

Maine Policy Review

Volume 3 | Issue 3

1994

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Recommended Citation

Potholm, Christian P. . "Expectations and the 1994 Maine Elections." *Maine Policy Review* 3.3 (1994) : 50 -53, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol3/iss3/8>.

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Year of change: A review of the 1994 elections

Maine Policy Review (1994). Volume 3, Number 3

The 1994 elections at the national and state level resulted in significant changes all across the political landscape. In the following articles, University of Maine political scientist Matthew Moen and Bowdoin Professor of Government Christian Potholm analyze the nature of that change and its implications for Maine.

Expectations and the 1994 Maine elections

By Christian P. Potholm

"Expectation is the enemy of prediction" wrote Ward Just, and his quotation aptly describes the Maine political scene during 1994. When the year began, conventional wisdom said that Senator George Mitchell would be easily reelected no matter who ran against him and that Maine's two congressional seats would continue to be held by Representatives Tom Andrews and Olympia Snowe, even though Snowe had faced serious opposition in 1990 and 1992. Democrat Joe Brennan, it was widely believed, would handily defeat a wide array of Democratic, Republican and Independent challengers.

Yet the best laid plans and most widely held predictions were thrown into a cocked hat by the announcement of George Mitchell in April that he would not seek reelection. Chaos reigned and, with an open Senate seat available, both of Maine's Congress people decided that destiny called. There were few Republican challengers to the candidacy of Snowe. But several Democrats, including state Senate President Dennis "Duke" Dutremble, thought to challenge Tom Andrews for the Democratic nomination, only to be brushed aside by the insistence of President Clinton and Senator George Mitchell that Andrews was the Democrat who could—and should—succeed Mitchell and ensure Democratic control of the U.S. Senate.

The decisions of Andrews and Snowe to seek the Senate opened up two Congressional seats, the first time this had happened in over 30 years. This in turn opened up the Maine legislature to new faces as a host of state representatives and senators vied for the Congressional opportunities. Not only did this produce the largest number of candidates since 1974, the compressed nature of the campaigns less than two months in duration also led to a wild scramble with highly competitive races.

In Maine's Second Congressional District, Republican Richard Bennett emerged victorious in a hotly contested race in the largest congressional district east of the Mississippi. State Senator John Baldacci pulled a surprise upset, beating the early front runner and former (and very recent) Democratic party chair, Jim Mitchell, Androscoggin District Attorney Janet Mills, and four other challengers.

Baldacci was the most conservative Democrat in the primary and his stance as a pro-business candidate served him well in the general election. He moved from his base in Bangor to run up

sizable margins in Lewiston, while his strong support among gun-owners helped keep down Bennett's margins in the rural areas. Running against Bennett the Republican, John Michael the Independent and Charles FitzGerald the Green, Baldacci won by four percent and swam strongly against the national (and statewide) Republican tide.

In the First Congressional District, James Longley Jr., son of the former Independent Governor James Longley Sr., moved to that district from Lewiston in something of a hurry. Capitalizing on his father's name, he outpolled Senator Charlie Summers and Kevin Keogh, the Republican state chair who had encouraged Longley to run against Tom Andrews when the seat was not open!

For the Democrats, "Duke" Dutremble outpolled Senator Bonnie Titcomb, Secretary of State Bill Diamond, and former Portland mayor Bill Troubh. Dutremble ran extremely well in his home base of York country but also ran a very competitive race in Portland, winning with a coalition of blue collar men and a surprisingly large number of women. Dutremble, the first Franco-American ever elected Senate President in Maine, was widely regarded as the most conservative of the four candidates in the race.

In the general election, it was a good year to be a Republican and a good year to have a well known name such as Longley. In a very close race — in fact the closest Congressional race since John McKernan beat John Kerry in 1984 — Longley beat Dutremble 52 percent to 48 percent, running up big enough margins in the suburbs to overcome Dutremble's support in the urban areas such as Portland, Biddeford and Waterville. Interestingly enough, Dutremble lost his home county of York. While this was due in part to the traditional bias against candidates from Biddeford, it was also a reflection of the changing demographics and social status of the county, which increasingly has a large professional Republican and Independent population.

