

3-1-2012

Massachusetts Politics in 2012

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Recommended Citation

Cunningham, Maurice (2012) "Massachusetts Politics in 2012," *New England Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 6: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/nejps/vol6/iss1/7>

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Connecticut: Implementing a New Vision for the State

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Since his election in 2010, Democratic Governor Dan Malloy has been dedicated to implementing his vision for a new Connecticut. This vision includes a balanced budget, an increase in the number of businesses opening or relocating in the state, and significant education reforms. Realizing these changes requires collaboration with the Democratic majorities in the state legislature and the support of his governing coalition.

Malloy's ascent came as a result of support from urban voters and unions. The former tend to have fewer complaints about their influence in the political system. Malloy's commitment to improving urban schools resonates with these constituents, who have been pleased with his service. In contrast, Malloy's willingness to reduce benefits for state employees and his recommendation of eliminating teacher tenure have enraged much of his union base. The great challenge for Malloy will be to usher the state toward a position of fiscal strength, job opportunities, and strong schools that produce a well-educated workforce – all while remaining on good terms with those who determine his ability to do so.

Although much of this report examines the Malloy Administration's vision for the state, I also include an update on an exciting US House and Senate race and discussion of some additional policies enacted this year including a repeal of the death penalty, Sunday liquor sales, medical marijuana, and election day registration.

Fiscal Vision

When Malloy entered office he faced a projected 3.44 billion dollar budget deficit. Although Malloy remained committed to the terms of his executive order requiring the state to transition to “generally accepted accounting principles,” he was unable to raise adequate funds to make the transition.¹ The State Comptroller recently projected the state’s budget deficit at \$66.9 million, with a shortfall for meeting the GAAP requirements of \$142 million (Phaneuf 2012). Malloy’s efforts to close this gap included a number of revenue-raising initiatives. In the past year alone, Malloy engaged in a strained negotiation with state employees to reduce their benefits, levied a series of new taxes on services, and increased Connecticut’s sales, income, and cigarette taxes. In addition, the governor attracted companies to Connecticut by offering tax incentives and development funds in exchange for relocating to the state. Malloy’s deal was enough to entice Jackson Laboratory to move from Maine to the UConn Health Center in Farmington, creating an estimated 6,800 permanent new jobs for Connecticut residents and improving the state’s stake in the bioscience industry in the process (Malloy 2012 b).

Education Vision

In addition to Malloy’s bold economic initiatives, he has introduced a controversial set of education reforms. The Governor appointed Stefan Pryor as the new State Commissioner of Education in February 2012. Pryor was formerly Deputy Mayor for Economic Development in Newark and is working to enact Malloy’s six goals of reform.

The goals are to:

¹ The common set of accounting principles, standards and procedures that companies use to compile their financial statements. GAAP are a combination of authoritative standards (set by policy boards) and simplify the commonly accepted ways of recording and reporting accounting information.

- 1) Enhance families' access to high-quality early childhood education opportunities.
- 2) Authorize the intensive interventions and enable the supports necessary to turn around Connecticut's lowest-performing schools and districts.
- 3) Expand the availability of high-quality school models, including traditional schools, magnets, charters, and others.
- 4) Unleash innovation by removing red tape and other barriers to success, especially in high-performing schools and districts.
- 5) Ensure that our schools are home to the very best teachers and principals—working within a fair system that values their skill and effectiveness over seniority and tenure.
- 6) Deliver more resources, targeted to districts with the greatest need—provided that they embrace key reforms that position our students for success.

(Malloy 2012 a)

The fifth aim has received the most scrutiny and has forced Malloy to clarify his message. Contrary to some interpretations, Malloy did not propose eliminating tenure entirely – he simply wanted to reform the system. Because Connecticut has the largest achievement gap in the nation and some of its greatest wealth disparities, this may have been Malloy's best bet for improving education. Identifying and rewarding the best teachers is within the governor's reach and far more realistic than any notions of income redistribution. In that spirit, Malloy recommended a "consensus evaluation framework" for determining tenure decisions as opposed to an automatic system based on years in the classroom. This new evaluative tool would include multiple measures of student performance, classroom observations, and parental feedback in constructing annual teacher ratings (Malloy 2012 a).

