

**MEMO** *Published November 7, 2025 • 12 minute read*

# Mainstream Democrats Show the Way to Win

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This October, Third Way worked with David Binder Research to conduct two sets of qualboards in the 2025 gubernatorial states of New Jersey and Virginia to understand the mindset of swing voters in this chaotic moment. These boards included people who decided late in 2025 who they would be voting for at the top of the ticket and consisted of individuals who did not vote for the same party in all three of the 2020, 2021, and 2024 elections in their state. The Virginia research was conducted October 22-23, while the New Jersey subset occurred October 27-28.

This research was focused on understanding how Abigail Spanberger and Mikie Sherrill were able to win over swing voters in their states and providing a template for Democrats looking ahead to 2026 and beyond.

## Takeaways

- Both governors-elect were seen as authentic, credible, and accomplished. People appreciated that they were moms raising their own families in their states and understood what came with that in terms of paying bills and caring about public schools.
- Both were seen as a different type of Democrat, thanks to their moderate, bipartisan credentials and backgrounds in national security and law enforcement.
- Spanberger and Sherrill won on the issues of cost of living and the economy. They also were boosted by education and being seen as mainstream on cultural issues.
- New Jersey was closer than Virginia, in part because Ciattarelli centered his campaign on property taxes (which resonated), while Earle-Sears was focused almost exclusively on transgender issues, which made people tune out.
- Opposing Trump is expected, but voters want much more than saying no to bad things coming from the federal government.
- Voters are looking for executive leaders who can cut through the partisan gridlock and get to work delivering for the people of their state.

## Unique Candidate Strengths

Abigail Spanberger and Mikie Sherrill were both elected to the United States House in the 2018 blue wave midterm that came as a backlash to the first Trump presidency. Both flipped long-held Republican districts in the suburbs and became archetypes of strong, moderate women with national security backgrounds who also showed relatability as mothers.

These qualboards made it clear that among many swing voters, Spanberger and Sherrill's relatability and likability provided the foundation for any potential support.

In Virginia, voters frequently pointed to Spanberger's overall temperament to show she is a strong leader. They found that she maintained poise under pressure and admired her steadiness. They liked her background in law enforcement and her work in Congress to secure funding for infrastructure and gun safety legislation.

Sherrill was seen as someone who understands middle- and working-class New Jersey residents. Respondents not only knew that she was a mother, but a mother to four, and said raising her family in New Jersey means she understands what families are going through. Voters said she seemed genuine, steady, and forthright.

Both were seen as moderate, and voters liked their proven track record of bipartisanship.

## **From the Voters Themselves**

### **Virginia Voters**

- “I feel like Spanberger is more calm and more collected. I’ve never really seen her yell or let something rattle her. I feel like she has the people’s best interests at heart, and by people I mean the common people and not the super-rich or the wealthy.”
- “There is a steadiness to Spanberger that I like in my politicians. She rarely comes across as radically excited or frazzled. That is a great quality to have in leadership. It evokes trust.”
- “I would have concerns if any candidate made transgender issues the main focal point of their candidacy. It is an issue of importance and candidates should have clear views, but issues like the economy, law enforcement, education, jobs, and cost of living are more important at this time. I don’t think I would be able to support a candidate that made transgender issues a tentpole policy.”
- “Abigail seems to be center left but not too left. I heard and read that she is part of some caucus that has bipartisan support, working with both with Republicans and Democrats.”
- “I appreciated that Spanberger felt more balanced and level than some other Democratic candidates I’ve seen before.”
- “Spanberger is known for being pragmatic, and both of us share public service having served in the federal government. So she has integrity and public service that we both share. She supports a balanced budget and careful spending which is something my conservative side agrees with.”

