's Tidewater region to the Philadelphia suburbs to Long Island, voters on Tuesday issued an unmistakable repudiation of the Democratic Party that was wider and deeper than even some of its more pessimistic tacticians were anticipating," [acknowledged](#) a *Washington Post* post-mortem.

Virginia and New Jersey drew particular attention as states where Republicans were supposed to be less viable than ever after years of Trump fatigue. New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) exercised often-monarchical pandemic policy that [won raves](#) from voters. He unilaterally [authorized the seizure of private property](#), dismissed [Bill of Rights-based objections](#) to lockdown orders, and sniffed that protests against his actions [didn't rise to the level of other causes](#). As recently as August, voters considered COVID-19 the top issue facing the state, with Monmouth University pollsters [reporting](#) "voters give Murphy a clear advantage on the pandemic (46% to 21% for [Republican Jack] Ciattarelli) and a narrower edge on jobs and the economy (35% to 27%)." Overall, Murphy led by double digits.

So, how did election day get resolved in Murphy's favor by what *Politico* calls "[a razor-thin margin](#)"?

"From a list of seven different policy areas asked about in the poll, 'taxes' emerges, nominally, as the top issue," and the pandemic slipped to fourth place, Monmouth's pollsters [noted](#) when they revisited the contest last week. Murphy brought the same not-so-light touch to taxes as to public health.

"If you're a one-issue voter and tax rate is your issue, either a family or a

business, if that's the only basis upon which you're going to make a decision, we're probably not your state," Murphy [huffed](#) to a gathering of business leaders in 2019 before [pushing a tax hike](#) through the legislature. Ciattarelli put that quote at the center of his advertising while Murphy defended his moves.

"If your business model includes high value-added, highly skilled workforce, we're on your list," the governor [told Bloomberg](#) two weeks ago. "We are not going to be the low-cost state to live or work in."

Murphy went on to just barely win a reelection fight that was supposed to be in the bag.

Former Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe wasn't in office during the pandemic, but he also emphasized active government intervention against the virus.

"Democratic former Gov. Terry McAuliffe lambasted Republican Glenn Youngkin on Tuesday night over his opposition to mandating Covid-19 vaccines for state workers in the second and final debate of the Virginia governor's race," CNN [reported](#) at the end of September after the second gubernatorial debate. "The candidates' split on vaccines ... has emerged as a central issue in 2021's marquee governor's race."

Sure enough, voters gave McAuliffe the edge over Youngkin on the pandemic in [polling](#) by Monmouth University. But that margin shrunk as Virginia voters moved past public health worries.

"The top issues chosen as the most important first or second factor in Virginians' vote for governor are jobs and the economy (45%, up from 39% in September) and education and schools (41%, up from 31%)," the late-October poll [added](#). "Just 23% name the Covid pandemic as one of their top two issues, which is a drop from 32% last month."

Like Murphy, McAuliffe's kingly policy preferences extended well beyond the response to COVID-19. He made headlines with a dismissive quip about parental concerns over schools and lesson content.

"I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach," McAuliffe [snorted](#) during a September 28 debate against Youngkin.

When critics pushed back, McAuliffe [trashed concerns](#) over curricula influenced by Critical Race Theory as "racist" and a "dog whistle."

The once and not-so-future governor plummeted in the polls and dramatically lost to Youngkin.

Elsewhere, government overreach got comparable slaps. The socialist nominated as the Democratic candidate for mayor of Buffalo, New York, endorsed by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, was [rejected by voters](#) who handed the incumbent moderate Democrat a rare write-in victory.

In Minneapolis, voters [highly critical](#) of the city's police department nevertheless [spurned](#) a ballot proposal to eliminate the police and replace them with a vaguely defined Department of Public Safety. Amid [crime fears](#), city residents seem to prefer the devil they know over a new agency with an amorphous "public health" focus after 18 months of just that in dealing with the pandemic.

"Americans have shifted back to favoring a more hands-off approach for government in addressing the nation's problems after a rare endorsement of a more active role last year," Gallup [reported in mid-October](#). "Last year marked only the second time in Gallup's 29-year trend that at least half of Americans endorsed an active role for the government on this item," the polling firm added. Before the pandemic, Americans supported activist

government for only a brief while after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks before returning to a preference for "fewer government services and lower taxes." That's happening once again.

On the national scene, that preference may be reflected in weak support for the multi-trillion-dollar spending schemes stalled in Congress. "A plurality (32%) of Americans think the bills would hurt people like them if they became law," finds a [recent ABC News/Ipsos poll](#).

McAuliffe, Murphy, and other political hopefuls are floundering in a country that's losing its tolerance for imperious officials. Voters are by no means unified in what they want, and it's not at all obvious that they voted on the same issues this week. But it's clear that most people have moved beyond the crisis climate that drove them to cut a lot of slack for government during the worst days of COVID-19.

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