

A Maine Summer 2025 Politics Update

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Maine politics always offers a mixture of continuity, change, and returns from the past. The past year and the near future are no exception! Let's look at the recent past and consider what might be coming to the Pine Tree State.

2024 ELECTIONS

Presidential voting: Trump era pattern holds again in 2024

The 2024 elections in Maine maintained the same pattern which debuted in Donald Trump's first presidential run in 2016 and continued in 2020. In all three races, the Democratic candidate won the state as a whole and the more liberal, more southern 1st District, while Trump won the expansive 2d District, leading Maine to split its electoral votes. Before that, Maine had not split its electoral votes in any election since it first adopted the district plan starting with the 1972 election. In the district plan—which now is also used by Nebraska--2 of Maine's electoral votes go to the statewide winner and one each to the winner of the congressional districts.¹ Maine's congressional districts have been diverging since the 2000 election, with the 1st CD becoming more Democratic and the 2nd CD becoming more Republican—and the differences between the vote in the two districts are expanding (Melcher and Fried 2022). Trump did slightly better overall in 2024 than in 2020. Unlike some parts of the country, he did this without the aid of a significant decline in the Democratic vote. In fact, Kamala Harris got about 700 more votes in 2024 in Maine than Joe Biden did in 2020. Donald Trump gained just over 17,000 votes in 2024 over 2020 in Maine, and the gap between the two Maine districts increased by just over 1 percentage point (Politico 2024c and 2024d).

Congressional races: more of the same

For decades, political scientists have noted the astonishingly high rate of re-election by American members of Congress (e.g. Mayhew 1974, Maisel 1990 and Abramowitz et.al. 2006). However, research in the past decade has found that since the late 2000s, these advantages have decreased, either through being eroded by increased partisanship (Jacobson 2015), surpassed by candidate quality as a key to victory (Algara and Bae 2025) or because of the expansion of broadband internet (Guriev et. al. 2025).

Maine's 2024 ballot featured three incumbents seeking re-election to Congress: Independent Senator Angus King, and two Democratic House incumbents: 1st District Congresswoman Chellie Pingree and 2nd District Congressman Jared Golden. In the past, both King and Pingree have been re-elected relatively easily, while Golden's races, going back to his defeat of Republican Congressman Bruce Poliquin in 2018, have been tightly contested.²

¹For a discussion of how both Maine and Nebraska came to adopt the district plan for presidential electors, see Melcher 2010.

²For a colorful book length discussion of the 2018 congressional election in Maine, see Norton 2019.

Independent Senator Angus King, who has said this is probably his last race, won his third term handily over former Maine Republican Chair Demi Kouzounas, Democrat David Costello and Independent Jason Cherry (Ballotpedia, n.d.) The main drama was whether King would get over 50% to avoid instant runoff voting, but he did. In any event, voters for Costello would have overwhelmingly ranked King as their second choice.

While Democrat Chellie Pingree won easily in the relatively liberal 1st District, Jared Golden had an unsurprisingly difficult race over State Representative Austin Theriault, a young, former NASCAR driver. Theriault won a contested Republican primary in which he benefitted from Donald Trump's endorsement (Creitz 2024).

As he has in the past, Golden did all he could to distance himself from national Democrats in this race. This included not only his refusal to endorse President Biden for re-election, but his refusal to endorse Kamala Harris as well. He was one of only two House Democrats to vote against student loan forgiveness in 2023 (Johnson 2023). He voted against President Biden more than any other House Democrat and enraged Maine Democrats in July 2024 by not only predicting that Donald Trump would win the election, but that he was "OK with that" (Bartow 2024). Maine Public's Kevin Miller quoted him thusly: "The three-term incumbent accused other Democrats of using scare tactics by suggesting a second Trump presidency will endanger the nation. Golden said the nation has withstood a civil war, world wars and other tumultuous periods before and will survive another four-year presidential term" (Miller 2024).

As it was when he was first elected to Congress in 2018, Golden survived a close race in which Ranked Choice Voting procedures had to be used, because no candidate exceeded 50%, though Golden did have a plurality. (In fact, three of four of Golden's congressional races required counting RCV votes.) There were enough of two kinds of votes to deny either candidate a first round victory. 420 voters cast votes for registered write-in candidate Diana Merenda, who was critical of the support both Golden and Theriault had expressed for Israel during the conflict in Gaza. But the biggest group that led to RCV kicking in were 12,000 voters who left their first choice blank. Many of these were reportedly protest votes by liberal Democrats unhappy with Golden but voting for Golden as their second choice. With the second place votes transferred in through the RCV process, Golden emerged the winner with just above half of the total votes, beating Theriault by just under 3000 votes (Davis 2024; Miller 2024). As Donald Trump carried the 2d District for the third straight time, this made Golden one of the few Democrats to win a district also carried by Trump.

