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Virginia Republicans remain in control of state Senate

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Associated Press |

RICHMOND — Virginia Republicans have maintained control of the state Senate after a bruising, expensive contest that featured heavy investment from national special interest groups.

After both Republicans and Democrats spent millions of dollars, not a single seat flipped control in the upper chamber. The GOP retained a 21-19 lead.

Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe led a well-financed effort, with help from deep-pocketed donors and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's gun control group, to help his party in a handful of competitive races. Republicans were helped by the Republican State Leadership Committee, a Washington-based GOP group largely backed by corporate interests that invested heavily in

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key races.

In a closely watched Richmond-area open seat, Republican Glen Sturtevant narrowly defeated Democrat Dan Gecker to hold a seat currently held by retiring GOP Sen. John Watkins.

Thomas A. Shearer, a retiree in Chesterfield County, said he was supporting Sturtevant in part because of the large financial assistance Gecker had received from out-of-state interests like Bloomberg's gun control group.

"I'm not going to vote for anyone financed that way," Shearer said.

Sturtevant beat Gecker 50 percent to 47 percent with 100 percent of the vote counted. Sturtevant said he won because he ran a positive campaign focused on key issues like improving Virginia's business climate and schools.

"You saw that resonate with voters today," Sturtevant said.

In the House, the GOP maintained a clear advantage.

With Republicans maintaining control of the General Assembly, McAuliffe lost a chance to gain leverage when negotiating with GOP lawmakers on matters like the state budget during the last two years of his term. And his top legislative priorities, like expanding Medicaid coverage or passing tighter gun laws, remain out of reach.

Election Day was a test for McAuliffe's efforts to build a lasting advantage over Republicans in terms of campaign field work. The governor has often touted his heavy investment in data-driven voter identification and get-out-the-vote efforts that could be used to strengthen Democratic efforts in future contests. Virginia is expected to be a key swing state, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, a close friend of McAuliffe, is the favorite to be the Democratic nominee in the 2016 presidential contest.

McAuliffe was able to tap his rolodex of wealthy donors from his days as a prominent national Democratic fundraiser with close ties to Clinton and her husband, former President Bill Clinton.

Virginia's legislative contest also became a spending war between well-funded national gun control and gun rights groups.

Bloomberg's gun control group entered the race in the final weeks, announcing it was going to spend \$2.2 million helping Democrats in two key Senate races. Bloomberg-backed candidates went one for two in Virginia, with Gecker losing and Democrat Jeremy McPike winning another closely watched and hard-fought race in northern Virginia.

Some of the group's ads featured the father of a Roanoke journalist who was shot to death on live TV in August and denounced the Republican candidates as being beholden to the gun lobby.

The National Rifle Association has also spent heavily promoting GOP lawmakers.

Some of Tuesday's Senate contests were likely among the most expensive in Virginia's history. Virginia candidates and outside groups spent more than \$10 million running more than 20,000 TV ads this election season, according to media tracking data analyzed by the Center for Public Integrity.

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