

Maine Policy Review

Volume 29
Issue 2 *Maine's Bicentennial*

2020

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Recommended Citation

Nicoll, Don. "Ed Muskie, Political Parties, and the Art of Governance." *Maine Policy Review* 29.2 (2020) : 34-38, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol29/iss2/5>.

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Ed Muskie, Political Parties, and the Art of Governance

by Don Nicoll

Abstract

In its 200-year history as a state, Maine has gone through three major political realignments and is now in the midst of a fourth. The Jefferson Democratic Republicans supplanted the Federalists to achieve statehood. The Republican Party dominated state politics from the eve of the Civil War until 1954. The Maine Democratic Party, under the leadership of Edmund S. Muskie and Frank Coffin, transformed it into a competitive two-party state. Now the goals of open, responsive, and responsible governance that Muskie and Coffin sought through healthy competition and civil discourse are threatened by bitter, dysfunctional national trends in the political arena, threats now compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and national revulsion over racial discrimination triggered by police violence against Black Americans. Could Maine play a role in restoring balance and correcting the ills that beset us?

When Ed Muskie was the Democratic candidate for vice president in 1968, he named his chartered campaign plane the Downeast Yankee. In that name, he asserted the value of Maine's image as a wholesome community in a period of national tumult, plus his own persona as a quintessential Mainer, although he was the son of a Polish immigrant. Both images embodied truths about his native state and his place in its history, however flawed that history might be. That campaign marked the apogee of Muskie as a political candidate. It also marked the beginning of a new stage in American politics, in a year political reporter Jules Witcover (1997) labeled "The Year the Dream Died."

Americans have always had a love-hate relationship with political parties. The leaders of the revolution against Great Britain scorned Britain's parliamentary parties. They called them "factions." As the former revolutionaries created a new government, and as they moved from the Confederation to a stronger national government, they reiterated their horror of factions—while they busily turned their factions into the Federalist and Democratic Republican parties. That pattern of deploring factions,

creating parties, recreating them, dumping some and building others, and struggling for power continues today, with credible fears about the viability of our representative democracy.

The year 2020, the bicentennial of the creation of the state of Maine, may be another seminal year in the political life of the United States and the survival of representative democracy. We find ourselves in the midst of a dysfunctional national legislature and constitutional crisis over the relationships between the three branches of the federal government. We are witnesses to the spectacle of a president mocking governors as they struggle to cope with public health needs and

economic pressure and threatening to override local law enforcement with military force. Our capacity as a vibrant, balanced federal system to deal with the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, climate change, economic and social disparity and discrimination, health care, international relations, and national security has been compromised and undermined.

Maine has shared much of the national history of political parties and how they make and implement public policy, but on a much more intimate scale and, to date, with more resilience. It also has in the legacy of Edmund S. Muskie and Frank M. Coffin examples of how political parties and politicians could function to benefit Maine as it enters its third century and help the nation as it struggles to achieve a fair, just, and sustainable society in a tumultuous and fragile world.¹

A little history: The District of Maine in the wake of the Revolution had only one organized faction. Maine Federalists, concentrated in the towns along the coast, were linked tightly to the mercantile and shipping interests of Massachusetts. In the interior, rural Maine farmers were not yet part of the Democratic Republican party, but they

were anti-Federalists, blaming Massachusetts for land-claims disputes, onerous tax policies, and lack of support in conflicts with Native Americans and Great Britain. The state of Maine at its advent was a fractious, Jeffersonian Republican frontier state, separated from its Federalist progenitor as much by ideology and class resentment as by complaints about neglect and wrong-headed policies in the conflicts with Britain. The Democratic Republicans emerged as the dominant party during the final push for statehood in 1819–1820, but soon split into factions over issues of state-sponsored economic development vs Jeffersonian ideals of small government.