Flag change defeat highlights 2024 statewide ballot issues

Maine's fall 2024 ballot choices also included a state referendum on whether Maine should adopt a new state flag. Republicans in the Maine Legislature argued successfully that such an important decision should be sent to a public vote. Many states in recent years have considered changes to their old flag designs, with Utah and Minnesota being the most recent states to change their flags (Craig 2025). The flags these states replaced were like those of just under half of the nation's state flags: a state seal on a plain (nearly always blue) background

(Amestoy and O'Brien, 2023). The critics of these flags say they do not follow good principles of flag design and are hard to distinguish at a distance from each other, leading critics to call them “seal on a bedsheet” designs (Craig 2025).

In recent years, an older but more distinctive Maine flag featuring a pine tree and a blue north star on a buff-colored background began making a comeback and became widely seen around Maine on stickers and actual flags. This was much like the first flag design Maine had adopted, back in 1901, only to be replaced less than a decade later by the current blue flag. There were multiple small variations between the proposed Pine Tree Flags, and Secretary of State Shenna Bellows decided to open a competition for the public to submit designs the state would consider for its referendum vote (Guildford 2024).

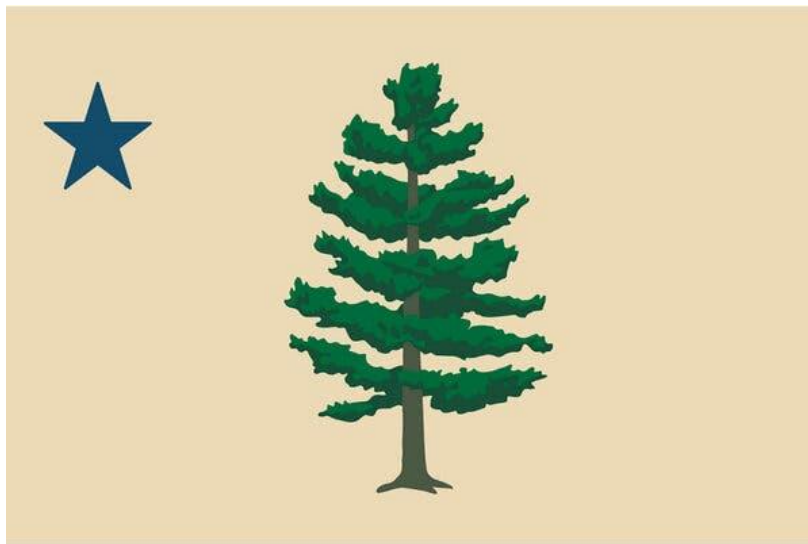


Figure 1: The version of the Pine Tree Flag on the Maine Ballot, 2024



Figure 2: The state flag of Maine from 1909 to present

When the Legislature approved the referendum putting the idea of switching the state flag up to a vote, it seemed to have a good deal of momentum. Some of this enthusiasm was seen during Maine's Bicentennial year of 2020 (Sharp and Whittle 2024). But as is so often the case in Maine, referenda and initiatives seeking changes in the status quo often lose support moving

towards Election Day—and moving toward the Pine Tree Flag proved to be another example. A September poll showed the race to be deadlocked at 40% each supporting and opposing the new flag (Pan Atlantic Research 2024). But by the end of October, the Pine Tree Flag trailed by a margin of 52-33%. (Survey USA 2024). The results of the October Survey USA poll showed that changing to the Pine Tree Flag was overwhelmingly opposed by non-liberals, non-Democrats, and voters over 50 (Survey USA 2024).