### **New Jersey Voters**

- “I really appreciate Sherrill’s focus on fairness and opportunity. I feel that she’s a very practical problem solver. She seems to genuinely care about families, education, and making the state a lot more affordable without getting lost in politics. That stuff just annoys me. I also value her emphasis on integrity and collaboration and doing right versus doing what’s popular.”
- “Sherrill’s speeches stood out to me because she came across very caring, and knowing she’s a mom and seeing her concern for not only her children but ours was very warming.”

- “I do like that she has not been in politics long term and has been in the Navy as a helicopter pilot as well as a mom. She has not been in a political bubble her whole life.”
- “I don’t see Mikie Sherrill as much of a typical member of her party. I think she feels more moderate and more willing to work across the aisle. That’s something that I can appreciate and respect. She talks about practical fixes rather than trying to push a strict party agenda. I think that makes her stand out in a really good way. She seems focused on results not just ‘being a Democrat’ for the sake of being a Democrat.”

## Issues Driving Vote Choice

Voters overwhelmingly cited cost of living, the economy, and education as the most important issues in both states, with property taxes also being incredibly important in New Jersey.

In Virginia, these qualboards point to why Spanberger was able to win by a healthy margin. These swing voters viewed her as having better plans than Winsome Earle-Sears on lowering costs, and Spanberger sending her own children to public school gave her credibility that she would actually work to support public education. Crime was a mid-tier issue in Virginia, but Spanberger’s background in law enforcement made her a different type of Democrat, to which voters responded favorably. Spanberger was viewed as more mainstream on cultural issues such as abortion as well. The Earle-Sears campaign tried to make Spanberger appear out of touch on transgender issues, but voters expressed frustration with both parties on that topic. There was a desire to prevent discrimination but also concerns with transgender athletes’ participation in girls’ sports and using girls’ bathrooms and locker rooms. The Earle-Sears campaign’s decision to single out transgender individuals to such an extreme degree ultimately seemed to turn voters off, and it was described by these swing voters as the least important issue the candidates were talking about.

New Jersey ended up being a convincing win for Sherrill but was seen as closer in pre-election polling, and the voters in that state we spoke with showed more difficulty getting to their final decision, in part because Jack Ciattarelli was seen as strong and focused on some economic issues. Voters praised his focus on cutting taxes and making the state more affordable. However, Sherrill’s ability to communicate believable and concrete plans for easing the financial burden of New Jersey residents ultimately won the day. Voters could specifically cite Sherrill’s proposals to provide property tax relief and freeze utility rates. Like in Virginia, New Jersey voters viewed Sherrill as credible on education issues, because her children go to public schools. They could also cite her support to expand after-school programs and tutoring to close the achievement gap. Also, like in Virginia, voters viewed Sherrill as more mainstream on cultural issues such as abortion.

## From the Voters Themselves

### Virginia Voters

- “I feel that Spanberger holds the Democratic line in education, environmental concerns, and

healthcare coverage, and reproductive rights. Her bipartisan record on law enforcement, border control, and rural/farming concerns bring her closer to center. I don't see many steps toward center from Earle-Sears."

- "Spanberger runs pretty close to the typical Democratic candidate except when she relies heavily on her law enforcement background. That is a good thing. It gives her credibility and makes her just different enough from many other liberals who lean on reducing law enforcement efforts."
- "It seems very polarizing, but when it comes to transgender bathrooms and sports - a commonsense approach should guide policies; not politics. So, I agree with both and also disdain both sides for vilifying the issue and making a mountain of a mud-pile."
- "Spanberger's messaging has primarily been about central issues and how she has worked with parties on both sides of the aisle to pass bills that work for all. That's a sign of someone willing to listen and compromise. Her talking points on her website specifically address people across the political spectrum."
- "I feel that she might compromise more. I feel that she will come up with more solutions vs sticking to a political ideology."