As important as the U.S. Senate seat was to both parties and as exciting as were the open races for the U.S. House, most political attention in Maine during 1994 was centered on the race for governor. For party faithful of both parties, the Blaine House is the symbol of political success and the source of what political patronage remains in the state. Major attention was focused on the nominations for governor as a host of candidates emerged.

On the Democratic side, many news people, business people, and party regulars quickly lined up behind Joe Brennan, considering him to have the best chance at reelection. Early campaign efforts by Professor Richard Barringer and former University of Maine Chancellor Bob Woodbury remained somewhat static and the major challenge to Brennan was left to Portland mayor and Rhodes Scholar Tom Allen. Allen's campaign turned out to be living proof that if one is going to strike a king, one should kill him. Allen seemed unsure of whether or not to attack Brennan directly, waiting until Brennan had the nomination locked up before launching a late barrage at the Democratic convention (where Brennan delegates were in a substantial majority) and closing his campaign with a strange television blitz centering around the export of logs to China! In the meantime, Brennan was putting together an irresistible coalition of blue collar Democrats, old friends and even some environmentalists who wanted to go with a winner.

Brennan won the Democratic primary by more than two to one and seemed headed toward reelection, especially when the extremely close Republican primary left all the candidates

exhausted and impoverished after a grueling race. Senator Bill Cohen's choice, Susan Collins, eked out a very narrow victory over state senator Sumner Lipman, the choice of Governor McKernan, state representative Judy Foss, perennial candidate Jasper Wyman, newcomer Paul Young, senate minority leader Charlie Webster, and Mary Adams, former head of Save Our Schools (SOS).

Her narrow victory was Susan Collins' last bit of good luck in the campaign. No sooner had she won the nomination than she was attacked by some right wing conservatives in her own party for being "too liberal" and for not satisfying the residency requirement to be governor! Mired in controversy, tied up in court proceedings most of the summer and having a hard time getting her campaign in gear, Collins ran into further difficulties when her brother was indicted on drug charges and it was learned that he was a fugitive from justice in Canada.

Then, in early September, just as she was getting these distractions behind her, Collins had the misfortune to run into a bizarre and controversial poll by the Portland Press Herald. Using a strange methodology that did not give respondents the party affiliation of the candidates (thereby giving the better known Brennan a huge advantage because of his name identification), the paper said Collins had only 11 percent of the vote when she actually had twice that. These results seemed to suggest that she had been going steadily backwards since the June primary and that the more she campaigned, the fewer votes she received!

In a normal political year, Collins still might have become competitive in October and in "the year of the Elephant," might even have surged enough at the end to give Brennan a run for his money.

But 1994 was not a normal political year. There were two other candidates in the race.

One, Jonathan Carter, was carrying the Green Party banner. Buoyed by his nine percent showing in the last congressional race — and widely regarded as the reason Olympia Snowe defeated the popular state representative Pat McGowan — Carter was running to get the Green Party officially on the ballot. Needing only five percent of the vote to accomplish this, Carter did not have to do a lot of heavy lifting during the campaign and, guaranteed a spot in the statewide debates, he could have an enjoyable election season. He did.

The second, Angus King was running as an Independent. King had something of a blurred image from the start. He had been a Democrat for most of his adult life and was regarded by some as merely a pleasant, liberal talk show host on public television. But during the energy crisis, King had hit upon a method of saving electricity and making money and when he sold his highly successful energy business, he had \$8 million in the bank, solid Republican credentials (and experience with the constraints of big government!) and the freedom to run as he chose. Bright, photogenic and comfortable on television, King produced an almost visceral negative reaction among the hard core "Brennanistas," who regarded him as a rich dilettante who alone offered a serious challenge to the reelection of Brennan. And his candidacy became something of a statewide Rorschach test, with individuals seeing in this newcomer whatever they wished.

