

3-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Petterson, Paul (2009) "New England Politics in 2009: Traditions and Transitions," *New England Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 3: No. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/nejps/vol3/iss2/8>

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New England Politics in 2009: Traditions – and Transitions?

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For politics in the six New England states, the 2008 election produced relatively few surprises, particularly for close observers. Barack Obama carried all six states, as expected; most incumbents were returned to office; and the Democratic Party continued to enhance its dominant role in the politics of the region. But underneath the predictability, the 2008-2009 period has also witnessed the potential beginnings of a number of important transitions in the electoral and policy arenas. Those transitions already appear to be starting to affect the political landscape of the region and even influencing aspects of national politics.

Firstly, the economic crisis has a multipronged and uneven impact in the region, with political effects that are still playing out. The unemployment rates have increased in all six states, affecting real estate values as well. Rhode Island has been particularly hard hit, as has Connecticut in the finance industry, while the northern New England states have managed to keep their statewide rates generally below the national average. Housing pressure also continues with residents in states such as Vermont not experiencing the sort of relief in high housing prices that many of them expected. In every state, however, economic pressures are rising on families and on state governments in turn, producing the first potential transition: prolonged budget difficulties and reduced services. While these disputes (lasting into October 2009 in Connecticut)

have not yet produced any shifts in partisan control, local (2009) and statewide (2010) races could still see a voter backlash based on fears and anger at current regimes.

These policy difficulties may coincide with generational or political transitions in a number of the New England states. In Vermont, Governor Jim Douglas (retiring in 2010) represents the last of a generation of Governors who came into Vermont politics in the 1960's and '70s (Snelling, Kunin, and now Douglas); whoever succeeds him will come from a younger generation of Vermont politicians, trending more cosmopolitan (and less likely to be a native Vermonter), partisan, and Democratic than its predecessor. In Connecticut, both Senators are facing actual (Dodd in 2010) or likely (Lieberman in 2012) reelection challenges, and the defeat of either would likely be a generational as well as political shift. Massachusetts (with the passing of Ted Kennedy) and Maine (with its pair of increasingly unusual moderate Republican senators) may also be on the verge of either generational or political transitions that will shape their state (if not the national) policy environments.

While budgets and generational change may each shake up politics and policy in their own way, New England in 2009 still remains increasingly Democratic in orientation and at one end of the national political spectrum. Connecticut voters turned out the last Republican House member from New England (Chris Shays) in 2008 after 11 terms in office; Democrats continued their emerging dominance in New Hampshire; and Vermont gave Barack Obama one of his highest vote percentages (and a majority in all 14 counties, a relatively rare county sweep in the 2008 results). Thanks to President Obama's emphasis on valuing bipartisanship, Republican Senators Collins and Snowe of Maine

have also emerged as an important policy force in Washington because of their willingness to pursue policy over party platform.

Whither New England in 2010 and beyond? Much will depend on the evolution of the regional economy. If the six states cannot maintain or rebuild their long term employment base, state budgets will demand increasingly painful policy choices, because of lost revenue and shifting demographics. This pressure will be exacerbated by the fact that the New England states, like most other American states, are not allowed to run deficits. These factors could potentially alter the political balance of each state, though the continuing regional and national difficulties of the Republican Party could mean that such a shift would be within the Democratic Party leadership, rather than a partisan transition. Despite its identity as a distinct region (which still displays shared characteristics in various aspects of culture and outlook), the politics of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont remain individualized, each taking their own unique path from a traditional past, to a politically liberal present, to an evolving future.

Beyond the economic and party dynamics lies what may be the determinative factor for new England's future: the identity and orientation of the next generation of state leaders. As the Douglasses, Kennedys and others leave the political stage, who will emerge to replace them? Will their orientation be partisanship or policy? Will they think within state borders, or will they work regionally on the challenges we face? What lessons will they take from past leaders? What will be their vision for New England's future? As President Obama would say, "now is the time" for all New Englanders, citizens and officeholders alike, to consider these questions, if they wish for future leaders and policies to be proactive rather than reactive. Stay tuned!