

# Maine Policy Review

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Volume 27  
Issue 1 *Leadership*

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2018

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### Recommended Citation

McDonnell, Joseph W. . "Incubating Leaders in Maine." *Maine Policy Review* 27.1 (2018) : 13 -17,  
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# Incubating Leaders in Maine

by Joseph W. McDonnell

## Abstract

For a sparsely populated state, Maine has produced an extraordinary number of national, bipartisan leaders. What has made Maine an incubator for such leadership? Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of *Democracy in America*, provides useful insights into Maine's culture as a breeding ground for leadership. But rapid societal changes sweeping the country and the world—particularly globalization, urbanization, and the digitization of the economy—will inevitably alter Maine's culture. This paper explores steps Maine might take to develop leaders in this new environment by preserving its past strengths and adjusting to these new challenges. Maine could overcome its north/south divide and play a role in developing leaders who would bring polarized sectors of the country together.

Maine has punched above its weight class in producing national leaders from such a sparsely populated state, and not just national leaders, but bipartisan leaders with a natural inclination to bring together disparate parties. These leaders include Maine's current senators Susan Collins and Angus King and notable past senators such as Margaret Chase Smith, Edmund Muskie, William Cohen, George Mitchell, and Olympia Snowe.

It cannot be just coincidence that these leaders come from Maine. Leadership does not just strike a chosen few as a bolt of lightning from the heavens, but bubbles up from the bottom, nurtured in a community's culture. In this article, I will explore three questions about Maine's leadership:

- What has made Maine an incubator for such leadership?
- In light of societal changes, particularly globalization, urbanization, and the digitization of the economy, what steps might Maine take to preserve its past strengths and nurture leadership for the twenty-first century?
- In a country deeply divided into red and blue states, reflecting rural and urban values, can Maine overcome its north/south divide and serve as a model to bring polarized sectors of the country together?

Maine's sparse population and its small towns encourage participation in community life. Leaders emerge from a rich communal life with its many opportunities to exercise leadership. Small towns with engaged schools, governments, fire and police departments, civic organizations, and houses of worship create communities rich in neighborliness and a spirit that encourages public service. Many small Maine towns, and even its cities, have maintained their same characteristics for more than 100 years.

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In Maine, people know their leaders on a first-name basis; political campaigns are intimate, and candidates relate to voters in one-on-one relationships more than through mass-media advertising. Personal reputations gained over a long period carry more weight than manufactured political images. Leaders tend to be responsive to the struggles of people they meet each day—and rarely have enough supporters to stake out extreme positions.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of *Democracy in America*, provides useful insight into Maine's culture as a breeding ground for leadership. If Tocqueville were to return to America today, nearly two centuries after his 1831 visit, he would hardly recognize the many rural communities and small cities he visited that have become sprawling suburbs and sizeable cities. He would recognize Maine, however, because it still shares many of the characteristics of those nineteenth century communities.

Tocqueville observed that Americans displayed a healthy balance between individualism and community-mindedness, which he described as "individualism well understood" (Tocqueville 2000: 500). Americans, he observed, keenly sought their own advancement, but also recognized that sacrificing some of that individualism for the sake of the community served their own interests. In many parts of the country, that attitude may no longer be true, but it remains true, or at least truer, in Maine today.

In America, equality of conditions first attracted Tocqueville's attention for its sharp contrast with Europe's aristocratic society, where opportunity for advancing one's station in life was limited. It was not that everyone in America had the same amount of wealth, but that Americans displayed a sense of equality in relationships and optimism about bettering themselves (Tocqueville 2000). Tocqueville observed that even women in America engaged in political discussions and exercised influence in shaping the democratic culture, despite being prevented from voting or holding formal leadership positions.

It is notable that none of the Maine leaders identified at the start of this essay came from wealth. It would be politically risky for Maine's statewide office holders, no matter their party affiliation, to lose sight of constituents of all incomes when considering policies or proposing legislation.

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Tocqueville observed that democratic leadership flourished in America because of its isolated geography, its laws, and especially its customs or mores, the "habits of the heart" of its people (Tocqueville 2000: 275). Maine's habits of the heart stem from its isolation, its independence, and the hardscrabble life its people have endured farming rocky soil, fishing cold waters, and felling trees for ships and lumber. Credit must also be attributed to nurturing immigrant communities—communities of French Canadians, Irish, Italians, Poles, Greeks, Jews, and more recently, Africans.