## **New Jersey Voters**

- "I connect more with Mikie Sherrill's approach... she seems steady, genuine, and focused on practical issues like cost of living and education instead of just politics... I don't agree with every stance she takes, but overall, her priorities feel closer to my own values and how I see in New Jersey's future."
- "The primary reason I am supporting Sherrill is she is fighting for tax relief and supports a program that I have used in the past called ANCHOR. Plus there are many other things such as lowering energy costs."
- "I think Mikie is more of a modern-day Democrat. She's targeting things that are within reach! Because she goes after issues that really exist and that can be fixed! Like lowering energy costs."
- "Typical candidates make generalized statements. Mikie's plan has specific examples on how she wants to help NJ. One example from her plan is that she will work to provide financing and assistance to municipalities to help them convert commercial buildings into housing units. She also wants to ensure that all reproductive healthcare services are insurance covered. I also like that she wants to improve the education system with 'high-impact tutoring,' as well as increased availability for mental health services."

- “I think Mikie has a better stance on taxes. She wants the money to flow back to the working class. That’s important for me.”
- “There is only one thing about Jack I like, but I agree with Mikie’s plan on ALL the issues.”

## **The Impact of Trump**

President Trump lost both of these states by six points in 2024. He remains unpopular with these swing voters. It was clear they were more concerned with Earle-Sears and Ciattarelli being too close with the president than they were impressed by Democrats who make opposing Trump their entire argument. Spanberger and Sherrill were seen as striking the right balance. Not surprisingly, voters opposed Trump policies such as tariffs and indiscriminate ICE raids, and in Virginia, DOGE and federal layoffs were especially unpopular. At the same time, they liked that Spanberger and Sherrill rose above the failings of the Trump presidency to provide a proactive vision for moving their respective states forward.

## **From the Voters Themselves**

### **Virginia Voters**

- “I didn’t see Spanberger say – if you don’t like Trump vote for me, and if you like Trump, I’m the enemy. Some candidates have that emotional campaign and run on that only. She tied issues with current policies.”
- “I might have more readily considered Earle-Sears if she didn’t hold so tight to her party line on DOGE and Trump’s policies. They have affected Virginia’s economy.”

### **New Jersey Voters**

- “I think I was on the fence for some time, but despite seeing good points from each side, the main thing that affected my decision making is the fact that Trump has backed up Ciattarelli, which makes it clear to me that Ciattarelli will easily allow the Trump administration to guide him in how to run the state of NJ.”
- “Sherrill seems to have a better plan than Jack. Jack supports the current president and let’s just say right now it’s not going well. She has a plan to have families save money and regain their confidence in this state.”
- “I worry about his strong relationship with President Trump and having his views on reproductive rights, immigration, vaccines and other issues effecting NJ.”

# The Next Four Years

Voters chose Spanberger and Sherrill because they were seen as different types of Democrats who they hope can bridge divides in their state governments like they did in Congress. They are expecting both to get to work and deliver on promises. Some, especially in New Jersey, said that they feel like past governors did not deliver results after promising to improve the cost of living. However, there is hope in both states that these two will be the types of governors who can push through divisiveness to do something good for the people of their states.

## From the Voters Themselves

### Virginia Voter

- “Focus and follow through with your plan. First focus on the economy and jobs as people are hurting with the cost of living. Then focus on education and healthcare and we do not need to revise all the prior policies the previous governor implemented. No noise or division.”

### New Jersey Voter

- “My message to our future Governor would be to be practical. We want all people to be able to work and live. Make it a great state where people have jobs, pay taxes, can send their children to quality schools, and have nice homes or at least live in nice areas. Don’t always look out for the highest earning citizens, look out for those who are working and trying to have a good life.”

## Conclusion

Virginia and New Jersey are light blue states, and Democrats winning the gubernatorial elections while a Republican is in the White House with an upside-down approval rating isn’t a huge shock. However, these elections showed what swing voters are looking for in their leaders. They want candidates who are strong, credible, relatable, mainstream, and not afraid to buck their party’s extremes. Spanberger and Sherrill provided steady leadership for their state parties and serve as a template for those looking for a path for Democrats to start winning again in purple and red places.

### TOPICS

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