The period between 1820 and 1860 was a period of turmoil, when shifting coalitions of Democrats, Jeffersonian Republicans, Whigs, and Free Soil parties tussled for power, and the prohibitionist and antislavery movements pressured the parties and amplified the splits. The modern Republican Party started to emerge in the mid-1850s, first at the county level, achieved victory in 1857, and won in a landslide in 1860. In the wake of the Civil War, the Republican Party's identification with the fight to abolish slavery and save the Union gave it a powerful claim for the high ground in the political arena. The captains of industry and commerce, large and small, led the Republican Party, which dominated the Pine Tree State's political scene and prevailed, with minor interruptions, for almost 100 years. Between 1857 and 1954, there were 31 Republican and 4 Democratic governors.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had given the Democrats some hope, when in 1932 voters elected Louis Brann governor, Edward C. Moran to Congress in the Second Congressional District, and John G. Utterback in the Third District. Brann and Moran were reelected in 1934, when Simon M. Hamlin was elected in the First Congressional District. That marked the end of the Democratic Party's wave of Maine successes. Democrats were left with majorities in a few mill towns and access to political patronage jobs through the Roosevelt and Truman years. Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 victory eliminated the federal patronage.

Maine Republicans endured bitter gubernatorial and US Senate primaries in 1952, revealing internal power struggles that were only tangentially related to policy issues. Margaret Chase Smith had succeeded her late husband in 1940 as Maine's Second District representative, and in 1948, she was elected as United States senator, but

she did not move to reform the Maine Republican party and was not involved in the primary disputes. Republicans won the general election and the presidential tally handily, but the party had lost its sheen among Maine voters. Unappreciated at the time, it foreshadowed the most significant change in Maine's political landscape in almost 100 years.

Two young Maine Democratic lawyers stepped into the breach: Edmund S. Muskie and Frank M. Coffin, both Navy veterans of World War II. Muskie was a former state representative from Waterville, former US Office of Price Stabilization (OPS) Maine director, and newly elected national committeeman. Coffin, a Lewiston and Portland attorney, was chairman of the 1954 Democratic pre-convention platform committee, then elected chairman of the Democratic State Committee. Together they set about rebuilding the Maine Democratic Party. After a fruitless search for what was expected to be a sacrificial lamb of a 1954 candidate for governor, Muskie agreed to run. Coffin devoted his attention to organizing the party, hiring the first full-time executive secretary, and recruiting candidates for legislative seats and county offices.

Muskie went on to win that gubernatorial election, was reelected in 1956, elected to the US Senate in 1958, and appointed Secretary of State in 1980. Coffin served as state chairman from 1954 to 1956, was elected US Representative for the Second District in 1956, reelected in 1958, defeated for governor in 1960, and served as a senior US Agency for International Development officer until 1965, when he was appointed to the US Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. Their record of political achievement and public service was impressive, and their philosophy of governance is still important and relevant.

Muskie and Coffin believed government should be responsive to the needs of its citizens and responsible for developing and implementing its policies. The role of a political party was to engage voters in reaching consensus on public policy needs, reach agreement on public policy goals and proposals through public participation, and present candidates for public office committed to advance the goals of the party platform. The object of campaigns was not to beat the other guy, but to persuade voters through civil discourse that your platform and your candidates were most likely to provide responsive and responsible government. Muskie and Coffin practiced what they preached.

In the 1954 campaign, Muskie ran not so much against his Republican opponent as for two-party competition. In speech after speech, he recounted his experience in the 1947 legislature, when he was one of 24 Democrats in the Maine House among 127 Republicans who were treated as irrelevant members of unimportant committees. There were three Democrats in the Maine Senate with 30 Republicans. Muskie argued that Maine's economic development, environmental protection, education, and other problems could not be solved until there were two strong parties, debating issues and competing for public support. Addressing the party faithful, he insisted that the role of the party was to be committed to implementation of a party platform addressing state needs and prepared to exercise accountable governance.

Muskie's success was aided by his opponent's unpopularity. Governor Burton Cross was shadowed by the hard feelings from the 1952 Republican primary and lacked empathy for disadvantaged constituencies, adhering to tight-fisted policy decisions, but the "Republicans for Muskie" efforts were also stimulated by the respect Muskie earned as a fair OPS director, administering an unpopular program that affected businesses in every area of the state. In addition, from 1954 to 1958, Muskie and Coffin built a broad-based and nonideological party, stressing grassroots participation. When they assumed leadership of the party in 1954, they did not take it over, but brought old and new activists together, encouraging healthy, civil debate on issues that might divide them.

