

9-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Petterson, Paul (2023) "Vermont Politics in 2023-2024: Political Continuity and Changing Realities," *New England Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/nejps/vol14/iss1/10>

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VERMONT POLITICS IN 2023-2024: POLITICAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGING REALITIES

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During the last year, Vermont politics has embodied two contrasting dynamics. In terms of major electoral offices and partisan balance, there has been an overall stability of statewide incumbents seeking reelection, freezing the political ladder of advancement for another cycle. With regard to policy and public issues, there are increasing challenges that are often putting the Democratic legislature and Republican Governor Phil Scott at odds, particularly in regard to taxation, education budgets, and environmental issues. Over time, if these issues continue to divide Vermonters, they may have an impact on the current partisan balance of power in the state.

Regarding major statewide elected offices, the 2024 election will have a familiar character. After some uncertainty (driven by Vermont's filing deadline not falling until late May), both incumbent Republican Governor Phil Scott and incumbent Independent Senator Bernie Sanders chose to pursue another term in office (Guo 2024; Associated Press 2024). Senator Sanders is widely popular in Vermont and is a national figure as well, while Governor Scott was judged to be the most popular governor in the U.S. in a Morning Consult survey (with an 84% approval rating) (Kinzel 2023); each are the presumptive favorites in their races for reelection.

As a result of Sanders' and Scott's decisions, first term U.S. House member Becca Balint has maintained her decision to run for reelection and is also likely to win reelection (Mearhoff 2024). Thus, the top rungs of the Vermont political ladder are likely to remain in the same hands, with no open seat opportunities for other Vermont politicians to advance. This is a frustrating but familiar narrative to those seeking high office in Vermont, epitomized by U.S. Senator Peter Welch, who spent a lengthy period waiting to run for the US House seat in 2006, and then did not have an open U.S. Senate seat to contest until 2022. Barring any major disruptive issue, Vermonters rarely vote out statewide incumbents. The overall dominance of Democrats in both houses of the State Legislature is also unlikely to be dramatically shifted in 2024, although a number of seats have opened up due to deaths or retirements, including longtime state senator Dick Sears (Kinzel 2024).

Vermont's particular strain of independent-minded politics was also reflected in the results of the Republican presidential primary in the state. In a singular occurrence, Nikki Haley beat Donald Trump in the primary, making Vermont the only state not to vote for Trump in the 2024 Republican primaries (Hirschfeld 2024). This outcome mirrors Republican Governor Scott's public lack of support for Trump since 2016.

While the stability of Vermont office holders and partisan control appears likely to continue after 2024, a range of current policy issues does paint a more contentious picture of Vermont policymaking.

At the top of the list of contentious challenges is education funding and taxation. In the 2024 legislative session, the Legislature overrode Governor Scott's veto of the annual statewide

property tax bill that funds education statewide. The bill, which increases the average property tax bill by 13.8%, was overridden by votes of 103-42 in the House and 22-7 in the Senate. Governor Scott, in vetoing the bill, argued that Vermonters “need property tax relief now” (Weinstein 2024). This issue is likely to recur in the 2025 legislative session.

Increasing taxes to fund rising K-12 education expenses across the state has proven to be a major battle at the local level, with a number of communities having to vote 2, 3, and in one case 5, times in order to pass their town’s local education budget (Lefrak et. al. 2024). This is highly unusual for Vermont and reflects a combination of rising demands on educational services, combined with rising housing costs and overall inflation, making taxes increasingly burdensome on aging and evolving local communities.

In addition to the property tax issue, the legislature also overrode 5 other vetoes cast by Governor Scott. These overrides included a significant reform of the Act 250 land use law; an expansion of the state’s restorative justice program (which Scott contended lacked adequate funding); a major new renewable energy standard for utility companies; a pilot overdose prevention center; and a ban on certain pesticides (Vermont Public 2024). Scott’s frustration with the outcome of these issues is likely part of the reason he is seeking reelection, hoping to continue his fight on these concerns in 2025-26.

One area of policy that does seem to be broadly embraced at some level by the Legislature and Governor Scott is the effort to respond to climate change. With the massive Vermont flooding of July 2023 echoing the flooding of Hurricane Irene in 2011, the state is being increasingly impacted by unusually destructive weather that many experts and citizens are attributing to long term climate change. As a result of the 2023 floods, the Legislature passed a first in the nation effort to hold fossil fuel companies directly liable for these weather impacts of climate change (Andreoni 2024). While this effort will undoubtedly encounter lengthy challenges in the court system, its political message from Vermonters is clear. They are demanding accountability for the changes upending a substantial number of lives in the state.

In essence, Vermont politics is demonstrating both stability and conflict in 2023-2024. While Vermont appears likely to see little change in major statewide officeholders in 2024, or in its ultimate partisan balance in the Legislature, the economic and environmental realities of 2024 will likely require solutions that may not neatly fit current policy preferences or partisan categories. If leadership and partisan changes are to occur in Vermont in the future, it will be issues of economics and environment that will pave the road.

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