

VERMONT AND NEW HAMPSHIRE: TWO ROADS DIVERGING YET AGAIN?

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To view recent political events in New Hampshire and Vermont is to once again see two close neighbors take substantially different political paths. While New Hampshire's results largely trended back to its long Republican heritage, Vermont continued its now long standing trend to Democratic dominance. But both states, each in their own way, remain distinctive from national trends, pursuing their own unique combinations of politics and policy.

In New Hampshire, the Republicans returned to dominant control of the state's Congressional delegation in a convincing manner. The US Senate contest was won by Republican Beth Ayotte, a popular figure who garnered majorities in almost every town across the state. This victory helped to preserve a Republican seat in the US Senate and contributed to a narrower margin of Democratic control, with potentially important implications for continuing and contentious budget debates.

Both of New Hampshire's US House seats shifted back to Republican hands, part of the Republican wave in the House. Incumbent Carol Shea-Porter lost by 26,000 votes to Frank Guinta in the First District, while Charles Bass regained the 2nd District seat (left open by Paul Hodes' decision to run for the US Senate) by a narrow margin of 3,000 votes. Thus, New Hampshire once again has a Republican-dominated Congressional presence in Washington, with a strong "Tea Party" tinge provided by the strong support that Senator Ayotte received from Sara Palin and other prominent figures during the election. This will undoubtedly shape the Presidential dynamics of 2012, as Republican hopefuls are already frequent visitors to this reenergized early-primary state.

Despite the Congressional gains, New Hampshire has not gone back to a one-party state of old. The voters of the state split their 2010 ticket by reelecting Democratic governor John Lynch, who won every county in the state except one (where the loss was narrow). This has perpetuated a divided-government pattern in the state, leading to potential policy difficulties. On the budget (the crucial issue for almost every state in 2011), the Republican-controlled Legislature is pursuing deeper spending cuts than those proposed by Governor Lynch. Calling their reductions “unnecessarily deep”, Lynch has indicated he will not rule out a budget veto. This may lead to a protracted budget process in the state.

Across the Connecticut River in Vermont, by contrast, the political and policy trends have been more markedly Democratic in tone and outcome. On the surface, there would seem to be relatively little change in the Legislature, with Democrats maintaining control of both the state House and Senate. Vermont’s congressional delegation is also unchanged, with expected and convincing victories by both Senator Leahy and Congressman Welch. Like Connecticut to the south, the real political change in 2010 is in the governor’s office (though once again it may be different in character from what some might assume on the surface).

The victory of Peter Shumlin in the governor’s race represents both a partisan and a generational shift. For the first time since 2002, a Democrat will preside over unified state government in Vermont. While Shumlin’s victory was a close one (he defeated Lieutenant Governor Brian Dubie by low single digits, in a race decided by the Legislature due to his failure to get 50% of the vote), his leadership standing in the Legislature has given him early connections and credibility in dealing with policy.

Shumlin’s ascendance also represents the end of a generational era. Retired governor Jim Douglas was in some ways the last of a generation of (particularly Republican) politicians

from the era of the 1970's, who came to prominence in a time when Republican moderates were still common in the United States. He is being succeeded by a generation of younger and more partisan figures less rooted in moderation, with policy implications for future cooperation in government. One wonders if his moderate, pragmatic and cooperative orientation to governance will continue to find a home in the political process on either side of the aisle.

Despite the presence of relatively unified government (the Republican lieutenant governor Phil Scott being the “odd man out” in a state which separately elects its executive officers), the budget still remains a fundamental challenge across partisan lines. The governor and legislature remain in largely cooperative negotiation on budget proposals, but deciding on the exact nature of cutbacks remains contentious. The fiscal picture may also be complicated by continuing discussions (currently at the study commission stage) over a “single payer” health plan, which could put added financial pressure on the state if pursued and enacted.

Beyond the fiscal challenges, Vermont is also in the midst of a major energy-related controversy. Vermont Yankee, Vermont's nuclear power plant in Vernon, is aging and up for license renewal – and it has once again become a center of dispute. While the Federal nuclear regulators have approved the renewal, the views of Vermont are shaping this issue into a major federalism controversy. Both Governor Shumlin and the legislature have clearly indicated their opposition to the plant's continued operation, and claim that a 2002 agreement gives the state the right to block the plant's continued licensure and operation. This controversy over who can decide is continuing to play out between Washington and Montpelier, but may be shaped by the energy market itself. The plant's current owner has been unsuccessful in finding a buyer for the facility, and both major power suppliers in Vermont (Green Mountain Power and Central Vermont Public Service) have indicated they will no longer buy power from the plant. Thus, its

political and economic future remain uncertain, a status only worsened by the recent nuclear crisis in Japan (and the doubts it has rekindled about nuclear energy). From the perspective of federal-state relations, it will be interesting to see how the issue plays out.

Thus, in a time of political change and fiscal uncertainty, both New Hampshire and Vermont seem to be continuing their tradition of going their own ways, both from the nation and one another. While New Hampshire seems back in the mainstream with the Republican resurgence, its reelection of a Democratic governor belies that easy predictability. In Vermont, its continued and reinforced (with the election of Governor Shumlin) Democratic dominance continue to set it apart on a “road less travelled”, with its resistance to Vermont Yankee reconfirming its historical willingness to buck federal initiatives and objectives. Both states will no doubt continue to provide an interesting political dynamic in 2011-2012, particularly with the New Hampshire presidential primary approaching faster than we may expect.