

Republican Sweeps in New Hampshire

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In New Hampshire, The Republican Party dominated the 2002 elections, winning the Senate seat, Governor's office, and both Congressional races, as well as increasing their control over both chambers of the State Legislature, wiping out any recent Democratic gains in the state. This result, once again, places the state firmly in the control of the Republican Party. An unusually high voter turnout of 66%, a record 32,602 new registrants, and the resurgent popularity of Republican candidates nationwide helped to defeat the Democrats in New Hampshire.

New Hampshire has traditionally been a one-party dominant state, except during short transition periods. The Granite State's system of government has seen little change, and its people have remained conservative despite population and economic growth. The Republican Party has held a solid majority since 1857. New Hampshire politics have been heavily influenced by the personalities of politicians and by economic interests such as railroads, newspapers, textile manufacturing, lumber, and tourism. These interests have been dominant only when they form alliances with other interests, not as individual actors. Party politics has been marked by regional schisms. The southern tier is the state's industrial and population center. The seacoast, whose economy is dependent on port activities and, more recently, tourism and the "north country," with lumber and tourism, have different economic bases and interests. Moreover, the structure of government, especially the size and amateur nature of the 400-

member General Court (or House) has made party organization difficult, and the dominance of one party has made strong organization unnecessary.

Republican registrations far outnumber Democrats, 253,504 to 176,634, but undeclared voters outnumber both with 260,021 registrations. Despite the large Republican majority, there is no identifiable philosophical thread in either party. The large size of the legislature makes party unity hard to achieve. Few voters seem to know or care what individual legislators among its 424 members do so many votes are based on friendship, personal favors, or for simply capricious reasons. Party identification of many office holders is made for equally capricious reasons, usually because Republicans are more likely to be elected. There is little or no incentive for Republicans to develop an issue-oriented agenda. Whenever they have, they split their diverse ideological ranks.

Several well-known liberal Republicans changed their party identification to Democrat when they perceived the GOP as becoming too ideological in the 1996 gubernatorial race. The Republican nominee, Ovid Lamontagne, was believed to have too many ties to the religious right, a trend abhorrent to the progressive strain of Republicans. Although there is some organization of the religious right, it has not gained the popularity seen in other Republican states. In the 1996 race, for example, we saw many well-known Republicans appearing in television ads for Lamontagne's rival, moderate Democrat Jeanne Shaheen. Shaheen went on to become the state's first woman governor, serving three terms in the "corner office." The Republican Party thus benefits from not organizing and not pursuing a highly ideological issue agenda. Democrats also fare better when they do not pursue a highly ideological issue agenda as well.

The 2002 Election: United States Senate

The race for the U. S. Senate seat was a particularly expensive and contentious one, beginning in the primary battle on the Republican side with Representative John E. Sununu defeating incumbent Bob Smith for the

Republican nomination. Smith had angered Republicans with his bid for the presidency and for leaving the party. Although he returned to the Republican ranks, party members were not forgiving. Smith spent over \$4 million to retain his seat, to no avail. Sununu's total spending for the primary and the general election was a bit over \$3.5 million. Sununu handily beat Smith, 81,920 (53%) to 68,608 (44%)¹ Sununu entered the race late and many worried that he was not extending himself to collect campaign funds. Some members of the party even urged him to leave the race for fear of splitting the Republican Party. Most notably, the Mount Washington Valley Republicans went so far as to write Sununu a letter asking him to step aside.

Sununu's Democratic opponent and the expected victor was 3-term Governor Jeanne Shaheen. Despite outspending Sununu (over \$5.8million), Shaheen lost to Sununu, 227,229 (50.8%) to 207,478 (46.4%). The Sununu-Shaheen race was expected to be one of the closest races in the country but that outcome did not materialize on November 5. The campaign was marked by copious amounts of mudslinging on both sides. Neither campaign was able to capitalize on the candidates' accomplishments but Shaheen, in particular, was not able to clearly enumerate her successes. She was continuously slammed for not being able to solve fully the school funding dilemma facing New Hampshire. The New Hampshire Supreme Court's ruling in the *Claremont* decision mandated that the state must provide equal educational opportunities for the state's children and that reliance on local property taxes to fund schools was unconstitutional. Until the high court's ruling, the state's expenditure on education was the lowest among the fifty states by a wide margin. After rejecting Governor Shaheen's funding proposal as well as proposals for a state-wide income tax, the legislature adopted a state-wide property tax which Shaheen signed into law. The property

¹ Election results and state candidate expenditure reports may be found on the Secretary of State's website at <http://www.state.nh.us>.

tax has been controversial and has been challenged in the state's courts by "donor" towns who find their tax payments reallocated to poorer "receiver" towns to help make up for inequities in school spending.

The 2002 Election: United States House of Representatives

The First District House race featured virtual unknown Republican Jeb Bradley and Democrat Martha Fuller Clark. Bradley had served as a state Senator before seeking to replace John E. Sununu. He beat seven other, rather unknown candidates for the nomination. Clark was considered to have a good chance to win this race on her second try. Her campaign was well-financed, outspending Bradley three and a half to one, \$3.5 million to \$1 million.² Clark appeared unprepared and inarticulate in the debate held between the candidates. She also fell victim to the Republican Party ad campaign accusing her of supporting a state income tax. Even though this was a race for the U. S. House, Clark's support for a state income tax doomed her campaign. Republicans relied on the state's almost psychotic fear of an income tax, the ignorance of citizens of their own government, and their ignorance of the concept of a federal system. Republicans also ran a particularly objectionable ad showing Clark, a large woman, walking with circus music playing, making her look like a clown.

