

NEW HAMPSHIRE POLITICS IN 2022:

PURPLE-STATE DEMOCRATS BRACE FOR A RED WAVE WHILE SUNUNU PLANS HIS FUTURE

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Introduction

New Hampshire is by any measure a purple state; in 2020, even as Joe Biden was easily carrying the state and Jeanne Shaheen was re-elected to the Senate, Chris Sununu won a third term as governor in a landslide that also flipped control of the state legislature and executive council to the GOP. This year, Sununu is running for a fourth term while the Democrats representing the state in Congress and seeking re-election – Senator Maggie Hassan, Representative Chris Pappas, and Representative Ann McLane Kuster – are all hoping to hold on in the face of what is likely to be a very good year for Republicans. Hassan and Pappas' races are likely to be bellwethers on Election Night, and if Kuster finds herself in genuine electoral danger, Republicans are going to have a very good night indeed.

United States Senate: Maggie Hassan vs. A Republican to be Named Later

Maggie Hassan, New Hampshire's Democratic junior senator and a former two-term governor, won her first term in 2016 by about one thousand votes (Lucas, Sisco, and Galdieri 2018). The political environment of 2022 is a challenging one for her. President Joe Biden is unpopular, and midterm elections are often rough for candidates from the president's party. With Democrats holding a nominal majority consisting of 48 Democratic senators, 2 independents, and Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote, every Senate contest has the potential to decide which party controls the Senate. Republicans had hoped to recruit Governor Chris

Sununu to run against her, and Sununu spent much of 2021 acting and talking like a candidate for federal office. But on the morning of November 9, 2021, he announced – with no advance warning to national Republicans – that he would instead seek a fourth term as governor (DeWitt 2021). By that afternoon, two other potential candidates – former U.S. Senator Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire (who lost to Hassan in 2016) and former U.S. Senator Scott Brown of Massachusetts (who lost to Jeanne Shaheen in 2014) – had also taken themselves out of the running. These moves have left Republicans without an obvious front-runner in the race for their party's Senate nomination.

At the time of Sununu's announcement, the only announced candidate was Don Bolduc, a retired brigadier general who sought the party's nomination to run against Senator Jeanne Shaheen in 2020. However, Bolduc's inconsistent behavior after he lost that primary and his embrace of Donald Trump's false claims about the 2020 election had made many Granite State Republicans uneasy about him as a candidate; Bolduc's declaration that he had "derailed" a Sununu Senate candidacy and that the governor was a "Chinese Communist sympathizer" did nothing to make him more palatable to party leaders and actors (Graham 2021). State Republicans tried to coordinate on a more mainstream alternative, for instance through a summit of potential candidates convened by Corky Messner, who lost to Shaheen in 2020 (DiStaso 2021b). But those efforts were largely unsuccessful, and both Chuck Morse, the president of the state senate, and Kevin Smith, a former state representative who ran for governor in 2012 and more recently served as the town manager of Londonderry, declared their candidacies. More recently, two novice candidates from the technology sector have joined the race: Bruce Fenton, a self-styled "Bitcoin entrepreneur," and Vikram Mansharmani, an author and "global trend-watcher."

None of these candidates are particularly well-known to New Hampshire voters; even among the mainline Republicans, Morse is an insider without much profile beyond political circles, and Smith has not sought office beyond Londonderry in a decade. This is good news for Hassan, who has won statewide office three times, twice in tough years for Democrats, and has widespread name recognition. But in a sufficiently bad political environment for Democrats, it's possible any of the five Republicans presently running could be a viable challenger. A recent University of New Hampshire poll found matchups between Hassan and Bolduc, Morse, and Smith were all one- or two-point races, while Hassan led the little-known Fenton by six (UNH Survey Center 2022).

In the face of a close race, Hassan is drawing on all the tools of incumbency. She has emphasized her support for President Biden's infrastructure bill and the benefits it will bring to New Hampshire (Alexander 2021), and has maintained a reputation for bipartisanship that should play well in this purple state (Sylvia 2022). She has also been aggressive in her fundraising, with a record-setting \$4.3 million raised in the first quarter of 2022, and \$7.5 million cash on hand (Sexton 2022a). By contrast, Chuck Morse raised \$750,000 in the same quarter (Sexton 2022b). But whichever Republican wins the primary should be supported by large amounts of outside money, which goes far in a small state like New Hampshire.

Abortion is the wildcard in the race. The Republican candidates have expressed varying degrees of support for the leaked Supreme Court draft opinion that would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, while Hassan has emphasized her support for abortion rights (Sexton 2022c). Public opinion in the state is strongly supportive of abortion rights (Pew Research Center 2014); a ruling that overturns *Roe* could put Republican candidates on the defensive and give Hassan a boost.