Skillfully blending the image of "outsider" with hard work, an extremely effective television campaign (created by Dan Payne of Boston), and a surprisingly effective grassroots organization (led by first time campaign manager Kay Rand), King nevertheless faced a very uphill race. The state's two largest daily newspapers opposed him. The Portland Press Herald was extravagantly, even wildly, complimentary of Brennan in the Democratic primary (seeing in him echoes of FDR!) and its coverage throughout the campaign reflected that enthusiasm. The Bangor Daily News seemed to oscillate between supporting Brennan and Collins before finally settling on Collins, endorsing her not once, but twice!

Deciding that he would have to tell his own story and tell it early and often, King made a command decision to go on television during the primary season even though voters would not get a chance to vote for him until November. And, after Brennan and Collins got big electoral boosts from winning their respective primaries in June, he invested heavily in a summer television campaign to make sure that when the post-Labor Day polls appeared, he would be in second place, thereby framing the election as one between himself and Brennan.

The strategy was very successful.

By October, the race was widely seen—and reported—as a two person contest with both Carter and Collins having little chance. The Brennan campaign launched a variety of negative attacks, but these attacks were unable to put enough distance between Brennan and King. King accented that the choice was between the past and the future, with Brennan representing the tax-filled past. By the way, as used in today's political lexicon, "negative" campaign ads are run by those who lose. "Contrast" ads are campaign ads run by those who win. King ran contrast ads.

Spirited debates, endless commercials and a lot of campaigning one-upmanship characterized the last weeks of the gubernatorial race. It was a close fight to the finish, with King getting more of the undecideds than Brennan. Ironically, the Brennan campaign miscalculated the impact of Collins in the final days of the campaign. Working on the assumption that any surge for Collins would take away from King (who was running much better than she among Republicans) and thus help Brennan, they peddled a poll showing Collins even with King! This poll was widely publicized in the Bangor Daily News, which had already endorsed Collins and now editorialized again that she could win. In fact, the tactic backfired. Election day exit polling showed that sizable numbers of Democratic women in the Second District left Brennan at the end and switched to Collins, thereby helping King to win by two percent. Final score: King 36 percent, Brennan 34 percent, Collins 24 percent, Carter six percent.

As exciting and close as the governor's race was, however, perhaps the most important outcome on the national level occurred in the Senate race. That race was over almost before it began. Although Olympia Snowe was seen as the weaker of the two candidates by Democrats, she ran a nearly flawless campaign. She started early to define Tom Andrews as someone out of touch with Maine voters and castigated him for his position on closing Loring Air Force Base and for advocating gun control. Snowe vigorously pursued a television strategy, attacking Andrews early and often in both the Portland and Bangor television markets. By midsummer, she was running not only a "Democrats for Snowe" commercial that made it acceptable for party regulars to

support her, but she also used a superb, positive biography spot to define herself as an orphan girl who made good.

For his part, Andrews never hit his stride. He lagged behind Snowe in the television effort and seemed determined to try to win the election through a grass roots organization even though such a strategy had not worked in Maine's second district since Margaret Chase Smith used it effectively in the 1950s and 1960s, surely a simpler era when television had far less weight. Also, he never produced a biographical commercial of his own to tell the voters of the Second District who he was.

In any case, Snowe was ahead of Andrews by 15 percent at Labor Day and maintained that margin even after Andrews finally went on television with negative attack ads. She eventually won by over 20 percent, helping the Republicans to take command of the U.S. Senate.

The 1994 elections thus brought with them a surging Republican tide, one which left the Maine delegation with three Republicans and only one Democrat and put the Republican-sounding King in the Blaine House. Among those rejoicing was the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, which had endorsed all four winners, thus indicating that Maine still has a crucial number of people who hunt and fish and who want to keep it that way.

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Full cite: Potholm, Christian P. 1994. *Expectations and the 1994 Maine elections*. Vol. 3(3): 50-53.