

The clock is ticking for Virginia's gubernatorial hopefuls to make the ballot

Two Republicans are angling to take on Virginia Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears in the gubernatorial primary, potentially denying her what was once expected to be a stress-free path to the nomination.

It appeared that Earle-Sears had cleared the field when she entered the race last September. But late last month, former state Sen. Amanda Chase—who unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for governor in 2021—and hard-right former Del. Dave LaRock announced intentions to enter the race. However, their place on the primary ballot isn't official yet.

Chase and LaRock must obtain 10,000 signatures from across the Commonwealth by April 3 in order to qualify for a June primary. At least 400 signatures must come from each of Virginia's 11 congressional districts. While both gubernatorial front-runners, Earle-Sears and former Democratic Rep. Abigail Spanberger, have submitted their signatures, neither of the lieutenant governor's potential opponents have done so.

"We still need thousands of signatures. I mean, we're about halfway there," Chase told National Journal in an interview eight days before the deadline. "We still have some congressional districts where we need to collect the necessary 400."

Chase said that in order to gather the remaining signatures, the campaign will hit a number of events this weekend, including a gun show in Hampton and the NASCAR race in Martinsville. LaRock's campaign told National Journal that it is still working to gather signatures at events over the next few days.

"Getting the signatures is really tough," said John Whitbeck, former chairman of the Virginia Republican Party and supporter of Earle-Sears. "You're a legitimate candidate just by virtue of the fact that you can marshal the volunteers to get 10,000 signatures. ... That's hard. That's really, really hard."

The candidates now find themselves racing against the clock to prove that they have viable primary campaigns.

"I think part of it was theater, right?" said David Richards, chairman of the international relations and political science department at the University of Lynchburg. "Spanberger and [Earle-Sears] came the first day with buckets of signatures, much more than they needed, and Chase and LaRock were nowhere to be seen. ... Politics is a lot about perception, and if you're straggling to the finish line just to get into the nomination process, that's not not a great look."

It remains to be seen whether an official primary will actually get off the ground, but a potential contest will all but certainly center on loyalty to President Trump. Both LaRock and Chase, who describes herself as "Trump in heels," have questioned Earle-Sears's loyalty to the leader of the

party, after she said Trump had become a liability following the 2022 midterms. She has since changed her tune and embraced him. Even in the absence of an official primary contest, the three candidates have been angling to prove that they are the most Trump-like figure, in the hopes that the president—who hasn't endorsed a candidate in the race yet—gives them his blessing.

"The reality is that it is a tough environment for any Republican in Virginia or elsewhere in the country to make all that much progress as a candidate if you're not fully supported by Donald Trump," University of Mary Washington political scientist Stephen Farnsworth told National Journal.

A primary centered on Trump could present difficulties for the eventual Republican nominee, who at this stage is all but certain to face Spanberger in the general election. While the president remains popular among Republican primary voters, his support could be a liability in a general election.

"The problem for Republicans ... is that if there is a nomination struggle and candidates compete to be the most pro-Trump Republican, that will not be helpful to the party in November," Farnsworth said. "Trump lost Virginia three times now, and in many ways Youngkin's gubernatorial success was aided by him not being too explicitly pro-Trump."

Republicans' concerns about Trump's liabilities were on display four years ago when Glenn Youngkin was elected governor. In 2021, Republicans chose their nominees through a convention system in which elected party delegates, not primary voters, participated. Republicans outwardly said that they opted against a traditional open primary in order to prevent Democrats from participating, but it was an open secret behind the scenes that the party chose a convention in order to avoid ending up with a nominee who would be too polarizing to win statewide—someone like Chase. In the general election, Youngkin was also careful to walk a political tightrope, neither embracing Trump too closely nor alienating his base.

"Youngkin really presented himself as a moderate—whether he was or not is open for debate," Richards said.

The White House's moves to drastically reduce the federal workforce could further erode the president's popularity, given the significant concentration of federal employees in the state. Off-year governor's races over the last 50 years in Virginia have almost always punished the president's party, and it's possible that frustration surrounding the federal layoffs could fuel that punishment this time around.

"Every time Trump does something to dismantle, reduce, stop the government spending, people in Virginia are impacted by that directly," Richards said. "By November maybe we'll be beyond that. But if not, people are going to take it out on the Republican candidate that they're upset with what Trump's doing."

“And it doesn't have to be a lot of people. [Trump] didn't win Virginia,” he continued.

With or without primary opponents, strategists outside of Chase's and LaRock's campaigns who spoke to National Journal said that they don't believe the lieutenant governor is in any sincere danger of losing the nomination. Earle-Sears has statewide name recognition, an endorsement from Youngkin, who enjoys positive approval ratings, and endorsements from a slew of other elected officials.

"Winsome is a proven winner and has already earned the support of dozens of Republican leaders, more than 60 sheriffs, community leaders, and clergy from across the Commonwealth," Peyton Vogel, press secretary for Earle-Sears's campaign, said in a statement to National Journal. "Other candidates can run campaigns but Winsome will have the winning one in both June and November."

Republican State Sen. Mark Obenshain, who has endorsed Earle-Sears, is also confident in the lieutenant governor's chances.

"Having a candidate who came here as an immigrant, who has embraced and lived the American dream, somebody who enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, somebody who has started and run a business, who has served in the Legislature and in statewide office, I think is just an unbeatable combination," Obenshain said in an interview with National Journal. "And for most people, most Republicans across Virginia, it's a no-brainer."