

## **Primary Republicans Go democratic.**

By William Nicoson

Members of the Grand Old Party of Virginia will vote in a primary on February 29, 2000, to choose delegates to nominate a presidential candidate at the Republican Convention later in the year. It will be one of six early primaries, and state GOP leaders hope that their primary results will contribute to the momentum that puts the eventual nominee over the top. Political leaders who engineer such a feat often find themselves appointed to high office or otherwise blessed.

Usually Virginia delegates nominating a Republican presidential candidate have been chosen in district and state conventions of the faithful. A primary election, in addition to publicizing Virginia's key role in the making of a great and grateful president -- well, at least a grateful candidate -- will transfer decision-making power to lowly voters. The Grand Old Party is going democratic!

In Virginia, candidates challenging incumbents or aspirants hand-picked by leaders of the same party, whether Republican or Democrat, are rarely offered a primary in which to demonstrate their vote-getting prowess. In 1991 when Democrat Michael Horwatt challenged Democrat Audrey Moore, the incumbent Chair of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, he demanded an open primary but was offered only a "firehouse" ballot, little more than a gussied-up caucus of the leadership. Horwatt dropped out, and Moore lost to Republican Tom Davis, beginning a new era in Fairfax County politics.

On the other hand, when the Republican leadership was miffed with Senator John Warner because he refused to support Republican candidate Oliver North in his challenge of Democratic Senator Chuck Robb in 1994, Warner was treated to a primary opponent in 1996. Senator Warner won handily, with the help, it was rumored, of cross-over Democrats voting in the Republican primary.

This was possible because Virginia has an open system of voter registration which doesn't record party affiliation. Theoretically primary voters are pledged to vote in the general election for the winner of the primary, but I've never understood how this pledge is enforced.

Some Republican leaders have questioned whether a presidential primary is wise, given the possibility that cross-over Democrats might conspire to vote for the primary candidate most vulnerable in the subsequent general election. That scenario was not supported by the Warner primary where any cross-over votes clearly helped the Republican candidate considered most likely to win -- and who in fact did win -- in the general election. But of course the leadership might well have preferred a different winning candidate.

Anyway, I'm pleased to be able to vote for a presidential candidate in a Republican primary, regardless of the reason I'm given the privilege, because I think the next president will be a

Republican in view of the record and scandals of the current Democratic Administration. I'll push the button for the candidate likely to wield the fastest broom and enjoy the exercise of my democratic right to vote out dysfunctional Democrats.

*William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers.*