The 43,000 member Connecticut Education Association has been one of the more vocal opponents of Malloy's reform plan. They have seized upon the tenure reforms and run ads portraying the governor's reform as a "bad science experiment" (Thomas 2012). In response to this controversy, the state legislature watered down the governor's proposed reform and reduced his budget significantly. Following closed door negotiations, the final bill included the following mandates:

- 1) A Commissioner's Network will identify and turnaround up to 25 of the state's low performing schools.
- 2) One thousand new preschool seats will be funded for low-income children.
- 3) Funding for charter schools will increase incrementally for the next three years by about \$2,000 per student.
- 4) A new teacher evaluation system which includes an annual evaluation, support mechanisms, and training for administrators who assign the ratings will be implemented. The program will be piloted in 8-10 districts and evaluated by the University of Connecticut School of Education before further implementation. Evaluations can be taken into consideration for tenure decisions, and school boards will have more flexibility in firing teachers.
- 5) At least 10 new family resource centers and expanded school-based health clinics will be created in low performing districts.
- 6) Education Cost Sharing Grants will increase by \$50 million, the majority of which will go to the state's 30 lowest performing districts.

(Education Matters 2012)

Congressional Races

In all but one of the state's five Congressional races, a strongly favored Democratic incumbent is running for reelection. The open seat is due to Chris Murphy's (D) decision to run for Connecticut's open Senate seat. This is the first open seat in Connecticut since 1998, when Barbara Kennelly left her 1st District seat to run for governor (Bigelow 2011). The 5th District was reconfigured in 2002 as a result of the

2000 Census which consolidated the former 5th and 6th Districts. Although the district was considered a Republican stronghold in 2002 and 2004, it became more democratic in 2008 and 2010 (Bigelow 2011). The district includes the Waterbury suburbs, parts of Litchfield County, and the Farmington Valley. These are relatively affluent and Republican leaning areas. The district also includes Meriden, Waterbury, New Britain -- cities that are reliably Democratic towns.

Observers believe that this district could be the Republican Party's best opportunity in the state, though the Democrats have a realistic shot at the seat as well. To date, there are five competitive Republican candidates vying for it: Andrew Roraback, Justin Bernier, Lisa Wilson-Foley, Mark Greenberg and Mike Clark. All are attempting to earn the "Young Gun" title from a program created by GOP leaders to identify strong and viable candidates in competitive races (Radelat 2012). For the Democrats, Chris Donovan, Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives, is a leading candidate with considerable name recognition. Former State Representative Elizabeth Esty and a lesser known PR Firm employee, Daniel Roberti, are also in the race.

The other major race in the state is for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Joe Lieberman. Once more, Linda McMahon is running to represent the state in the Senate. In her failed 2010 bid she lost to Dick Blumenthal, spending \$50 million of her own fortune for the privilege. McMahon is best known for her work as CEO of the World Wrestling Entertainment, a multimillion dollar business based in Stamford, Connecticut. For this run, McMahon is painting herself as a businesswoman who can relate to other women. This new, softer approach is reinforced by the "Women for Linda" fundraisers she's been holding in Connecticut women's homes.

Former congressman Chris Shays is the other viable Republican candidate. Shays served 21 years in the House representing the 4th District, losing the seat to Jim Himes four years ago. McMahon is the clear Republican frontrunner in terms of name recognition and money. However, for many voters her greatest liability is her affiliation with WWE. It's proven difficult for McMahon to distance herself from the objectification and violence embraced by the company and "sport" which made her millions.

