

New Hampshire State Politics Report 2025: Yet Another Split Decision in New England's Only Swing State

Christopher J. Galdieri
Saint Anselm College

The Granite State Remains Purple

The 2024 elections demonstrated the same split political personality that the state has displayed for over a decade. At the federal level, Democrats prevailed. Vice President Kamala Harris won the state's four electoral votes, and Representative Chris Pappas won a fourth term representing the state's first congressional district. In the second district, Maggie Goodlander kept the seat in Democratic hands following the retirement of Ann Kuster after six terms in Congress. But Republicans ran the table down ticket, keeping control of the governor's office and the executive council, and expanding their margins in the state legislature. 2024 also began what will be a transitional era in state politics, as several longtime fixtures in the state's politics have either left office or announced plans to do so.

The presidential race

New Hampshire has been the only swing state in New England since Bill Clinton carried it in 1992. While 2000 was the only year since then in which it went Republican, it has been a hotly contested state in many elections, with major rallies and candidate appearances the norm. In 2024, however, the campaign was decidedly low key. Kamala Harris visited the state once as the Democratic nominee, early in September, and Donald Trump made no appearances in the state following his victory in the January 23 primary in a marked shift from his 2016 and 2020 campaigns, though his running mate JD Vance held a rally in Derry during the final weekend of the campaign. There was a general sense on both sides of the race, built on Joe Biden's easy 2020 win by nearly eight points and polling that showed Harris with a comparable lead, that New Hampshire had fallen down to the second tier of swing states and was far less competitive than the likes of Pennsylvania or Arizona.

On election night, however, the race proved closer than many had expected, and Vice President Harris ultimately won the state by just under 2.8%. Every county in the state shifted toward Trump, and this underperformance likely helped doom Democrats down ticket. The close result will also probably lead to renewed attention to New Hampshire in the 2028 presidential election: It is irresistibly tempting for Republicans, while Democrats cannot afford to lose another four electoral votes.

The House seats stay blue

In the first congressional district, Democratic incumbent Chris Pappas was re-elected to a fourth term over Republican challenger Russell Prescott. Prescott, a former state senator and member of the state's executive council, was a surprisingly mainstream choice from a party that went full MAGA in the 2022 primaries for federal office, and he made a point of running a clean, positive campaign and avoiding personal attacks on his opponent (Bookman 2024). Combined with Pappas' own image as a moderate pragmatist more interested in delivering results than engaging in culture wars, this made for a very subdued race. Unlike past years, in which both parties directed money and resources into the first district, no one saw the 2024 race as especially

competitive. Pappas won the race with 52% to Prescott's 45%, a result very similar to his victory over Karoline Leavitt in 2022.

In the second district, a tumultuous Democratic primary preceded a sleepy general election that kept the seat in Democratic hands for the seventh straight election. Longtime incumbent Ann Kuster surprised everyone when she announced, late in March, that she would not seek another term. She quickly endorsed Colin Van Ostern, her onetime campaign manager and a former executive councilor who had lost the 2016 governor's race to Chris Sununu and made an unsuccessful bid to become secretary of state in 2018, to succeed her. The timing of Kuster's announcement was widely understood as an attempt to hand the seat off to Van Ostern with minimal fuss. Van Ostern also brought notable endorsements to the race, including that of popular former governor John Lynch, and formidable fundraising prowess. At first this strategy looked like it would work: State senator Becky Whitley briefly entered the race, but soon withdrew in the face of Van Ostern's financial and institutional support (Richmond 2024).

However, the unexpected candidacy of Maggie Goodlander, who launched her campaign in May, upended these plans. Goodlander had never run for office before, but brought heavyweight connections (Goodlander is married to Jake Sullivan, then national security advisor in the Biden White House, and her mother, Betty Tampusi, is a former Republican state representative) and personal wealth (a WMUR report estimated her net worth at over \$24 million (Mitropoulos 2024)) to the race, as well as a resume that included service in the Navy National Guard, staff work for John McCain and Joe Lieberman, a Supreme Court clerkship, and work in the Biden Administration's Department of Justice. Goodlander and her husband own a home in Portsmouth, which is in the state's first congressional district, but rented one in Nashua in an effort to head off charges of carpetbagging.

