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Clyde McKee
Trinity College

Stefanie Chambers
Trinity Collge

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Connecticut's Challenged Political Systems

Clyde McKee
Trinity College

Stefanie Chambers
Trinity College

On August 26, 2002, *The New York Times* published an article titled “Poverty In The Land Of Plenty: Can Hartford Ever Recover?” This was an important article because it put Hartford in the national news and highlighted enduring questions related to both a core capital city and its parent, the State of Connecticut. How could America’s richest city in the 1880’s now be one of our nation’s poorest communities? How could Connecticut, with the nation’s highest per capita income, allow its core capital city to fall into such a miserable condition? Why did the corporate leaders of what was once called “the insurance capital of the world” allow this to happen at their very doorsteps? Why have the elected and appointed leaders at city hall been so weak? How did this city’s prosperous suburbs turn its regional center into a classical “doughnut,” with all the “dough” in the ring and an economic and social “hole” in the middle?

These are stinging questions given the fact that Republican Governor John Rowland said his legacy will be Connecticut’s urban revitalization. During the past six years Governor Rowland invested much of his political capital to establish this legacy. Under his leadership the state took over Hartford’s welfare burden, took control of its 32 public schools under an appointed board of education commissioners, put \$771 million of state money into the

redevelopment of Hartford's downtown supervised by a state-approved development board, and arranged for state police to assist Hartford's 450 local police in breaking up urban gangs.

The timing of the publication of the *Times* denunciation of state and local leaders is significant. It appeared in the middle of a campaign by Democratic Mayor Eddie Perez, Hartford's first Hispanic mayor, to replace his city's 56 year-old council-manager form of government with a strong-mayor plan under which he would become the city's chief executive. At the state level, Governor Rowland was being challenged vigorously by the endorsed Democratic candidate, Bill Curry. One of Curry's central themes was his attack on Rowland's urban policy for all Connecticut's major cities- Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and Waterbury, the home city of Governor Rowland.

Hartford's problems have been known for more than a decade. In 1991, *The Hartford Courant* published a comprehensive study prepared by 37 investigative reporters, who spent five months comparing Hartford to nine cities with similar sizes and problems located throughout the nation. The purpose of this study was to confront this city's problems, analyze the community's potential to address them, and report what other cities did to improve their situations. In addition to gathering voluminous data, these reporters conducted many interviews with Hartford's residents, governmental, business, and civic leaders. Since the Courant's study, three competing visions of Hartford's future were prepared.

The Metro-Hartford Vision

In 1960, Connecticut abolished its county form of government and transferred county responsibilities to the state and local governments. But the national government created metropolitan statistical areas, which replaced our counties as regions eligible to receive federal funds. Of 56 selected metropolitan areas in the United States, Hartford ranked 26th. Karl J. Krapek, president and

chief operating officer of United Technologies Corporation, created The MetroHartford Vision, which was designed to make the metropolitan area of Hartford one of the ten best places to work and live in the nation. This goal is anchored by four key concepts: accountability, inclusiveness, celebration of diversity, and measured results. Metro-Hartford's strategy is to use technology to build a world-class workforce and educational system, to design organizations to break down social barriers, to foster economic growth, to create quality jobs for all residents, and to create a vibrant and culturally rich city. The business leaders associated with this project aspire to achieve the status and accomplishments of the legendary Hartford "Bishops."

The Six Pillars of Progress

In 1996, Republican Governor John Rowland announced his "Six Pillars of Progress" for Hartford. The intervention of a governor into local politics was based on the fact that the state had already assumed responsibility for four of the city's major functions. Rather than a grand and overreaching vision for the capital city, Governor Rowland believed Hartford's future could be greatly improved by specific projects. First, there is the civic center, which needs to be made more inviting to pedestrians and retailers. The state invested \$28 million to help construct 250 upscale apartments and create new office facilities. Next, there is the riverfront area located near Constitutional Plaza, a downtown landmark. National and state transportation planners made the mistake of locating Interstate I-91 between Hartford's downtown and the Connecticut River. After two decades of attempting to correct this error with private donations, the state committed \$25 million to complete this project. Third, the Governor wants to enliven the downtown area by relocating the Capital Community College from the outskirts of the city to the vacated G. Fox department store on Main Street. The state's tab for this project is \$30 million.

Parking, the fourth pillar, has been a city patronage scandal for as long as anyone can remember. More than 2,300 new parking spaces are needed to support the other downtown pillars. The state is providing a grant of \$15 million of support for new parking facilities. The fifth pillar, housing (costing the state \$25 million), calls for the construction of three big housing complexes downtown. The biggest pillar of them all, the convention center/sports complex/science center, covering a 33-acre site between the Phoenix Home Life Mutual Insurance Company's "boat building" and I-91, will bring the total cost for the state to more than \$771 million.

