

Politics in New Hampshire

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Equilibrium points have been elusive in New Hampshire politics for the past half-dozen years. Control of the state's 400-member State House has changed hands three times since 2006, with dozens of seats changing hands between Democrats and Republicans. Similarly, no fewer than six different politicians have occupied the Granite State's two congressional seats since the beginning of 2006 – three for the eastern First Congressional District, and three for the Second Congressional District bordering Vermont. New Hampshire has been both the epicenter of “Bush fatigue” in 2006, and of Tea Party rebellion in 2010. Entering 2012, observers could be forgiven for thinking that the sole swing state in New England had a malfunctioning pendulum.

The 2012 election results, however, were notable not for their novelty, but for confirming long-term trends in Granite State politics. As is often the case, presidential-year elections provide a corrective to the extreme fluctuations of off-year elections, offering a more accurate depiction of the current state of affairs. November's elections, in particular, presented fresh evidence for the following axioms of New Hampshire politics:

The periphery is powerful. The lion's share of political analysis in New Hampshire focuses on the behavior of its two largest counties, Hillsborough and Rockingham. Together, the two counties, which form the outer ring of the Boston suburbs, comprise more than half the votes cast in the state. Conventional wisdom explained the state's drift away from Republicanism, for instance, by pointing to the northward migration of liberal Massachusetts citizens up Interstate 93. Much more dramatic political changes, however, have occurred in the state's periphery of rural counties, where Yankee Republicans have faded into history, replaced in part by a

generation of migrant retirees who brought their liberal politics with them. In 2004, for instance, John Kerry lost both Hillsborough and Rockingham counties to George W. Bush by a combined 12,000 votes, but nonetheless carried New Hampshire because of his strong performance in rural areas, such as the Connecticut River Valley counties bordering Vermont. Barack Obama followed a similar path to victory in 2012, falling behind slightly in the populous southern tier, but dominating in the Connecticut River Valley, as well as Merrimack County (seat of the state capitol) and Strafford County (home of the state university). As long as the populous counties along the Massachusetts border remain closely divided, the more sparsely populated counties of New Hampshire hold the balance of power because the Democrats dominate most of them.

New Hampshire remains a Democratic-tilting swing state. In 2008, Barack Obama carried New Hampshire easily, winning 54 percent of the vote, approximately 1 percent better than his national share of the popular vote. During his first term in office, however, the president's approval numbers in New Hampshire fell sharply, and Obama received much of the blame for the drubbing Granite State Democrats endured in the 2010 midterms. Looking ahead to 2012, New Hampshire Republican elites were encouraged that a fellow New Englander, Mitt Romney, could move their state back to the GOP column.

Romney's best night in New Hampshire, however, came in January 2012, not in November. Obama's approval numbers rebounded at the beginning of 2012, and he enjoyed a lead over his opponent throughout the campaign season. The president's campaign worked the state aggressively, both on the ground and on the airwaves. The Romney campaign and allied super PACs made significant investments in New Hampshire, but it was all for naught. The president carried the state once again with 52 percent of the vote, once again a slightly better performance than nationwide. Granite State Republicans were left facing a daunting set of facts.

No presidential nominee of their party had won 50 percent of the popular vote in a quarter-century, dating back to George H. W. Bush's victory over Michael Dukakis in 1988. What's more, the nominees of their party in 2008 and 2012 appeared custom-made for a New England electorate. Both Romney and his predecessor, John McCain, had reputations as right-of-center conservatives who did not place what New England Republicans deemed undue emphasis on issues that mattered to social conservatives and evangelicals. Nonetheless, in the general election, New Hampshire voters treated them both as generic Republicans; neither McCain nor Romney displayed any significant crossover appeal to independents or Democrats.

The demise of moderate Republicans has not been exaggerated. At the congressional level, Democrats recaptured both seats lost in the Republican deluge of 2010. In the bellwether First Congressional District, covering the eastern half of the state, progressive Democrat Carol Shea-Porter regained her seat, defeating first-term GOP incumbent Frank Guinta by 4 percentage points. Of special note was the fate of Republican Charlie Bass in the neighboring Second Congressional District, which stretches from the populous southern tier of the state, along the Vermont border, into the state's North Country. During his 14 years in office (from 1994 to 2006, and then from 2010-12), Bass had cultivated an image as a "Main Street" Republican who took moderate positions on some high-profile issues, such as abortion. As such, he was identified as a vanishing species of Republican in an increasingly polarized party system. After losing in 2006, Bass staged a comeback four years later, filling the empty seat left open by Democrat Paul Hodes, who unsuccessfully ran for the U. S. Senate seat vacated by retiring Republican Judd Gregg. Even though Bass was successful, his approval numbers among constituents were marginal, according to research conducted by the University of New

Hampshire's Survey Center.¹ In a rematch against Democrat Ann McLane Kuster, Bass lost by 5 percentage points. Bass initially showed no interest in another comeback try. Indeed, the most prominent Republican mentioned as a potential challenger to Kuster was former Speaker of the New Hampshire State House William O'Brien, a controversial figure whose ideological views resembled Tea Party far more than Main Street.