Goodlander presented herself as a fresh face with none of the baggage attached to Van Ostern, whom she dubbed a perennial candidate. Van Ostern in turn sought to depict Goodlander as a carpetbagger, a creature of Washington DC lacking real ties to the district, and someone whose past work and support for Republicans called her bona fides on abortion rights into question. There were two missteps embedded in this attack. The first was that John McCain remains popular in New Hampshire, even – perhaps, these days, especially -- among Democrats. The second was that the attack on Goodlander's record on abortion led her to share her own harrowing experience of delivering her stillborn child in a hotel bathtub while awaiting medical treatment (Lerer 2024). In the wake of this controversy, Van Ostern's fundraising plummeted and former governor John Lynch publicly pulled his endorsement and announced his support for Goodlander, whom he described in an ad as "New Hampshire through and through." Goodlander ultimately won the primary by a whopping 64%-36% margin.

In the general election, Goodlander easily defeated the Republican nominee, Lily Tang Williams, an anti-Communist speaker and activist who had run for office as a Libertarian in Colorado before moving to New Hampshire, by a margin of 53% to 47%, somewhat tighter than the 56% to 44% margin Kuster put up in 2022 against a similar opponent. Following her election, Goodlander has bought a home in Concord (Matherly 2025). While Goodlander has announced she will not run for the Senate seat being vacated by Jeanne Shaheen's retirement, about which more follows, few expect her to be a House lifer.

The race for governor

When Chris Sununu announced he would not seek a fifth term as governor, Democrats were hopeful that 2024 would be their year to reclaim the governor's office. Sununu's personal popularity had helped him hold on in 2018's blue wave, and he won by massive margins in 2020

and 2022. Democrats hoped that the open-seat contest would attract strong candidates and that presidential-year turnout would give their candidate an additional boost. These hopes were emphatically dashed on Election Night, in an early harbinger of how the night was going to go for Democrats across the country.

The Republican candidate was Kelly Ayotte, the former United States Senator who lost her re-election bid in 2016 by roughly 1,000 votes but was still well-regarded by many voters (Lucas, Sisco, and Galdieri 2018). Ayotte, never a strong speaker, was rusty on the campaign trail. But she was also a familiar face and benefitted from the visible support of Governor Sununu and was careful to note her support for Donald Trump's campaign this time around. She organized her campaign around the slogan "Don't Mass Up New Hampshire," a reference to neighboring Massachusetts, a state with which many Granite Staters have a complicated and torturous emotional relationship. In this case, the slogan attempted to encompass negative stereotypes about the Bay State with regards to policy areas like taxation, regulation, and education, while remaining vague enough to avoid making any policy commitments in those areas.

The leading Democrats were Joyce Craig, former three-term mayor of Manchester, and Cinde Warmington, a first-term member of the state's executive council. Neither candidate had an unblemished image. Craig's close ties to Manchester, a city Republicans often use as a bogeyman and many elsewhere in the state think poorly of (Rogers 2023), did her little good, and Warmington's work representing pharmaceutical companies earlier in her career was a liability for her. Craig won the primary by a 48-42% margin and entered the fall campaign slightly trailing Ayotte in most polls. Her campaign repeatedly attacked Ayotte over abortion rights, her work on corporate boards since her 2016 defeat, and her support for Donald Trump, while Ayotte focused on housing, her own personality and family, and Craig's record as mayor of Manchester, blaming her for everything from crime and homelessness to the price of hamburgers (Kelly Ayotte for New Hampshire 2024). Craig also made the mystifying decision to campaign repeatedly with Massachusetts governor Maura Healy, a move that mainly served to remind voters of Ayotte's campaign slogan. Despite massive ad spending on the abortion issue, which clearly got under Ayotte's skin and led her to declare that she would not seek to change state law on abortion, and some strong debate performances, Craig was never able to catch up with Ayotte in the polls. On election night, the race was called for Ayotte early, thanks to her nearly ten-point margin of victory over Craig.

Ayotte's big win likely helps explain the strong performances Republicans displayed down ballot. Republicans maintained their 4-1 margin on the state's executive council and picked up an additional 25 seats in the state House of Representatives and two in the State Senate, giving them a 16-8 majority. This expanded Republican trifecta has moved quickly on party priorities like expanding the state's controversial and costly school vouchers plan, but remains at this writing mired in debate over the size and extent of cuts to the state budget.