Why is Governor Rowland spending so much of our state's money and his own political capital on Hartford? There are three reasons. First, Connecticut, the nation's wealthiest state, is the parent of Hartford, one of the nation's poorest children. This often-reported relationship is a continuing embarrassment. Losing the relocation of the New England Patriots football team from Massachusetts to Hartford was a major political brouhaha and the governor needed some highly visible "winners" to support his campaign for reelection in the fall of 2002. Third, the owners of the state's construction companies that are hired to complete all these projects were expected to contribute significantly to the Governor's campaign fund for a third term.

The Hartford Compact

The newest vision is in the form of a political "compact" created by Democratic Mayor Eddie Perez and his endorsed Democratic slate of six council candidates. This compact pledges to strengthen the bonds between the city's residents and their elected officials, to create a strong-mayor form of government to replace the council-manager form of government, to greatly strengthen community policing, to make schools the centers of Hartford's neighborhoods, and to provide fiscal stability and healthy financial reserves.

The 2002 Election: Avoidance Politics

How did Connecticut's state and local elections affect the political strategies and visions of the incumbent candidates and their challengers? Syndicated writer David Broder used the label "avoidance politics" to characterize our nation's mid-term campaigns and elections. To support his thesis, Broder noted the extensive number of uncontested races and the lack of debate on critical issues within the many campaigns.

To what extent does Broder's generalization apply to Connecticut's politics? The single most important political factor in Connecticut's 2002 election was the 2000 national census report. Connecticut's relatively low growth in population forced the reduction of our six congressional seats and the reapportionment and redistricting of all the remaining congressional districts and nearly all the senate and house districts of the General Assembly. Would our state's most influential politicians use this opportunity to make our districts more dynamic, more competitive, and more democratic by giving voters more real choices among candidates and policy alternatives or would they weaken democracy by enabling incumbents to become more entrenched, less competitive, and motivated to avoid debate of critical issues?

Analysis of our state's new congressional districts answers this question. Of the six original districts, two (the First and Third) were made more Democratic; one (the Fourth) was made more Republican; one (the Second) was made "potentially swing"; the two remaining districts (the Fifth and Sixth) were combined in such a way that the incumbent Democrat and incumbent Republican would have what turned out as the fifth most-contested contest in the nation. As expected, all the incumbents won, including the more senior incumbent in the lone "highly contested" race.

Did Connecticut's candidates avoid discussion of critical issues? Each of the winning candidates concentrated on those particular issues most closely

connected to those groups of voters most likely to give campaign contributions and most likely to vote in both primary and general elections. These groups were: senior citizens (federally-funded prescription drugs, social security, veteran's benefits); women (abortion rights); upper-income taxpayers (improved transportation system, energy costs). Challengers and third-party candidates raised broader issues such as fundamental reform of our tax system, increased regulation of utilities to reduce air pollution, development of alternative sources of energy, and reduced benefits and tax rebates to drug and insurance companies.

The repeat contest between incumbent Republican John Rowland, seeking a nontraditional third term, and former state senator and state comptroller Bill Curry was this state's second most important political event. The issues they debated were similar to ones raised during their 1994 gubernatorial contest- tax reform, governmental ethics, the state budget crisis, and the plight of our cities. The central issue for Curry was local property tax relief, which would cost the state an estimated \$730 million. Rowland answered Curry's attacks by stating that Connecticut was in excellent shape and that Curry was a candidate who had never held a position of major executive responsibility.

Rowland frequently cited the progress that was being made on his "six pillars" in Hartford. A major partisan decision made by the Democrats during their primary campaign is important more because of its potential significance on the next gubernatorial race than on the one last fall. Bill Curry was challenged by Democratic Senate Majority Leader George Jepsen. Both of them were significantly trailing Republican Governor John Rowland in two key areas: campaign funding and voter popularity. State AFL-CIO President John Olson, the new state Democratic party chairman, brought Curry and Jepsen together, showed them that their contest against each other was self defeating, and

persuaded them to form a new ticket with Curry running for governor and Jepsen running for lieutenant governor.

This union came too late in the campaign to be of major consequence. In October Rowland had nearly \$ 5 million in his campaign fund compared to \$1.36 in the Curry-Jepsen fund. In a voter survey conducted two days before the general election, Curry's voter support had increased from 32% in early September to 36%. But Rowland's support had jumped from 42% to 54%, with only 9% of the expected voters still undecided.