But if Maine's small public-spirited communities have successfully nurtured leadership, they also have been seen by many young people as places to escape from in order to pursue their ambitions or find gainful employment. Leaving the community of your parents

has a long history in Maine and the nation. Tocqueville observed that people in nineteenth-century France typically lived their entire lives in one community, but in America a person might be born in the East, move west to acquire less expensive land, and after a few years, sell that farm and migrate farther west to purchase an even larger farm. Mobility characterized ambitious Americans in the early nineteenth century, and a future outside Maine described the destiny of many young Mainers throughout its history and continues today.

### NEW CHALLENGES FROM TECHNOLOGY AND A CHANGING WORLD

Globalization, automation, revitalization of cities, and the digital revolution create new challenges that are already affecting Maine's culture and will inevitably influence the development of its future leaders.

Maine knows firsthand the ravages of globalization as mills and other natural resource businesses have closed, eliminating jobs, forcing the young to flee, and leaving towns like Millinocket largely to retirees.<sup>1</sup> Globalization has also left Maine with fewer businesses headquartered in the state as long-established businesses become satellites of larger corporations. Even the remaining state-based employers no longer place all their eggs in Maine's basket as they expand to new locations in other states and countries. Maine's large iconic employers, LL Bean, Idexx Laboratories, Wex, and Jackson Laboratory, have all expanded outside Maine.<sup>2</sup>

Automation has been responsible for far more job losses in the country than globalization, and rapid advancements in artificial intelligence will only accelerate this trend.<sup>3</sup> Automation will not only replace routine factory jobs, but also jobs associated with food preparation, collecting and processing data, and work associated with accounting, law, and real estate.

In the short run, Maine's aging workforce presents the state with a massive problem that those in leadership positions have not yet fully responded to (Dorrer 2017). In the longer run, the changing nature of jobs presents education leaders with a sizeable challenge to revamp schools, community colleges, and universities to prepare students and displaced workers for the new jobs, which will require different and often higher-level skills.

The worldwide resurgence of cities is also altering the economic landscape of Maine. Young people are flocking to cities, and businesses now are following

talent into the cities rather than trying to lure employees to suburbs or rural locations. Although still seen as a rural state, Maine's cities are driving the state's economy, and in the near future, they are likely to be the only parts of the state experiencing growth.

Maine's current population projections predict Greater Portland, for instance, will grow 2.3 percent between 2014 and 2034 while the rest of Maine experiences a 3 percent decline (LeVert and deLutio 2017). But it would be a mistake for Maine's leaders to conclude that its cities are doing well just because they are doing better than the state's declining rural regions. Maine's cities are competing with other cities for talented workers and businesses to employ them as well as attracting tourists to support their economies. Maine's cities suffer from aging infrastructure, shortages of workforce housing and public transportation, an influx of the homeless and those with mental illness, and a more complex school-age population with a disproportionate number of the state's new Mainers. It will take resources and imaginative leadership from business, government, and education officials to address these issues.

Maine's rural regions with their aging and declining populations present daunting challenges for leaders as they seek to revitalize their economies and attract new younger residents to the region. Incubating future leaders will require nurturing an entrepreneurial spirit and a love of the outdoors. Entrepreneurial ventures focused on nature tourism, crafts, agriculture, and aquaculture offer possible opportunities, and rural businesses must take advantage of Maine's cities and the reach of the internet to sell products to distant markets.

## RESPONDING TO CULTURAL CHANGES

**H**ow might Maine respond to these worldwide trends—especially with respect to the development of its future leaders? As a microcosm of the nation, half blue and half red, Maine could become a statewide demonstration project to reimagine democracy in the twenty-first century. Maine's small cities and rural communities have historically built strong social capital among their members, which is the foundation for a democratic society. The sociologist Robert Putnam (2000) described social capital as accepted norms of reciprocity, trustworthiness, good will, sympathy, and fellowship, the glue that holds communities together.

But for the twenty-first century, bonding alone will not suffice as an incubator for future leaders. It risks

producing narrow-minded, tribal leaders who represent only a small slice of the community and treat those outside the tribe with suspicion and even hostility. Maine has also produced its share of that type of leader. Bonding creates what Putnam has called "thick trust" in homogenous associations, but can leave a diverse society with "thin trust" among strangers (Putnam 2000: 136–137).