Democrats used similar tactics but not as insulting as the ads against Clark. Bradley won handily, 12,8993 (58%) to 8,5426(38%) for Clark. The Second District race was between incumbent Charlie Bass (R) and the wife of the Democrat two term incumbent, Dick Swett, Bass had defeated to gain his seat. Katrina Swett, daughter of California Representative Tom Lantos and the mother of seven, in her first campaign, was well-financed, predominantly by out-of-state money. Republicans used this information to their advantage in ads against Swett. She spent about \$1.5 million to Bass's \$887 thousand. Swett was articulate

² Federal candidate expenditure reports are available at <http://www.fec.gov>.

and showed a grasp of issues but could not overcome the entrenched Republican machine, losing to Bass 125,804 (57%) to 90479 (41%).

The 2002 Election: Governor

Businessman and political newcomer Craig Benson used extensive personal funds to win the “corner office,” defeating former Senator Gordon Humphrey and rival Bruce Keough, as well as other minor contenders, in the Republican primary and, then, defeating Democrat Mark Fernald in the general election. Benson began Cabletron, a company which was quite successful until after his abrupt departure as its CEO. While at Cabletron, he was convicted of gender bias yet he denied it in ads throughout the campaign. Many other questions arose during the campaign, particularly about the enormous amount of money he was spending. His rival, Gordon Humphrey, charged that Benson was spending \$500,000 per week on media. Although the Secretary of State’s office does not have Benson’s expenditures report available, it is estimated he spent in excess of \$10 million of his half-billion dollar fortune in this bid for governor.

Benson also hired a private investigator to look into the backgrounds of his primary challengers. When confronted with it, he first denied having hired an investigator, until Gordon Humphrey produced the investigator’s name and address! Benson used the tired and trite, but popular, promise the he would run the state government “like a business.” While his rival, Mark Fernald, proposed a state income tax, Benson pledged to rid the state of the statewide property tax while not raising taxes. His budget numbers are suspect at best. Fernald could not match Benson’s personal spending and his support of an income tax was the death knell for his campaign. Benson’s defeat of Fernald was decisive, 259,663 (58.6%) to 169,277 (38.2%).

Issues

The new Governor’s term began rather inauspiciously when he forgot to hold the Governor’s Annual Easter Egg Roll, disappointing New Hampshire’s

children. The most important issues in New Hampshire revolve around money and growth. New Hampshire is the fastest growing New England state, adding approximately the population of its second largest city, Nashua, every five years. New Hampshire's towns are feeling the pressure of added population, while trying to retain their small town charm. Tamworth, a small town in the Mount Washington Valley, is faced with the challenges of new development. A proposed "country club" for sports car owners is causing quite a bit of controversy. The developers want to place a race track in an area with a view of the mountains and allow the racing of private cars on the property. Tamworth has no zoning so it is unable to block the building of this country club. Opponents worry about the added noise of 25 cars racing every twenty minutes, the visibility of the track, and the possibility of contamination of a large aquifer under the property. Zoning proponents are using this as a way to push for zoning, while opponents do not want "any one telling me what I can do with my property." Some towns are finding they need to limit new homes to those over \$300 thousand so they can provide services without stretching already scant resources.

School funding continues to be a problem for New Hampshire towns. Since the Claremont ruling, the state has been required by the courts to provide funding for the state's schools. The state levies a property tax that then is redistributed to the towns. Towns that pay more than they receive, donor towns, have been in an uproar over this solution. The courts in particular have been attacked for this ruling. The legislature has passed measures limiting the court's power as a response. It also passed a bill in early July which lowers the state property tax (from \$5.80 per thousand to \$4.92 and, then, to \$3.24) and targets the towns which particularly need aid to fund their schools. The bill became law without the Governor's signature. Receiver towns are already appealing to the courts.

The state's budget has proven to be problematic as well. The economic downturn hit New Hampshire's revenues, quite hard. Governor Benson and the legislature tussled over the budget, which Benson felt was too high. When the legislature passed the budget despite his objections, Benson vetoed it. The legislature was not able to override his veto and, eventually, passed a continuing budget which is in effect for three months. It is, basically, one fourth of the budget passed by the legislature. The budget contains deep cuts, particularly in the Department of Health and Human Services. The Adult Services Division will lose a quarter of their already miniscule staff. The budget eliminates money for tobacco prevention programs and drains a \$31 million trust fund for startup grants for health programs and guts land and historic conservation funding. The University System, which already receives less than 15% of its budget from the state, also was cut, forcing tuition to rise for the coming school year. The legislature still must pass a budget. Further cuts will be difficult to make.

The legislature had already considered and rejected further cuts the Governor suggested in a recent meeting. Legislators listened to Benson in stony silence, only occasionally interrupting to object to his suggestions. When Benson told them they should each come to their next meeting with five suggested cuts, the legislators responded by saying they had done their work and, now, it was the governor's turn to do his. The coming months will reveal where this "non-dialogue" concludes.