The Under-Ticket

Connecticut has an established pattern of divided government. This pattern is revealed in a variety of ways. Most of the major party voters in Connecticut are Democrats but they frequently support Republican candidates for president and governor while electing Democrats to the offices of the U.S. Senate and the four statewide positions on the under-ticket. Going into the fall election Republican Rowland was heavily favored for reelection as were the incumbent Democrats running for the offices of attorney general, treasurer, comptroller, and secretary of the state. Similarly, while a Republican served as chief executive, both houses of the state legislature were controlled by Democratic majorities. The election did not change any of these patterns.

As one looks at Connecticut's political system, special attention should be given to the under-ticket because it is here that political careers can be developed. Well known examples come immediately to mind. Ella Grasso gained statewide name recognition and voter popularity as secretary of the state. After several terms as a U.S. representative, she won the office of governor and became the nation's first female governor elected without following her husband. More recently, U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman served at the state's attorney general where he became known for initiating high profile lawsuits. Without the name recognition gained from this office he could not have challenged and defeated

incumbent U.S. Senator Lowell Weicker and run for Vice President of the United States.

Of the candidates now serving in under-ticket positions, the best known is Attorney General Richard Blumenthal. He is now a prime candidate to run for governor or receive a presidential appointment to the U.S. Court of Appeals or perhaps even the U.S. Supreme Court. This history explains why incumbents in these offices are so frequently challenged by quality candidates, who would not think of challenging one of the incumbent members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

To get a full picture of the 2002 election, there is a need to understand the campaign strategies that were used. As a well-known and popular two-term governor, John Rowland ran what *The Hartford Courant's* political writers called a "minimalist campaign." He aggressively defended his public record, avoided commitments on tax cuts, and refused to raise false hopes. He also gave vague answers to probing questions raised by the press/media. Curry followed the strategy used in his 1994 gubernatorial campaign during which he relied heavily on the support of labor unions, spent his limited funds on infrequent TV ads, and did not initiate "town meetings" or bus tours as other challengers have done. The last day of the campaign reveals a contrast in campaign styles. While Curry held a hastily called and under-publicized political rally in Hartford with former president Bill Clinton, John Rowland led a coterie of state and local Republican candidates on the commuter trains running to and from New York City, greeting numerous travelers from Grand Central Station to the various station stops to New Haven. It was this novel approach that got him prime-time coverage on the evening news.

Because Connecticut had two potential "swing" races at the congressional level that could influence the future balance in the U.S House, the national parties sent in well know personalities to help their candidates raise funds and

attract voters. Former president Bill Clinton and then House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt campaigned for Congressman Jim Maloney in the Fifth District and state senator Joseph Courtney in the Second District. They were matched by the appearances of Vice President Dick Cheney and U.S. Senator John McCain to help the Republicans. There is little evidence that these efforts made a significant difference in the outcomes.

Voter Turnout and Corruption in Connecticut

From the middle of the last century to the present, Connecticut enjoyed a national reputation as a state that had very strong party organizations, a high quality citizen-oriented state legislature, outstanding elected leaders, high voter turnouts, and very little major corruption at the state or local levels. This profile has changed. The party organizations are now weaker at the state and local levels. There are more career-oriented politicians, more unaffiliated voters, lower voter turnout, and major corruption has been exposed in our state's three largest cities.

Declining voter turnout is the third most important factor inherent in the most recent election. Only 56% of the state's registered voters participated in the last gubernatorial election. With items on the ballot to change its local form of government, reclaim control of its local schools, give its new strong mayor expansive authority in appointing members of a traditionally nonpartisan school board, and change control of zoning decisions from the city council to an separate zoning committee, Hartford voters should have turned out in droves to express their sentiments for or against these policies advocated by its first Hispanic mayor. This did not happen. Voter turnout in Hartford was 39% of the registered voters, the lowest percentage of any community in the entire state. It will not be enough to build a new city on six new physical "pillars" if the people living beneath the government's new structure do not give it substantial political support.

There are four types of political corruption: bribery/ stealing, moral abuse of authority, excessive patronage for personal gain, and tolerance for administrative violation of professional standards and accountability. Connecticut's state and local governments provide classic examples of each of these types. On May 11, 2000 Bob Englehart, long-time editorial cartoonist for *The Hartford Courant*, published a cartoon of a privatized auto emission testing station. In this cartoon there were three entrances for vehicles—"cars," "vans," and "bribes." Englehart illustrated the exposure of a scheme in which emissions supervisors accepted bribes from motorists whose cars failed their pollution tests. It was cheaper for them to give bribes and get an approval sticker than for them to repair their cars and make the air cleaner. But this corruption at the state level cannot match what was going on in Connecticut's largest cities, two of which have strong-mayor forms of government.