Communities in the twenty-first century will thrive when they complement bonding with bridging, which is the capacity to relate to a diversity of people and interests. If bonding is the glue that holds a community together, bridging is the grease that lubricates the diverse elements of a democratic society. To prevent the state's population and economy from declining as deaths outnumber births, Maine will have to welcome people from different states and countries to its communities.

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Maine's future leaders could become bridge builders, bridging divides between urban and rural, liberal and conservative polarized political parties, and those born here and those "from away." In short, Maine might serve as a model in bridging human differences to find common ground. In the process, Maine could build social capital within the state and train future leaders for the state and the nation.

## LESSONS FROM HISTORY

**M**ore than 100 years ago the United States economy shifted from an agrarian society to a predominantly urban industrial society, with people leaving farms and moving to cities to work in factories and offices. The shift raised questions about whether the democratic society created by the country's early settlers could continue in a society that had grown larger, more impersonal, and more complex.

Even proponents of democracy doubted whether the average person would have the time, interest, or capacity to deliberate intelligently about society's many issues and their far-reaching consequences. The rise of popular media also made it likely that propaganda would undermine democratic decision making. Democratic realists such as Walter Lippmann (1966) thought it best to limit the public's role in democracy to the voting booth with an elite group of experts running the government.

The philosopher John Dewey recognized that industrial society had altered democracy's landscape, but he remained optimistic that this new society could be transformed into a great democratic community through education. Dewey maintained that culture shaped people and that if families, schools, media, local government, civic associations, and houses of worship all operated democratically, they would inculcate democratic habits that would transform the large, complex, and impersonal society into a great democratic community (Dewey 1954). Chief among these habits was an education in methods of inquiry—to create a generation of problem solvers who would search for solutions to society's problems, free from personal, economic, or ideological bias.

We are again living in a society that is being transformed—by the digital revolution. The internet and social media are disrupting traditional forms of community, shopping, schooling, and even dating and interpersonal relationships. On the internet, place no longer matters. Whether you live in a city or a rural community, you are no longer dependent on local stores, schools, libraries, or even jobs. These new technologies provide access to unlimited information and entertainment, but can also disrupt the rich social interaction of face-to-face communities and encourage a retreat to echo chambers in cyberspace where interactions are limited to like-minded people.

Tocqueville warned that democracy could be threatened if people withdrew from the public sphere into their own private interests. Although de Tocqueville, Dewey, and Putnam lived decades apart from each other, they concurred that a democratic society requires citizen participation at a local level, not just in government, but in a variety of political, civic, religious, and educational organizations.

Today, there are many obstacles to such participation—the stressful 24/7 work ethic, long commutes, two-parent careers, single-parent households, and the lure of electronic entertainment after a hard day's work.

Participation runs against the grain for many, but to nurture the next generation of leaders, youth need role models and rich civic experiences—especially to counter the tendency of digital natives to turn inward with electronic media.

If societal complexity led Dewey and Lippmann to raise concerns about the mass media's potential to undermine democracy by distorting communications, imagine their concerns today with social media whose impact on public opinion we do not yet fully understand. But Dewey's solution still works today—independent social inquiry, the artful presentation of findings, rich interaction in local communities, and the development of democratic habits.

### NURTURING LEADERS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Maine has all the right ingredients to develop leaders for the twenty-first century with small cities and communities that provide many opportunities for the exercise of leadership. Even in the digital society, the local face-to-face community will remain the center of leadership development in Maine.

Schools might consider revitalizing civics—not only to explain how government works, but as a highly engaged activity where students learn by participating in the decision-making life of the community. Students, along with adults in the community, might learn to bond and to bridge, to inquire imaginatively into community problems, to understand and appreciate diverse points of view, and to lead small groups in activities that make a difference in the community.

Through such an education, Maine would be nurturing leaders for the twenty-first century and asserting itself as a model for the nation. Maine might remain a purple state, but not because red citizens live in the north and blue citizens in the south, but because Maine has educated a generation of leaders with the capacity to inquire dispassionately and harmonize diverse perspectives. 🐉

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Since 2011, more than 2,400 workers have lost their jobs in Maine's pulp or paper mills (Milneil 2017).
- 2 Jobs displaced from 2001 to 2013 due to the growing goods trade deficit with China represented 1.77 percent of total state employment in Maine, or 11,400 jobs (Aging and Disability Services 2016).

- 3 Foreign trade accounted for just 13 percent of America’s lost factory jobs. The vast majority of the lost jobs—88 percent—were lost to robots and other homegrown factors that reduce factories’ need for human labor (Milneil 2017).

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