Governor: Sununu Goes for the Record

Chris Sununu is strongly favored to win a fourth two-year term, which would tie the record set by Democrat John Lynch. While his approval ratings have descended from the sky-high levels they reached at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, a recent Saint Anselm College poll showed him with a still-impressive 62% of respondents approving of his performance (Levesque and Sisco 2022). The only declared Democratic candidate is Senator Tom Sherman of Rye, who has no real profile beyond his state senate district and ran slightly behind President Biden in 2020.

Sherman is seeking to make the election, in part, a referendum on Sununu's abortion stance. While Sununu has long described himself as pro-choice, he signed a state budget in 2021 that included a ban on abortions after 24 weeks; he has since signed legislation to roll back other provisions of the ban, such as its mandatory ultrasound requirements, and allowing exceptions in cases of fatal fetal abnormalities (Tracy 2022). But he has also said of himself that he has "done more on the pro-life issue, if you will, than anyone" (Timmins 2022). Normally a politician who describes himself as both pro-choice and pro-life might be seen as someone whose stance will get them in trouble. But after Sununu held on during the blue tsunami of 2018 and won with coattails long enough to flip the state legislature to Republicans in 2020, it is hard to see how this could be the year Sununu's positions on abortion end his tenure as governor.

U.S. House Races: At Long Last, We Have a Map

When control of New Hampshire's legislature flipped to the Republicans in 2020, the party relished the chance to control the decennial redistricting process. New Hampshire Republicans have long had the fortuitous timing of winning control of the legislature in years

ending in zero, even as the state has become a bluer shade of purple, and enacting maps that help elect Republicans to the state senate and executive council (Barrick, Lavoie, and Haverty 2016). But the party was divided about how to wield its power when it came to the state's congressional map. Some wanted to turn the first district, currently represented by Democrat Chris Pappas, into a much more Republican-leaning district, while making the second a safely Democratic seat. (It is a sign of the state's evolving politics that the state's Democrats would have leapt at this map thirty years ago.) Other Republicans wanted to draw lines that would result in two competitive districts, in hopes that Republicans could win both seats in a red wave year like 2010 or 2014. Governor Sununu fell into the latter camp, and vetoed maps that would have dramatically reddened the first district. The legislature ultimately failed to pass a map that Sununu found acceptable, and so the state supreme court turned the matter over to a special master, whose "least-change" map moved a total of 8,500 voters in five small towns between districts (Brooks 2022).

In the second district, Representative Anne McLane Kuster is running for a sixth term and is favored to win absent a red tsunami in the fall. She did not have a notable challenger until after the congressional map was finalized, when Mayor George Hansel of Keene announced he would run for the seat (Sexton 2022d). Hansel entered the race with the endorsement of Governor Chris Sununu, which will help him with organization and fund-raising. But he is also out of step with his party in several ways: He describes himself as pro-choice, he attended a Black Lives Matter rally as mayor, and implemented a mask mandate during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. Two conservative activists are also running in the GOP primary; we will not know until September whether a candidate like Hansel will pay a price at the polls for his heterodox policy positions.

Representative Chris Pappas, a Democrat who became the state's first openly gay member of Congress upon his election in 2018, is seeking a third term in the first district. The first district is much more competitive than the second – readers may recall that it swung back and forth between Democrat Carol Shea-Porter and Republican Frank Guinta for almost a decade's worth of elections -- and Pappas will have a tough race on his hands even under the state supreme court's least-change map. The competitive nature of the district and a political environment that favors Republicans have led a large field of potential challengers to enter the race. To the extent that there is a front-runner, it is probably Matt Mowers, who lost to Pappas by about 5% in 2020. Mowers is originally from New Jersey, where he worked for Governor Chris Christie before moving to New Hampshire to work as executive director of the state Republican Party, and also worked as a White House adviser to the State Department during the first years of the Trump Administration (DiStaso 2020). He raised some eyebrows earlier this year when it was discovered that he had voted in presidential primaries in both New Hampshire and New Jersey in 2016 (Ramer 2022). He brings some heavyweight endorsements from House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy and House Republican Whip Steve Scalise (Sexton 2022e).

However, this support has not been enough to clear the field. Among the other Republicans running are Gail Huff Brown, who is married to former Senator Scott Brown of Massachusetts and is known to many voters in the district from her years as a Boston television reporter, and Karoline Leavitt, who worked first as a staffer in the Trump White House's press office and then for Elise Stefanik, the number three House Republican. Leavitt, who would be one of the youngest people ever elected to Congress if she wins, has Stefanik's endorsement (Singman 2021). Most noteworthy is the fact that she is a full-throated propagator of the Big Lie that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election (DiStaso 2021a), and has attacked

Mowers and Huff Brown for acknowledging that President Biden won more votes than Trump did in 2020 (Rogers, Zanona, and Raju 2021). She has also spent much of the campaign appearing on fringe right-wing media outlets like NewsMax, One America News Network, and Steve Bannon's podcast. Trump himself has not yet endorsed a candidate in this race, but Leavitt would likely have the inside track should he decide to. But the fact that an abject denial of reality – as ABC News' Jonathan Karl noted recently, photos of Trump staffers on Election Night 2020 make clear that they knew they were losing (Karl 2022) – has not hurt Leavitt's chances, and may very well have helped her with a segment of the GOP primary electorate, says nothing good about the health of the Republican Party or American democracy.

