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Three are vying for WV secretary of state

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The West Virginia secretary of state race is a three-way competition among the incumbent Democrat, a challenging Republican candidate with a legal background that includes experience in the U.S. military, and a Libertarian candidate who has a legal background and about 40 years of active political experience in Virginia and West Virginia.

Secretary of State Natalie Tennant is seeking her third term in the office she's held since 2009, and she's challenged this year by Republican Mac Warner, of Morgantown, and Libertarian John Buckley, of Mathias, Hardy County.

Tennant, 48, first was elected secretary of state in 2008 and was re-elected in 2012. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from West Virginia University and a master's degree in corporate and organizational communication, also from WVU. She is the co-owner of Wells Media Group and previously worked as a television reporter and anchor in West Virginia.

Warner, 61, is a retired military officer who earned his bachelor's degree from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1977 and his law degree from WVU's College of Law in 1982. He also has postgraduate degrees in international law, from the University of Virginia, and military law, from Judge Advocate General's School. His military career included five years as a U.S. Department of State contractor in Afghanistan working to establish a government there.

Buckley, 63, earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia in 1975, and he earned his law degree from the College of William & Mary in 1987. He previously served a term in the Virginia General Assembly from 1980 to 1982. He previously worked as a court manager, and he spent a few years in private practice with a law firm in northern Virginia. He also has worked for multiple free-market policy organizations, including the Cato Institute, the Institute for Humane Studies, and the Law and Economics Center at George Mason University School of Law. He made West Virginia his permanent home in 2002.

In seeking re-election, Tennant said she hoped to build on the record she's established in the office, which includes modernizing the state's election processes, innovating the office to ease the burdens of starting and operating a business in West Virginia as well as making the office more transparent.

"I think this is a clear choice for secretary of state with the results that I've delivered in running the office in an entrepreneurial spirit, where we are going to work toward forward-thinking ideas

and initiatives that lead the country," Tennant said. "That's what I want folks to look at - look at my record solely. Don't base my record on the words of somebody else that might be on the ballot."

In his interview with The Herald-Dispatch, Warner criticized Tennant's performance in the office, saying she had "taken her eye off the ball" while running for other offices instead of focusing on the duties of her current post, referring to Tennant's unsuccessful bids for U.S. Senate in 2014 and governor in the 2011 special election. Warner said he wanted to use his legal and military background to focus solely on the job of being secretary of state.

"You have to take all aspects of the voting process seriously, and you've got to apply yourself to the job," Warner said. "I want to restore faith in our electoral process, on the election side, and when we do that we help restore faith in government, and more people are going to invest in the economy and invest in West Virginia and bring jobs."

Buckley also boasted of his background in the public and private sectors, which he said make him uniquely qualified to review election statutes to ensure fair and accurate interpretation and enforcement as well as manage the office itself. He also said his Libertarian affiliation would make him a "neutral referee" to ensure fair elections.

"I'm running for this office for two reasons. No. 1, I'm particularly qualified for the job; and No. 2, I'd use the office as a platform to advocate for principles of limited government and individual liberty in a way that reaches out to citizens all across conventional political boundaries," Buckley said. "I'm fed up with the failure of our two-party system of Republicans and Democrats dominating all elective offices, when all the while the government continues to grow bigger and bigger."

While the secretary of state is responsible for business and other types of licensing as well as enforcing open meeting laws, much of the attention for the office focuses on the secretary of state's primary function as the state's chief election officer.

"Trust" was a word that came up among all three candidates when talking about providing safe and fair elections.

Buckley said citizens have become cynical, doubting whether it does them any good at all to participate in elections, noting he has no special interests funding his candidacy.

"Already this year, we've seen confusion about whether certain candidates are even allowed to run for public office, confusion as to who can vote in the primary, and mistaken alignment of precincts and offices up for election," he said. "We need to restore confidence in the integrity of the voting process so that, whoever wins, the losing side can say, 'Godspeed. You won fair and square. Now how can we work together to solve problems and boost prosperity for all?'"

Warner said he'd met with people throughout the state who had shared stories and concerns about possible election fraud, and he said he would rely on a military adage that the things that get done are the things that get inspected.

"I'm afraid that a lot of attention has been paid to looking good in the office than being good in the office," Warner said. "You've got to apply yourself and say we're really going to investigate

and not wait for the U.S. Attorney to do the job and try to take credit for things that happen. We're going to actually do that investigation and turn things over and work with the U.S. Attorney and local prosecutors to investigate voter fraud."

Tennant said her office investigates every report of voter fraud that is made there, and she also encouraged citizens who believe they've seen election fraud taking place to report it to her office, their local police, their county clerk or even the FBI.

"We have an attitude in the West Virginia Secretary of State's Office that we're not going to take anyone trying to steal an election," Tennant said. "My record shows that. It shows that with my office having more investigations and more convictions than any other secretary of state. I'm willing to look at anything. We investigate everything."