

9-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Galdieri, Christopher J. (2023) "New Hampshire Politics in 2023: Aftermath and Anticipation," *New England Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/nejps/vol14/iss1/8>

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NEW HAMPSHIRE POLITICS IN 2023: AFTERMATH AND ANTICIPATION

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New Hampshire's politics in 2023 were defined by the aftermath of the 2022 midterm elections and the anticipation of the elections of 2024. Republicans had had high hopes for the 2022 midterms, expecting that the historical tendency of the president's party to do poorly in midterms, President Joe Biden's persistent unpopularity, and voter frustration with inflation and gas prices would lead to a red wave that would sweep Republicans into power at every level of government in a repeat of the 1994 and 2010 midterms.

Instead, the exact opposite happened. New Hampshire, with its early poll closing times and speedy vote counts, was an early election night indicator that Democrats were on track to do unusually well for a midterm election.

In the race for the US Senate, where most observers' best estimate of incumbent Maggie Hassan's chances against retired general Don Bolduc was that she would "win ugly" (Shapiro 2022), Hassan won by nine points (Galdieri, Lucas, and Sisco 2023). In the first congressional district, where one survey put former Trump White House press aide Karoline Leavitt up by six points against Congressman Chris Pappas, Pappas won by eight points (Levesque and Sisco 2022; Enstrom 2022). And in the second district, Bob Burns never came within shouting distance of incumbent Congresswoman Ann McLane Kuster, who became the longest-serving Democrat from New Hampshire in the House of Representatives. This was in part because New Hampshire's Republicans went full MAGA in the primaries for these offices; each of these candidates propagated the Big Lie that the 2020 presidential election had somehow been "stolen" from Donald Trump, and coupled this with strident and, at times, ham-fisted opposition to legal abortion access and transgender rights. And each of them defeated more mainstream and less bombastic candidates in their primaries.

Democrats also did well in the race for the state legislature. While the heavily gerrymandered maps for the state senate and executive council held and kept each of those bodies in GOP hands, the state house ended up in a near-tie, with Republicans having a bare majority and several elections decided in recounts by single-digit margins. Throughout 2023, special elections to fill vacant seats would further narrow the Republicans' margin to 199-198 at this writing in January 2024. Remarkably, this actually lowered the temperature in Concord, with the state house passing a bipartisan budget in June by voice vote for the first time in decades (Timmins 2023).

Republicans' brightest spot in the 2022 election was the re-election of Governor Chris Sununu to a record-tying fourth term. It is a measure of Sununu's consistent popularity and standing with Granite State voters that his victory over state senator Tom Sherman by a 15-point margin was seen as something of a comedown from his 65-33% victory over state senator Dan Feltes in 2020.

Much of the state's attention in 2023 was focused on the activity surrounding the 2024 presidential primary. However, this primary was an unusual one in several regards. The

Republican field was dominated by the candidacy of Donald Trump, who kicked off his bid for a second, non-consecutive term with a disastrous CNN town hall at Saint Anselm College in May the day after a New York jury found him liable for the sexual assault of E. Jean Carroll and for defaming her. Trump, comfortable with his lead and uninterested in elevating his rivals' status (or diminishing his own) by appearing on a debate stage with them held only a handful of events in the state. And few Republicans were willing to run against him; by year's end, just Nikki Haley, Ron DeSantis, Chris Christie, Asa Hutchison, and Vivek Ramaswamy remained in the race, and all but Haley dropped out by the primary. All of this combined to mean there was far less campaign activity than in 2016 and 2020, with one observer drolly describing the race as a "high school production of a presidential primary" (Shapiro 2023).