2024: A Look Ahead

The 2024 primary season draws near under a greater cloud of uncertainty than it has faced in many cycles. Secretary of State Bill Gardner, who held his position since 1976, retired early this year, and the Democratic National Committee has opened the door to making major changes in which states will go first next time around (Glueck 2022). This stems from both the fiasco that was Iowa's 2020 Democratic caucuses and the sentiment among some Democrats that New Hampshire and Iowa are not diverse enough to hold such an influential position in choosing the party's nominees. While some accounts of the DNC's deliberations suggest that the party may in the end simply remove Iowa from its first place position and leave New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina where they are, it is clear that the state cannot take its position as the first primary state for granted (Schneider and Kashinsky 2022). In light of the diversity concerns some Democrats have expressed, the state's best argument is probably rooted in its status as one of the swingiest of swing states: Democrats who can win here may be better positioned to win in

other, larger swing states like Pennsylvania and Arizona. And unlike large states with multiple media markets, winning in New Hampshire tends to require candidates to display a degree of skill at retail and organizational politics.

Republicans have said that they have no plans to revise their primary calendar, which means that New Hampshire will host at least one party's first presidential primary in 2024. Donald Trump, despite two impeachments, an insurrection, and multiple legal investigations, continues to talk about running for a second, non-consecutive term in 2024, but other Republicans have been quietly exploring their own presidential prospects in 2021 and 2022. Former New Jersey governor Chris Christie and Governor Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas have both spoken at Politics & Eggs breakfasts. Others who have made forays into New Hampshire include Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor who served as Trump's ambassador to the United Nations; Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas; and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of Kansas. Former vice president Mike Pence has made several trips. Governor Kirsty Noem of South Dakota also made a highly choreographed visit just before last year's election, but at least one observer found her unready for the national stage (Olsen 2020).

There has not, at this writing, been much activity at all from the handful of Republican Trump critics who also hold presidential ambitions, such as Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska and Governor Larry Hogan of Maryland. This is somewhat striking because New Hampshire is home to a number of prominent "Never Trump" Republicans; if an anti-Trump candidate is going to find a natural base of support, it will be here. The relative lack of activity from that faction of the GOP is a distressing sign of the health or prospects of non-Trumpist Republicans as a meaningful force within their party.

As for the Democrats, President Joe Biden, who will be 81 on Election Day 2024, maintains that he will seek a second term in office (Peoples 2021). Biden first ran for president in 1988, and took meetings about a possible run in 1984; he also ran in 2008 and came close to a run in 2016 after two terms as Barack Obama's vice president. There is absolutely no reason to think he will not run for a second term if he is able. But Biden's age foregrounds the question of his ability to do so in a way that it has for few of his predecessors. No Democrats are publicly looking at a 2024 run, but the Biden administration has sent both First Lady Jill Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris to the Granite State, and Biden himself has made a number of appearances here since taking office. 2020 candidates Amy Klobuchar and Cory Booker have both spoken at Democratic Party events recently, as has Governor J.B. Pritzker of Illinois.

In addition to the usual primary speculation that New Hampshire politicians spent midterm years speculating about, there has been no small amount of chatter about the prospect of Chris Sununu running for president in 2024. Sununu has been open about his disinterest in giving up the governorship to become a member of the Senate, where Republicans' goal would be to act as a "roadblock" to President Biden's agenda through the 2024 election rather than getting things done (Lonas 2022). He would bring an unusual profile to the race; while Sununu has largely run and governed as a conservative, he has not embraced culture war politics and has largely kept his distance from Donald Trump over the years. At this year's Gridiron Dinner, he burned whatever bridges he may have had with Trump when he made a lengthy discourse about Trump's mental health, declaring Trump "crazy" and saying "He just stresses me out so much!...The press often will ask me if I think Donald Trump is crazy. And I'll say it this way: I don't think he's so crazy that you could put him in a mental institution. But I think if he were in one, he ain't getting out!" (Pierce 2022).

Trump prevailed in the 2016 nomination contest in part because there were so many other Republicans in the race, and in part because none of the other Republicans was able to make himself the leading anti-Trump alternative (Galdieri 2020). Sununu could benefit in a primary that includes Trump and several candidates who were part of Trump's administration as the main non-Trump alternative. But in a Republican Party that did not reject Trump in the aftermath of January 6, this may not be a viable path to the nomination.

It should also be noted that much of the chatter about a Sununu candidacy seems to emanate from those around Sununu. These may be less about serious steps to building a presidential campaign, and more about boosting Sununu's profile and standing, much like the persistent rumors about me and Zooey Deschanel.

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