Social liberalism and fiscal moderation remained a winning ticket for New Hampshire Democrats running statewide. As 2012 dawned, Republican Ovide Lamontagne (who had narrowly missed upsetting Kelly Ayotte in the 2010 U. S. Senate primary) was touted as a favorite to win the corner office in Concord. Popular Democratic Governor John Lynch had announced his retirement after serving a record four consecutive two-year terms. Democrats were uncertain who their nominee would be, pending a September primary. (Lamontagne also faced a primary opponent, whom he defeated easily.) Lamontagne was once a controversial figure in his party, a social conservative who upset a prominent moderate to win the gubernatorial nomination in 1996, only to lose the general election to Democrat Jeanne Shaheen. However, after his close loss (and gracious concession) to Ayotte in 2010, Lamontagne had worked hard to unite the party behind him. Given the Republicans' success in winning both houses of the state legislature in 2010, Lamontagne's victory appeared quite plausible. In November, however, it was Lamontagne who was delivering yet another concession speech. Not only had he lost, but his margin of defeat far exceeded Romney's at the top of the ticket. For the Republican, it was a painful case of déjà vu: he had just been defeated by a socially liberal, fiscally moderate female Democrat, just as he had been 16 years earlier.

¹ For snapshot of Bass's approval numbers during his congressional career, see Smith, Andrew E. (October 3, 2012). "NH Congressional Races Remain Close." Retrieved from http://www.unh.edu/survey-center/news/pdf/gsp2012_fall_congrace100312.pdf.

This time, the Democrat was former state Senator Maggie Hassan. During her six years as a state senator, Hassan had risen to the rank of majority leader, but had been a casualty of the Republican wave in 2010. In order to win the nomination of her party in 2012, Hassan faced another former state senator, Jackie Cilley. During the primary season, the two took opposite sides on a familiar issue to New Hampshire voters: taxes. Hassan took the so-called “Pledge,” vowing that she would block any attempt to create a broad-based income or sales tax. In doing so, Hassan followed the political precedent of successful Democratic gubernatorial candidates such as Lynch and Shaheen. In contrast, Cilley refused to take the pledge, stating that the citizenry needed to have a thorough discussion of available fiscal options. Cilley herself did not endorse either an income tax or sales tax, although a third contestant, political neophyte Bill Kennedy, did propose an income tax. Hassan enjoyed a significant fundraising advantage over her opponents, thanks in part to an early endorsement from Emily’s List, a political action committee dedicated to electing pro-choice women to office. In the state’s September primary, Hassan won 53 percent of the vote in the three-person contest.

The contested primary drained Hassan’s financial resources, but the Democratic nominee had formidable allies ready to step in during the two-month general election battle versus Lamontagne. Of the more than \$23 million spent on the governor’s race, Hassan and Lamontagne themselves only raised close to \$4 million. In contrast, New Hampshire Freedom Fund, a super PAC of the Democratic Governors’ Association, spent close to \$8 million on Hassan’s behalf; Lamontagne enjoyed roughly equal support from Live Free PAC, the super

PAC of the Republican Governors Association. Unions also came to Hassan's aid, as well as the Emily's List super PAC, Women Vote!.²

During the general election season, while Lamontagne and his allies directed fire at Hassan's fiscal positions, Democrats focused on the Republican's social conservatism. The latter set of issues had an unexpectedly high profile in 2012, in part due to the actions of Lamontagne's fellow Republicans in Concord. The Republican-dominated lower house of the state legislature, for instance, had passed bills to defund Planned Parenthood and to offer exemptions to religious institutions which did not wish to offer contraceptive coverage as part of their employees' health insurance plans. Faced with a decision between a pro-abortion rights, female Democrat and an anti-abortion rights, male Republican, woman voters flocked to the former. In its final pre-election survey of New Hampshire voters, the University of New Hampshire Survey Center reported that female voters favored Hassan by a 23-point margin, while male voters favored Lamontagne by only 6 percentage points.³ In sum, Hassan's combination of social liberalism and fiscal moderation once again proved a successful formula for Democrats. Her victory was the eighth out of the last nine gubernatorial contests for her party, dating back to Jeanne Shaheen's first-term victory in 1996.

Hassan began her first term as governor with a divided legislature. Democrats exceeded most expectations by regaining a majority in the lower house of the state legislature, as well as in the Executive Council, a five-person entity which approves the governor's nominations of executive department heads, as well as significant state financial contracts. Republicans managed to cling to a 13-11 majority in the State Senate. In her first weeks as governor, Hassan put

² Surdukowski, Jay (Fall 2012). "The Invention of the New Hampshire Super PAC." *New Hampshire Bar Journal*, 53 (3). Retrieved from <http://www.nhbar.org/uploads/pdf/BJ-Fall2012-Vol53-No3-Pg20.pdf>

³ Smith, Andrew E. (November 4, 2012). "Obama Has Advantage in Final NH Poll." Retrieved from http://www.unh.edu/survey-center/news/pdf/e2012_election110412.pdf.

forward casino gambling as the centerpiece of a revenue-raising strategy that would keep her campaign promise to invest in areas such as higher education, which suffered large cuts in the previous two years. Hassan's plan found ready allies in the Senate, but faced an uncertain future in the lower House, which historically has been averse to gambling proposals.