Looking ahead

Senator Jeanne Shaheen announced in March that she would not see another term in the United States Senate in 2026. This was not exactly a surprise, given her age (she will celebrate her 80th birthday just weeks after the end of her term in 2027), and in keeping with a trend in recent years of retiring senators announcing their plans well in advance of the next election (Willis 2015). Representative Chris Pappas quickly announced his intention to run for the seat, and to date no other Democrat has sought to challenge him in next year's primary (NHPR Staff 2025). On the Republican side, after some public statements suggesting an interest in running,

former governor Chris Sununu took himself out of the race, just as he did in the 2020 and 2022 Senate races and the 2024 presidential primary, while insisting that he would have won if he had run, just as he did in the 2020 and 2022 Senate races and the 2024 presidential primary (Porter 2025; Vakil 2025). Sununu's decision is a blow to Republican hopes of winning this seat, since his popularity would make him the strongest candidate the GOP could put forward. On the other hand, becoming a federal candidate could well force a shift in voters' perceptions of Sununu, as was the case with governors like Republican Larry Hogan of Maryland and Democrat Steve Bullock of Montana who lost Senate races in recent cycles despite their popularity. The most high-profile name in the mix is now that of former Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown, who served as Ambassador to New Zealand in the first Trump administration following his loss to Jeanne Shaheen in 2014 (Galdieri 2019). Philip Taub, an attorney and Republican donor, has also expressed some interest in running. But Pappas is the clear favorite here: He has represented half of the state since 2019, is well known to voters, and has cultivated the same sort of low-key problem solver persona that has worked well for Democrats in the state for decades.

Pappas' campaign for the Senate opens up the first congressional district's seat for the first time since 2018. Maura Sullivan, a former Obama administration official who ran in that primary in 2018 after considering runs in several states, has declared her candidacy (Chjoolian 2018; Sexton 2025a), and her work for Pappas and the New Hampshire Democratic Party will likely help her avoid the charges of carpetbagging that dogged her earlier bid. Stefany Shaheen, daughter of the retiring senator and a former Portsmouth city councilor, is also running, as is Carleigh Beriont, who holds local office in Hampton (Skipworth 2025). Hanna Trudo, a former correspondent for *The Hill*, is also mulling a run (Blanchard 2025). For Republicans, the party's 2024 nominee, Russell Prescott, may run again. But the district, once regarded as among the most competitive in the nation, has not elected a Republican since 2014 and saw little national attention in 2024.

Meanwhile, few prominent Democrats have shown public interest in running against Governor Kelly Ayotte, though former state senator Tom Sherman, who lost to Chris Sununu in 2022, has dipped a toe in the waters (Sexton 2025b). It is exceedingly rare for a New Hampshire governor to lose a bid for a second term. But Ayotte won her election by 9.3%, which is both a big win and also just under the average 11.5% swing toward Democrats seen in special elections since Donald Trump's second inauguration (Smith 2025). This is by no means a prediction of an Ayotte defeat in 2026. But higher-profile Democrats' general disinterest in the race could provide an unusual opportunity for a Democratic candidate who can tap into that party's anger, frustration, and discontent.

2028: It's never too early

The official position of the Democratic National Committee is that South Carolina will have the first presidential primary in the nation in 2028. New Hampshire state law requires the Granite State to hold the first presidential primary in the nation and empowers the Secretary of State to schedule the primary in order to ensure that it does so. There is absolutely no chance that the Republican-controlled legislature and Republican governor will change the state law to accommodate the DNC's preference on this score. In this they are aided by the fact that the Republican National Committee is content with the status quo, while somewhat hampered by the fact that Donald Trump's utterly unconstitutional ramblings about seeking a third term will likely discourage would-be successors in his own party from engaging in the sorts of not-quite-campaign activity that keeps the primary visible and vital in the years between primaries.

In 2024, with President Biden honoring the DNC's wishes and avoiding any activity, campaign or otherwise, in advance of the primary, the debate over its status had something of a theological aspect to it: Does it matter which state goes first when an incumbent president is seeking renomination against the likes of Dean Phillips and Marianne Williamson (Galdieri 2024)? But 2028 is likely to be different; potential candidates like Governor JB Pritzker of Illinois, Governor Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania, Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, and more have already been spending time in the Granite State. In past years, state officials and party leaders played hardball with candidates to secure their support for keeping New Hampshire's place at the head of the line (Moore and Smith 2015); given how close Donald Trump came to carrying the state in 2024, the national party may find itself more open to preserving that place this time around.

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