Muskie and Coffin also moved to engage voters more directly outside the usual political venues, taking advantage of all forms of media. They and the other candidates used radio and the new medium of television to establish connections with voters who did not meet them personally. They did so on a remarkably limited budget. Campaign expenditures for the 1954 gubernatorial, US Senate, and three Congressional races totaled \$18,000 (\$171,000 in 2020 dollars).

The Democratic momentum continued through the 1958 election, when Muskie was elected to the US Senate, Clinton Clauson was elected governor to succeed Muskie, Coffin was reelected, and James Oliver was elected to the US House of Representatives from the First District. There were modest gains in the number of Democratic legislative seats. The cycle was broken when Governor Clauson died at the end of 1959, and Coffin lost his bid to fill the

balance of the Clauson term in 1960. Maine's anti-John Kennedy vote in that year led to Coffin's defeat, Oliver's loss in the First District, and turnover of the Second District seat formerly occupied by Coffin. There were sharp Democratic losses in the Maine Legislature in 1960 and 1962, followed by election of Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate in 1964. Kenneth Curtis was elected governor in 1966, but the Republicans regained the legislative majority. From 1964, however, the legislative races have been competitive, as have been the gubernatorial contests, with the addition of two elected Independent governors, James Longley and Angus King, and one Independent US senator, former Governor King.

Party enrollments reflect as dramatically as any statistic the shift to a competitive political environment that Senator Muskie sought. Enrollment data were not collected by the state until 1958 and not completely integrated until 1972, but the data show a decline of Republican enrollment from about 52 percent of registered voters in 1958 to less than 30 percent in 1986 and hovering just under 30 percent since that time. Democratic enrollment in the same period increased from 24 percent to around 34 percent; in recent years, it has moved in the 30 percent to 36 percent range. There has been a significant increase in unenrolled voters from 24 percent in 1958, to 38 percent in 1998 and, until this year, a continuation in a narrow range above 35 percent. The Green Party first appeared on the charts in 1998 and now represents about 5 percent of registered voters. May 2020 state enrollment records showed Democrats at 36 percent, unenrolled at 32.5 percent, Republicans at 27.5 percent, and Greens at 4 percent of total registered voters (Figure 1).

If political competition had been Senator Muskie's sole aim, he and Coffin and their successors and competitors were successful, but for him political competition was not the goal. It was a way to achieve responsive and responsible government in a representative democracy. It was part of the checks and balances that are essential for a sustainable free society and consistency between means and ends in fulfilling that role. Muskie's view of how political competitors can interact constructively and in the public interest was inherent in his patient, persistent persuasion, listening and hearing what others had to say, even when he deeply disagreed with them.

That was how he was able to build an exemplary record as one of the US Senate's all-time leaders in crafting

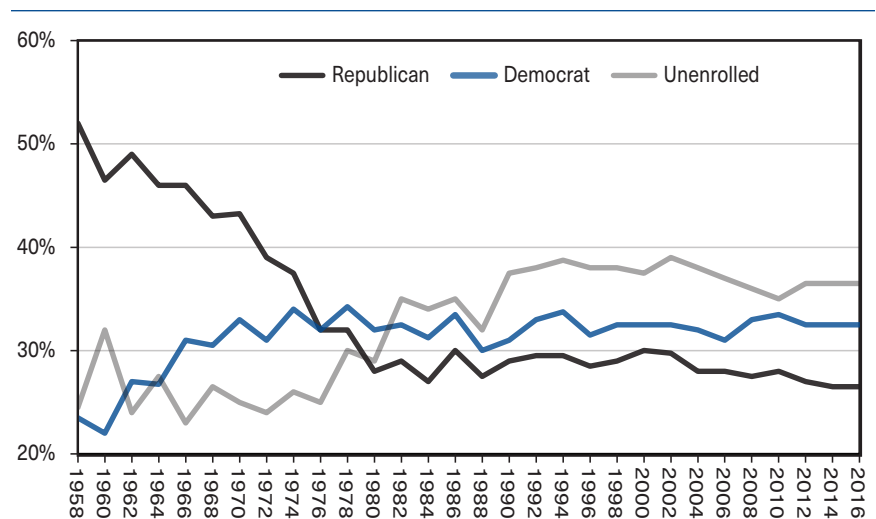
pioneering, bipartisan legislation in environmental protection, conservation, housing and historic preservation, urban and regional planning, and federal budgeting. He was a master of compromise—not “splitting the difference,” but finding ways to move toward a desired goal while meeting the legitimate concerns or incorporating the ideas of colleagues who had different perspectives. Muskie knew from Maine’s history how a split-the-difference compromise could result in terrible consequences. Maine’s admission as a state was the other half of the Missouri Compromise, in which Missouri was allowed to become a slave state, while Maine entered as a free state.