For Democrats, the main focus was the standoff between the state and the state party on the one hand and the Democratic National Committee on the other. The DNC, heedful of longstanding criticisms that New Hampshire's lack of diversity made it a poor choice for the first in the nation primary, released a primary schedule in December 2022 that placed South Carolina at the head of the line and New Hampshire and Nevada sharing second place just three days later (DeWitt 2023). However, state law mandates that New Hampshire hold its primary before any other state holds a similar contest, and empowers its secretary of state to schedule the primary to ensure this takes place. The DNC's solution was to ask New Hampshire to change the law, and was caught flatfooted when the state – controlled by Republicans – said no. In response, the DNC stripped the state of its delegates and said any candidate who campaigned there would face sanctions. This led President Biden not to file for the primary, but Dean Phillips – a heretofore generally respected, if also unknown, three-term Congressman from Minnesota – entered the primary as a challenge to Biden who, as noted earlier in this sentence, was not actually on the ballot. Also filing to run was Marianne Williamson, the writer and self-help guru who briefly ran in 2020. In order to avoid embarrassing the president and the state of New Hampshire with a primary in which Phillips won, the same party leaders who had been enraged by the DNC's calendar organized a write-in campaign on behalf of Biden, and hope for a happier outcome in 2028, when Democrats are likely to have an open contest which would give them more leverage over the calendar. Likely 2028 candidates Representative Ro Khanna of California, Governor J.B. Pritzker of Illinois, and Governor Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania have all made appearances in the Granite State.

Manchester, New Hampshire's largest city, elected Jay Ruais, a Republican, in an open-seat mayoral race in November. Ruais, a first-time candidate who had previously worked in the nonprofit sector and in Republican politics, defeated Democrat Kevin Cavanaugh by a 51-49% margin. The result was something of a surprise; while Ruais received more votes than any other single candidate in September's nonpartisan primary, his total was well behind the combined vote for Democratic candidates (Rogers 2023a). His electoral success in Manchester, a city often used as a boogeyman by Republicans elsewhere in the state (Rogers 2023b), has marked him as someone to watch, and Granite State Republicans are hopeful that this election is the first step on a long career. Ruais' election was also seen by some as a rebuke of outgoing mayor Joyce Craig, a Democrat who stood aside after three terms as mayor.

The statewide race to watch in 2024 – since, in the absence of a US Senate race, it will be the *only* statewide race -- will be the race for governor. Chris Sununu announced last year that

he would not seek another term, giving the state its first open race for governor since 2016. Former Manchester mayor Joyce Craig and executive councilor Cinde Warmington are running in the Democratic primary. The declared Republicans, at this date, are Chuck Morse, the former state senate president last seen losing the Republican primary for US Senate in 2022, and Kelly Ayotte, the former US senator who narrowly lost for re-election in 2016.

The governor's race should be viewed as a toss-up. Ayotte is the only one of the current candidates who has won an election statewide, but it has been eight years since her name was last on a ballot and fourteen since her only electoral victory. Morse is relatively unknown to those who do not remember his tenure in the state senate. Ayotte should be favored in the primary, if only because so much of the state's GOP establishment was so invested in her potential future at the national level during her term in the Senate. Craig's time as mayor of Manchester may hurt her in other parts of the state, and Warmington has little profile beyond her executive council district. After eight years of a Republican governor, New Hampshire voters may be ready for a change, but Chris Sununu will surely use his popularity to boost whichever Republican wins the primary. New Hampshire is also one of Democrats' few opportunities to pick up a governorship in 2024.

There are at least two wild cards to watch as well. In 2022, Republicans performed so poorly because MAGA candidates won their primaries. If such a candidate enters the Republican primary for governor, that candidate could very well win the primary and go on to perform as poorly as Bolduc, Leavitt, and Burns did in their federal races. The second wild card is, of course, Donald Trump, who seems likely to become the Republican nominee for president. Trump lost New Hampshire narrowly in 2016 and by over 7% in 2020. And Trump comes with baggage beyond his poor electoral track record here: In 2016, Kelly Ayotte's decision to denounce Trump, following the release of the infamous *Access Hollywood* recording, and write in Mike Pence for president helped cost her re-election (Lucas, Sisco, and Galdieri 2018). Any GOP nominee will have to decide either to embrace Trump or keep him at arm's length, and either decision will come with electoral costs.

Finally, as Chris Sununu winds down his tenure as governor, many wonder what his next move will be. He flirted for months with a run for the United States Senate in 2022, only to decline to run (DeWitt 2021), and then spent much of 2023 apparently testing the waters for a presidential run before opting out of that race as well (Astor 2023). He then spent months squiring Republican presidential candidates not named Donald Trump around the state before finally endorsing Nikki Haley (Sexton 2023). While Sununu has been critical of Donald Trump, he has also said he would vote for Trump in a general election against President Biden. Sununu will be just 50 years old when his term ends; at the very least, he will be the subject of speculation in races for governor and the US Senate for years to come.

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