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Schapiro: McAuliffe budget makes dollars, sense for Democrat

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BY JEFF E. SCHAPIRO Richmond Times-Dispatch

In rolling out his budget this past Wednesday to the money committees of the Republican-controlled legislature, Terry McAuliffe gushed that he loves being Virginia governor and wakes up every morning rarin' to compete with other states and nations for jobs.

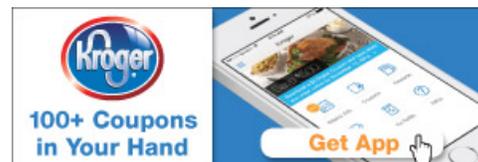
Because hyperbole is in McAuliffe's DNA, he can't help being unsubtle. It applies to his politics and his policies and can be insufferable when he combines the two, as he's doing with his spending proposals for the year ahead — the election year ahead.

The Democrat's budget isn't as much a program on which candidates for the House of Delegates and Virginia Senate can run in 2015 as it is a scheme to energize voters who ordinarily ignore

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General Assembly elections.

There's a lot in the McAuliffe plan that's going nowhere fast in the Republican-controlled statehouse. But that's probably just fine with Democrats.

The extreme prejudice with which Republicans are expected to dispatch, among other McAuliffe initiatives, his second attempt at a Medicaid-financed expansion of Obamacare, is essential to the Democratic campaign narrative that

the only word in the GOP's vocabulary is no.

Conversely, Republicans will amass talking points for their base.

Whether it's killing a health care fix, blocking a rollback of tax breaks favored by big donors, stopping more public money for more gun control, or disposing of a Michelle Obama-like nutrition program pushed by McAuliffe's wife, Dorothy, Republicans get to tell their voters that Democrats are wedded to big, expensive, meddlesome government.

If this sounds cynical, it is.

It's made more so by the fact that the McAuliffe budget, as a campaign blueprint, is tailored not to Democrats, in general, but, specifically, to so-called federal Democrats in five or six Senate districts in Northern Virginia, the Richmond suburbs and South Hampton Roads. The districts fell to President Barack Obama, McAuliffe or both.

About 1.2 million people live in these districts, roughly one-seventh of the state's total population. The target audience, however, is much smaller, perhaps 400,000 registered voters, as distinct from residents. These voters show up for presidential and congressional elections, occasionally for gubernatorial contests, rarely if ever for legislative races.

McAuliffe, who will have no shortage of cash or campaign technology, is gambling that Democrats can turn out enough of these voters to tip the Senate by holding an open seat and picking up one — better yet, two — from Republicans. The expand-the-electorate strategy worked in two gubernatorial elections, McAuliffe's in 2013 and Tim Kaine's in 2005.

Now it will be attempted on a microscale. Votes, at that level, were often cast by friends and neighbors, guided by personal loyalties to a candidate rather than political affiliations. It allowed Democrats to win in Republican regions and vice-versa.

Virginia's politics, however, have become more national, more polarized.

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Intensified by gerrymandering, it's seeping into what had been local campaigns. Instead of emphasizing tried-and-true remedies to public problems, candidates play to tribal ties.

So the action this fall will be in the cul-de-sacs of Prince William County, which Democrat Chuck Colgan represented for four decades; those of Loudoun County, home of Republican Dick Black; the increasingly moderate Chesterfield County subdivisions whence sprang the retiring Republican John Watkins, and the neighborhoods of Virginia Beach that sent to Richmond two Republicans, Frank Wagner and Jeff McWaters.

Republicans, who came out of last month's election with a record 67 of 98 partisan legislative chambers nationwide, are spoiling for the fight. They are happily looking on contests here as an opportunity to take McAuliffe down a peg ahead of a presidential race in a swing state he wants to deliver for his pal, Hillary Clinton.

The Republican State Leadership Committee, previously led by Ed Gillespie and whose former chief operative was Richmond lobbyist Chris Jankowski, is readying to again pump into Virginia cash and personnel. The PAC has been a funnel for national dollars in state races here for about a decade.

With the House out of reach for Democrats because of computer-driven redistricting, their efforts are focused entirely on taking back the Senate, restoring for the second half of McAuliffe's four-year term what little legislative traction he had when he took office in January.

Back then, Democrats had working control of an evenly divided Senate on Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam's tie-breaking vote. Within eight months, the Senate flipped to the Republicans because of the surprise — and suspicious — resignation of the last Democratic legislator in far Southwest Virginia, Phillip Puckett.

In addition to a federal corruption investigation that went nowhere and killing McAuliffe's Medicaid gambit, Puckett's departure triggered a special election in August won by Republican Ben Chafin, giving the GOP a 21-19 advantage. Republicans immediately used their two-seat majority to recast committees. Those previously friendly to McAuliffe became death traps.

Democrats can reverse this with two seats: retaining Colgan's and winning one held or vacated by a Republican. That would be enough to restore a tied Senate and the power of Northam's tie-breaking 21st vote. But there are potential obstacles to the Democrats' scenario.

They include Obama's unpopularity, which would dampen the enthusiasm of the very voters McAuliffe is hoping to mobilize. Another is McAuliffe himself. His continuing retreat on climate change, reflected by his embrace of a \$5 billion natural gas pipeline as a job generator, is a turnoff to green voters.

Here's where traditional Democratic themes for targeted Democratic audiences,

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particularly those with a long history of reliability, come into play. They're coupled with a long-anticipated staff shuffle in the Senate Democratic Caucus that more closely links its political apparatus with McAuliffe's.

The McAuliffe budget includes a proposal to shore up teacher pensions by selling \$150 million in unclaimed stocks and bonds, plowing the proceeds into the Virginia Retirement System. Teachers, whose union, the Virginia Education Association, is a virtual adjunct of the Democratic Party, make up the largest share of VRS beneficiaries.

Access to the polls, a bigger issue in Virginia after Republicans imposed a voter ID requirement that Democrats say unfairly targets their voters — seniors, minorities and the young — also is addressed by the governor. McAuliffe is proposing \$28 million in bonds to modernize voting equipment.

And just in time for Election Day '15.

Contact Jeff E. Schapiro at (804) 649-6184. His column appears Wednesday and Sunday. Watch his video column Thursday on TimesDispatch.com. Follow him on Twitter.com/RTDSchapiro. Listen to his analysis 8:45 a.m. Friday on WCVE (88.9 FM).

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So, with McAuliffe, it's all about Democratic Party politics, voters, and one-upmanship rather than what's in the best interest of our commonwealth. A state budget should not be a political document.

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