Democratic candidates include Congressman Chris Murphy (CT-5), former Secretary of State Susan Bysiewicz, State Representative William Tong, and software engineer Lee Whitnum. Observers note that a winning Senate campaign will require support from the 5th District. This gives Murphy a significant advantage since he's represented the district since 2007. Murphy is leading in all polls and has a considerable fundraising lead over his primary rival, Susan Bysiewicz. Bysiewicz has considerable name recognition, but the fame isn't entirely positive owing to some previous campaign decisions and controversies surrounding her work as Secretary of State. Meanwhile, Whitnum has done herself no favors by calling Murphy a "whore" and Tong "ignorant" based on their support for Israel and AIPAC. In another televised debate, she called Susan "incompetent" as secretary of the state. Whitnum's central issue is her opposition to US support of Israel. Tong is the least well-known of the candidates, and is unlikely to garner much of the vote.

A March 2012 Quinnipiac poll shows Shays (R) tied with Murphy (D) with both carrying about 40% of the vote. The poll shows McMahon (R) trailing Murphy (D) by 15%, but she is the favored candidate in the Republican primary by 9%. Given

McMahon's deep pockets and ironic obstacles, the race is likely to have no shortage of entertainment value (Quinniapiac Poll March 22, 2012).

Other Noteworthy Issues

The repeal of the death penalty involved a bitterly fought battle, one that was all but lost in 2009, when former Republican Governor Jodi Rell vetoed a similar bill. Malloy, a longtime opponent of capital punishment, has realized a major component of his legislative vision with this reversal. The legislation passed in the House on a 86-62 margin, and 20-16 in the Senate. Connecticut joins 16 states that ban the procedure. However, the law includes the noteworthy exception that people committing crimes before the law takes effect will be eligible for death. This provision resulted from the controversy surrounding the 2007 home invasion and murder of the Petit family. Both men convicted in this case have been sentenced to death and will not be eligible for life in prison because their sentences occurred before the law took effect.

Another noteworthy debate has ensued over Connecticut's Blue Laws, which prohibit Sunday alcohol sales and restrict the sale of wine and spirits to "package stores." Grocery chains and consumers have lobbied tirelessly in favor of lifting the restrictions. Their argument centered on Connecticut's status as one of only two states limiting Sunday sales, preventing an estimated \$5.3 million in state tax revenue. Governor Malloy was of the same mind, urging the legislature to eliminate the restrictions. Despite opposition from mom and pop package stores and higher end wine shops, the issue passed easily with bi-partisan support in the House and Senate, with votes of 116-27 and 28-6, respectively.

Connecticut also joined 16 other states by legalizing marijuana for medicinal purposes such as AIDS, Parkinson's Disease or Cancer. With the new law, patients can legally possess the drug by obtaining a physician's permission. The prospect of enforcement, and in particular its costs, was central during negotiations. However, the legislature's non-partisan Office of Fiscal Management estimated that fees associated with the program would make it cost-neutral (Phaneuf 2012). In the end, the House voted 96-51 in favor of the measure and the Senate vote was 21-13.

Additionally, Connecticut will join ten other states that allow for election day registration. Secretary of State Denise Merrill and Governor Malloy strongly supported this measure as a way to increase voter turnout in the state. In 2003, a similar measure was vetoed by former Republican Governor John G. Rowland due to concern about potential voter fraud (Pazniokas 2012). Similar issues were raised by Republicans in the House and Senate during the legislative debate over this law, but the votes split along party lines: 83-59 in the House and 19-6 in the Senate.

Conclusion

Implementing a new vision for the state is no easy task. Governor Malloy has pushed his legislative agenda in an aggressive way that could backfire if significant economic and educational improvements don't begin prior to the next election. For many, Malloy's sharp elbows are a political liability, but others believe that his approach is the only way to get the state on track. Connecticut's 5th District race and the US Senate race will also be decided by voters' assessments of candidate vision. A candidate's ability to sell their ability to usher in change will be a pivotal factor in the outcome of the race.

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