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## JEFF SCHAPIRO: Welcome to Washington on the James

By Jeff E. Schapiro



Virginia legislators bristle at suggestions that Washington-style politics is becoming the rule at Mr. Jefferson's Capitol. Not at all, they intone, manners and high-mindedness are the rule. All that means is lawmakers say "Excuse me" before driving in the shiv.

William F. Connelly Jr., a professor of politics at Washington and Lee University and an expert on congressional partisanship, laid out for the Cato Institute, a center-right think tank, eight reasons why heightened partisanship is enveloping Washington. They could apply to Richmond:

1. Nominating primaries feed polarization by appealing to the party base. Republicans bow right; Democrats, left. Legislators talk past each other rather than with each other, even on regional issues that once transcended party. This decade-long shouting match only got Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads stuck in traffic.
2. Redistricting is a high art driven by computer technology. Gerrymandering is the rule. Legislators pick voters, not the other way around. This empowers narrow bands of the electorate and keeps in power narrow-minded lawmakers. You know who you are.
3. What Connelly calls institutional "democratization and decentralization." Despite enduring hubs of power —

the House speaker and the Senate majority leader — authority is disperse. The explosion of subcommittees, particularly in the GOP House, gives small groups of lawmakers a big say on huge issues, such as nonpartisan redistricting.

4. "Big government gives you big politics," says Connelly. With Virginia spending \$35 billion-plus a year, politicians have as many reasons to fight. Even in this election year, when lawmakers tend toward caution, they quarrel over issues macro (schools, roads, cops) and micro (abortion restrictions, high-cost instant loans, sweeter tax breaks for specific businesses.)
5. A reflex toward, by the standards of a state given to incrementalism, sweeping change. You're for it or against it: Jerry Baliles' tax increases for roads in the 1980s. Parole abolition and prison construction by George Allen in the 1990s. A credit-card-financed highway plan by Bob McDonnell in the 2000s.
6. The growth of interest groups — what Connelly calls "hyperpluralism." Used to be on business issues, the big three — the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, the manufacturers and the retailers — got the first and last word. As the economy has diversified, so have legislation and the ranks of lobbyists.
7. A better-educated electorate. Turnouts are falling. Barely four in 10 voters cast ballots for governor in 2009. But those who did tended to be well-informed on the issue that spurred them to the polls.
8. Old media vs. new media. A few newspapers and the news services no longer control the flow of information from the statehouse. Online reporting, social media and blogs quickly yield more info — more of it with a point of view. Says Connelly, "Conflict is what gets covered as opposed to consensus, exaggerating the level of contentiousness in our politics."

Guilty as charged.

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