In July 2001, former Waterbury Mayor Philip Giordano was arrested, incarcerated at an undisclosed out of state prison and is currently charged with alleged federal civil rights violations. A year earlier, about the time of the emissions scandal, agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were investigating suspected wide-spread racketeering in this city's contracting programs, involving the mayor and more than two dozen local people. This investigation was abruptly suspended and sealed when the agents discovered from their taping of the mayor's phone conversations and his personal surveillance that the mayor might be involved in far more serious crimes. There was strong evidence that Mayor Giordano was using his office and the city's cell phones to arrange for sex with two twelve year old girls supplied to him by a prostitute, the mother of one of the girls. One of the ironies of this story of local corruption is that the Mayor, a lawyer, had become a federal informer and was cooperating with the FBI as they investigated his partners in crime. If found

guilty, former Mayor Giordano, who challenged U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman in his last election, could end his political career by serving a life-time sentence.

The corruption story of five-term Bridgeport Mayor Joseph Ganim is very different from the case of former Mayor Giordano. Rather than an insatiable drive for sex, especially with children, Ganim is alleged to have a penchant for fine wines, dinners at pricey New York restaurants, expensive clothes, renovations of his homes, and costly Persian rugs. Also, before the Curry-Rowland gubernatorial contest, Mayor Ganim was one of the leading Democratic candidates for governor. It is alleged he used extortion and racketeering in Connecticut's largest city to develop a large campaign fund for this race. Before his closest political associates turned on him and began cooperating with the FBI, Mayor Ganim enjoyed a national reputation as an urban leader. During more than ten years as his city's strong mayor, Ganim pulled his city out of bankruptcy, improved local schools, reduced crime, constructed major sports and recreation facilities, and beautified the city. While undertaking these projects, he is alleged to have extorted funds (by privatizing the city's sewer system), received kickbacks from contractors hired to demolish condemned buildings, and manipulated zoning changes for personal gain. During his six-week trial in New Haven's federal district court Mayor Ganim's defense was that his closest political associates made him the scapegoat for the millions of dollars they have extorted by their delegated control of city projects. Unlike Giordano, Mayor Ganim still enjoys local popularity and support. But this scandal has ruined his political career and tarnished Bridgeport's reputation as a strong-mayor city.

Until recently, Bridgeport was a model for Hartford to follow. Under a strong mayor, Bridgeport had been successful where Hartford had failed. But the capital city failed because of a very different type of corruption from that found in Waterbury and Bridgeport. Of course, there was the sexual and public

housing scandal of Arthur Anderson, who was a very influential friend and political advisor to former mayor Mike Peters. But Hartford's corruption was more institutional and administrative than personal. In essence, it was the systemic politicization of the theory and practice of this city's council-manager form of government. As part of this process, professional, experienced administrators were replaced with inexperienced and unqualified locals, who had the support of influential council members, racial and ethnic groups, and various unionized groups. Residents had preference in hiring. In return for this support, Hartford's elected and appointed officials ignored professional standards and procedures, drastically raised salaries and pensions, and padded agency employment. The result is that many of Hartford's top administrators are retired, residential population continues to decline, taxes on small businesses are the highest in the state, schools are still near the bottom, local agencies have not collected revenue owed the city, the budget is still unbalanced, and voters seem not to care. But there is strong evidence this is changing.

Post Election Consequences and Prospects for the Future

With only five congressional seats apportioned for the state, Republicans now control three and Democrats two. Republicans also have the office of governor. This partisan imbalance is offset by Democratic control of two U.S. Senate seats, control of both houses of the state legislature and control of the four offices of the under-ticket. It is likely, however, that there will be significant change to this alignment. Governor Rowland has announced that this will be his last term. Bill Curry has had two opportunities to win this office so the Democrats are unlikely to endorse him, again. This means the most favored candidate to be Connecticut's next governor is the present Democratic state chairman, George Jepsen. Although it is not established practice, there are well known precedents in both parties for state party chairmen to hold concurrent elected office. With Mayor Ganim discredited, Jepsen's main challenger could be

Attorney General Blumenthal. But he may place his political future on the hopes for the election of a Democrat as president, who will appoint him to a federal judicial position.

Unless there is a death or major personal scandal, it is unlikely that any of the current incumbent members of Congress will be removed. This assessment can also be applied to the other Democrats holding statewide offices, although one or more may be interested in running for lieutenant governor with Jepsen. Democrats have held majorities in both house of the General Assembly for a long time. One of the little discussed issues related to the future of this institution is the factor of uncontested seats that cause incumbents to become complaisant. In this last election there were six state senators and 34 house members who had no opponents. Also, during the post election debate, gridlock ensued between the house and senate and between the General Assembly and the Governor. Many of the state legislators were criticized severely by the press and media for playing personal politics with the state's employment, spending, and revenue policies. The end result may be that a significant number of incumbents will decide not to run for reelection, others could be defeated, and the legislature may be captured by the Republicans.