Unfortunately, while he was succeeding in the Senate, the Muskie vision of competitive, governance-policy-focused political parties was coming apart at the seams. The strategy and tactics of Richard Nixon’s 1968 and 1972 campaigns, exploiting the divisions over the Vietnam War, backlash against civil rights legislation, and fear of the social and cultural changes of the 1960s were fueled by interest-group funding and magnified by public relations techniques.

US national political parties became primarily vehicles for funding and managing election campaigns, aided and abetted by political action committees (PACs) dominated by heavily funded interest groups. The campaigns aim to win. They sideline rank-and-file citizens from participation in policy development and the responsibilities of governance that come with an election. Those are the patterns that alienate voters, lead to the symptoms of declining party enrollments, and result in voter susceptibility to the false siren of populism.

Efforts at structural reform have, in some cases, perversely weakened institutions like the legislature and undermined the possibilities of healthy debate on the issues. Proposals to weaken parties by open primaries, all in the name of more democracy, ignore an important lesson of history: the factions will always be with us. The challenge is to reform them. Little attention has been given to the kind of open engagement of citizens in the kind of

FIGURE 1: Trends in Major Party Enrollment as a Percentage of All Registered Voters, 1972–2016



platform and public policy development Frank Coffin pioneered. We should work to make the parties more transparent, responsive, and responsible, not delude ourselves by thinking we can solve our problems by making them irrelevant.

The 200th anniversary of the founding of the state of Maine is not an occasion for dreaming we can go back to the seemingly simple time of 1954, much less 1820. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief fault lines in our society. The crises looming over us demand wise, effective, and sustainable reforms: ending racial discrimination and oppression, reducing health risks and expanding access to health care, reducing social and economic disparities, achieving public safety reform, stopping environmental damage and ameliorating climate change that threatens life on the planet, and curtailing disruption of the global and political economy. All these problems are compounded by political leaders cynically disseminating disinformation and exploiting citizens’ anxieties by fostering violence in responses to efforts to protect public health and achieve social, economic, and political reform.

Broadly stated, meaningful responses to those crises and challenges will need to include electoral reforms, ending the political money arms race, ending gerrymandering (as Maine has done), and expanding voter registration and participation, coupled with substantive reforms.

Community grassroots responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that constructive action for mutual benefit can happen.

It won't be easy and it won't happen overnight, but applying the Muskie-Coffin principles of honesty, comity, and civil discourse, and engaging citizens through responsive and responsible political parties can move society toward achieving the goals of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address.

Now is the time for the citizens of Maine to come together within their chosen parties and across the partisan, ideological, ethnic, socioeconomic, and regional lines that often divide us and to converse with patience, persistence, and persuasive sharing of experience, knowledge, and ideas to improve the ways we can work together and strengthen our governance institutions to support a fair, just, healthy, and sustainable community. We can, working with colleagues from other states, develop ways of achieving national reforms, beginning from the grassroots.

If we do not succeed in such efforts, the collapse of representative democracy will be more than a theoretical possibility. 🌐

NOTES

- 1 The data and specific references from Maine's political history, including elections and voter registration and party enrollments are drawn from the online archives of the State of Maine Bureau of Corporations, Elections & Commissions (<https://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/data>), Henderson's Maine An Encyclopedia (<https://maineencyclopedia.com>), and Judd et al. (1995).

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Don Nicoll has a long history in Maine's Democratic Party and served on the staff of Congressman Frank M. Coffin (D-ME/2) and Senator Edmund S. Muskie (D-ME). His career also included serving as the chairman and CEO of the Joint Operations Committee of New England Land Grant Universities, as vice president

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