

Maine Policy Review

Volume 28 | Issue 1

2019

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Matthew Bourque
bourqu1@stolaf.edu

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Recommended Citation

Bourque, Matthew. "Local Politics from Away." *Maine Policy Review* 28.1 (2019) : 6 -7, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol28/iss1/1>.

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Local Politics from Away

by Matthew Bourque

The prairie wind whips and whirls the falling snow outside the coffee shop windows. Inside, I sit writing and listening to a family argue over football. The parents are wearing purple Vikings jerseys, the father also sporting a Minnesota Wild winter hat. It's a cozy winter day in small-town Minnesota, but my thoughts are drifting home to Maine and the smell of the snow-laden pine trees that cover our vast state.

Even more than 1,500 miles away, I remain attached to Maine and stay informed on local politics and the state of the economy. As our nation enters an era of divisive politics, characterized by a distaste for compromise and demonization of the other, Maine emerges as a safeguard for political civility. Mainers away from home should look back proudly on the strength and character of Maine's political tradition. Our state has a history of independent thinking and support for such thinking. Compared to other states, Maine has voted for a higher number of Independent politicians, from former Governor James Longley to current Senator Angus King. In the current Maine legislature, five representative seats are held by Independents, second only to Vermont, which currently has six Independent representatives. Passed in 2016, and reaffirmed in 2018, our state has also enacted ranked-choice voting, a system that advocates claim will help launch Independent candidates into office and break the divisive dialogue that accompanies a two-party political system.

Maine is also host to many politicians who have courageously put ideals and home over party. Senator Margaret Chase Smith is perhaps the greatest

example and someone any Mainer can look up to. In the early 1950s, Margaret Chase Smith led the resistance to McCarthyism. Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt against alleged Communists and Communist sympathizers was in direct contradiction to America's long-valued political freedom. Smith stood up for the entire United States and its history of political thought and freedom in her *Declaration of Conscience*, which directly challenged McCarthy and his House Un-American Activities Committee.

In today's toxic political climate, Maine's politicians continue to stand out. Senator Susan Collins, a Republican, is regarded by the Lugar Center as the most bipartisan politician in the US Senate. Our current governor, Janet Mills, used her inaugural address to establish a platform based on unity and compromise, stating, "We are all in this together. We all want Maine to have a beautiful environment; happy people; and prosperous communities.... We are Republicans, Greens, Democrats, Libertarians, Independents, and many more besides." Independent Senator Angus King advocates for the greater benefit of Maine and not party. He has most notably fought against policies that could hasten the impending dangers of climate change, an issue to which coastal Maine is especially vulnerable. Concerning the recent chaos of the Mueller investigation, King has resisted the high-tension atmosphere, claiming, "I don't think that there's evidence yet available to the public where there would be more or less a consensus that this was an appropriate path.... We don't want to create a precedent where

Congress of one party unseats the president of another party for essentially political reasons." Senator King's respect for the American tradition of rule of law above the partisan clamor for action or inaction is indicative of Maine's political tradition.¹

Of course, there are caveats, and Maine is not entirely immune to the divisive political atmosphere plaguing our country. Most notably, former Governor Paul LePage was infamous for his harsh statements on political enemies, perhaps reaching its apex in the profanity-laced voice mail he left for Democrat Drew Gattine of Westbrook.² This behavior, however, is the exception and should be condemned if Maine is to continue its more moderate political tradition.

Maine's youth diaspora's relationship with our home state is complex. We are more connected, mobile, and educated than the generations before us. As such, many of us leave Maine searching for better jobs and successful and meaningful careers. In leaving Maine, temporarily or for an extended period, however, we are trying to find financial stability, not trying to avoid the home that shaped us. We are proud of our Pine Tree State for a myriad of reasons. From the winding Kennebec River, to the peak of Katahdin, and to the working waterfront along the coast, Maine is host to both a beautiful landscape and a down-to-earth population. At home, we are immersed in a culture defined by close community ties and a sense of pragmatism. Away, we are known for our genuine and honest personalities, coupled with ambitious work ethics many of us developed early

in life. We look back proudly on the home that formed us into the diligent and respectable people we are known to be across the United States. So, we of the Maine diaspora should continue to take pride in this bold political tradition. These values of hard work, courage, and the determination to do what is right that were exhibited by Senator Margaret Chase Smith continue to influence Maine politics and represent the values Mainers espouse wherever we live. 🐟



Matt Bourque

is a current political science and social studies education double major at St. Olaf College. His interests range from international

and domestic politics, to the strategies of running road races. After graduation in May 2019, Matt hopes to become a teacher and encourage the future generation, just as his teachers encouraged him. Though Maine is always home, Matt currently resides in Northfield, Minnesota.

ENDNOTES

1. Senator Collins's bipartisan rating comes from "2017 Senate Scores," *The Lugar Center – McCourt School Bipartisan Index*, <http://www.thelugarcenter.org/ourwork-Bipartisan-Index.html#Bipartisanship>. Janet Mill's inauguration speech is available on the *Portland Press Herald's* website: <https://www.pressherald.com/2019/01/03/read-janet-mills-inaugural-address/>. Information on Senator King comes from a Maine Public story: Jennifer Mitchell, "Sen. Angus King Says There's Not Sufficient Evidence for Impeachment Inquiry," (December 9, 2018), <http://www.mainepublic.org/post/sen-angus-king-says-theres-not-sufficient-evidence-impeachment-inquiry>
2. Scott Thistle, "'Prove I'm a Racist': LePage Challenges Westbrook Lawmaker in an Obscenity-laced Voice Mail," *Portland Press Herald* (August 26, 2016), <http://www.mainepublic.org/post/sen-angus-king-says-theres-not-sufficient-evidence-impeachment-inquiry>.