

VERMONT POLITICS IN 2022: A YEAR OF TRANSITION – AND CONTINUITIES

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For those who have aspired to represent Vermont in Washington, DC, 2022 was a year of rare opportunity, as well as resulting historic changes. For the first time since 2006, Vermont had an open U.S. Senate seat and an open U.S. House seat, presenting the chance for advancement to Washington or from the US House to the US Senate. Patrick Leahy (D), Vermont's senior U.S. Senator (and the most senior member of the U.S. Senate) decided to retire after nearly a half century in that body (8 terms). Combined with other election results and two historic votes on the Vermont Constitution, Vermont broke new ground while reaffirming its standing as a deep blue state with a New England bipartisan ethos.

In the U.S. Senate race, Leahy's retirement led to an expected continuity: Rep. Peter Welch (D), Vermont's U.S. House member since 2007, declared his candidacy for the seat. Since Robert Stafford advanced to the Senate from the House in 1971, Vermont's House member has contested for an open Senate seat, and been the successful candidate, in 1988 (Jim Jeffords), 2006 (Bernie Sanders), and now 2022 (Peter Welch). Only in 1974 was the House member (Richard Mallary) defeated in seeking a Senate seat, losing in a historic race to Pat Leahy. (https://electionarchive.vermont.gov/elections/search/year_from:1914/year_to:2018/office_id:6). Welch handily won both the Democratic nomination, and the general election with 68.5% of the vote, losing only in a scattering of towns and in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom (a traditionally strong Republican region) (<https://sos.vermont.gov/elections/election-info-resources/elections-results-data/>).

Welch's Senate victory is noteworthy for other reasons as well. For the first time, Vermont has an entire Congressional delegation (Sanders, Welch, and newly elected U.S. House

Representative Becca Balint) who are not native born Vermonsters. Balint was born in Germany to American parents, Sanders was born in Brooklyn, and Welch was born in Springfield, MA. Their “flatlander” backgrounds are a reflection of nearly 60 years of demographic, political and cultural transformation that has reshaped Vermont since the 1960’s and 1970’s, when both Sanders and Welch moved to Vermont.

Senator Leahy’s retirement represents a shift not only in the character of Vermont’s Congressional delegation, but in its Washington political clout as well (at least for the short term). Leahy’s immense seniority in the Senate enabled him to direct substantial federal spending to Vermont, most recently in portions of the \$1.7 trillion spending bill passed by Congress in December 2022. As one recent commentator noted, “Pat Leahy is economic development in Vermont” (<https://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/leahys-departure-from-the-us-senate-could-stanch-the-flow-of-federal-cash-to-vermont/Content?oid=37191398>). The loss of Leahy’s seniority will weaken Vermont’s ability to acquire such funding.

The U.S. Senate vacancy also served to open up Vermont’s U.S. House seat for the first time in 16 years, resulting in another historic political change. For the first time, Vermont has elected a woman to Congress (being the last of the 50 states to do so, despite its recent deep blue character). U.S. Representative Becca Balint is also the first openly LGBTQ representative from Vermont in Congress. Rep. Balint advanced to the House through service in the Vermont Senate (including serving as Majority Leader and President Pro Tem)(<https://www.beccabalint.com/>). She won 60% of the vote in a competitive Democratic primary with Lieutenant Governor Molly Gray, and she won the general election with 60% of the vote, a convincing majority (<https://sos.vermont.gov/elections/election-info-resources/elections-results-data/>).

On the level of state offices in Vermont, the results spoke to continuity rather than change. Incumbent Governor Phil Scott (R) won his fourth term with 71% of the vote (<https://sos.vermont.gov/elections/election-info-resources/elections-results-data/>). After being sought out to potentially run for Vermont's U.S. House or U.S. Senate seat, Scott decided to remain in Vermont and seek another term as Governor. In an otherwise Democratic-dominated election cycle, Scott stood out as a reminder of Vermont's willingness to continue to support moderate Republican governors. Since 1976, even as Vermont has trended increasingly Democratic blue, it has regularly cycled between Democratic and Republican governors every 6-8 years (with the exception of Howard Dean's 11 year run from 1991-2002). Scott's popularity rests on his continuing willingness to dissent from former President Donald Trump and the current national Republican Party, and his impressive handling of the COVID pandemic in VT. Along with Governor John Sununu in NH and now former Governor Charlie Baker in MA, Scott represents the persistence of moderate New England Republicanism.

In addition to the changes and continuities in major elected offices, Vermont in 2022 also witnessed two historic votes on the Vermont constitution that reaffirmed its increasingly liberal political culture. A proposal to add reproductive rights to the Vermont Constitution passed with a decisive 73% of the vote, despite an active and visible opposition to the measure. The measure was spurred by the Supreme Court's Dobbs decision, which likely fueled the groundswell of support for the measure. The vote distribution also indicates some continuing regional divides in Vermont on this issue; while the proposal carried in every Vermont town, its margin was much narrower in the most rural towns and the Northeast Kingdom (<https://sos.vermont.gov/elections/election-info-resources/elections-results-data/>).

Vermont also voted to add an amendment to the Vermont Constitution explicitly prohibiting slavery. Spurred by recent movements for racial justice, the 82% approval vote was unsurprising, as Vermont had officially prohibited slavery in its 1777 constitution for the Republic of Vermont. Like the reproductive rights amendment, this proposal was approved by every town in Vermont (see reference above).

In summary, 2022 was an election year that witnessed both transition in some major offices, and deep continuities in the modern evolution of Vermont to a strong Democratic liberal political culture, mixed with New England bipartisan moderation. If past is prologue, both Senator Welch and Representative Balint will likely maintain their positions until they choose to forego them (in particular, Vermont has never voted an incumbent U.S. Senator out of office), and when Governor Scott chooses to move on, he may well be replaced by a Democratic governor for a period.