A lack of a strong campaign on behalf of the Pine Tree Flag, combined with a conservative backlash to the change, surely also doomed it to defeat, with the final margin being 56% to 44% against changing to the Pine Tree Flag. Of Maine's 16 counties, the Pine Tree Flag proposal only won in Cumberland, Knox and York counties. However, the four other state ballot issues—an initiative to limit donations to Political Action Committees and three bond referenda—all passed (Secretary of State 2024). The bond votes continued a winning streak for Maine statewide bonds at the polls. The last one to lose was a community college bond in 2012, which lost by just over two percentage points. Since that time, statewide bonds in Maine have gone a remarkable 26-0 at the polls (data compiled by the author from Ballotpedia 2025).³

2025'S BIG ISSUE: TRANS ATHLETES IN SCHOOL SPORTS

Conflict with Governor Mills and President Trump

Coming out of the 2024 elections, Democratic Governor Janet Mills again had a Democratic House and a Democratic Senate to work with in Maine, though Republicans gained seats in both to narrow the Democratic advantages (Hilton 2024). But Mills had no shortage of conflict, due to the return of Donald Trump to the White House. And a controversial issue on which they did not agree came to find itself the most discussed political issue in Maine during the first half of 2025—the issue of the participation of trans girls in girls' high school and college sports. This conflict came to national attention during a White House meeting of President Trump and governors from around the nation, including Mills. Trump called out Maine's noncompliance with his executive order banning trans girls from participating in sports and did so with cameras rolling and the other governors present in the room (Monteil 2025). Randy Billings of the *Portland Press Herald* described their confrontation this way:

During a White House event with a bipartisan group of governors on Friday, President Donald Trump — who has pushed the boundaries of his presidential authority since taking office a month ago — asked if Maine's governor was in attendance. After she replied that she was there, Trump turned and asked her if she planned to follow his executive order to “(keep) men out of women's sports.”

“I'm complying with state and federal law,” she answered from across the room.

“Well, we are the federal law,” Trump said. “You'd better do it. You'd better do it, because you're not going to get any federal funding at all if you don't.”

“See you in court,” Mills replied. (Billings 2025).

³These bond victories in November 2024 are notable in that bond votes like this, held at the same time as presidential elections, are the most likely to lose (Melcher 2016).



For standing up to Trump, Mills was seen as a hero by many Democrats who had felt discouraged since Trump's election victory. (Billings 2025). She was widely discussed on national media, and "See You In Court" t-shirts (such as the one on the left) in her honor went on sale both locally and nationally (Murphy 2025; Haskell 2025).

The Laurel Libby censure and controversy

But the controversies about trans athletes did not end there. President Trump demanded a "full-throated" apology from Governor Mills (Bergquist 2025) but did not get one (Cover 2025). And an even more heated controversy broke out on the trans athlete issue after a controversial Facebook post by Republican Representative Laurel Libby of Auburn. Libby used her post to argue that allowing trans athletes to compete against cisgender girls in sports was unfair to the latter. To make the point, she posted pictures and the name of a trans athlete she said had finished 5th competing against boys in the pole vault in the Class B State Championships but won the same event the next year competing against girls. Her win in the pole vault gave Greely High School the Class B Girls' state title by one point (Mesa 2025).

Many Democrats in the Maine House were outraged by Libby's post. They argued that it constituted "doxxing", violated the student's privacy, and by showing the student's picture, name and high school, potentially posed a threat to her and her school. The censure motion passed 75-70 on a party line vote. Speaking to Libby after the vote to censure her, House Speaker Ryan Fecteau (D-Biddeford) said "I urge you, and indeed every member of this body, to recommit to keeping kids out of the political fray as has long been observed in both our state and federal politics. Maine kids and all Maine people deserve better." (Davis 2025) House Minority Leader Billy Bob Faulkingham (R-Winter Harbor) condemned the vote on the grounds that her Facebook posts should not be a basis for censure, and that Democrats were using the issue as a distraction: "Instead of solving pressing problems, they have attempted to divert public attention to a social media post." (Davis 2025).

The House censure prohibited Libby from voting on bills or speaking on the House floor. In previous cases of censure in Maine, legislators apologized to the body and had their rights restored. However, Libby adamantly refused to apologize for her actions (WMTW-TV 2025). Libby filed suit in federal court seeking emergency relief, arguing that the censure unconstitutionally denied her constituency representation in floor votes. At the United States Supreme Court, she won in the case of *Libby v. Fecteau* (Quinn 2025). The Maine House went on to restore Libby's speaking and voting rights, though they did not remove her censure (Pendharkar 2025; Van Pate 2025).

Social Security conflict

In another piece of fallout from the Mills-Trump confrontation, the acting head of the Social Security Administration, Lee Dudek, admitted that "I was ticked at the governor of Maine for not being real cordial to the president", and that this anger led to his retaliating against Maine by issuing a mandate that Maine would be the only state barred from a federal program allowing

parents of newborns to register their child for a Social Security number in the hospital, instead of having to go later to a Social Security office. (Until the apology, the reason for the change was unclear). He apologized and rescinded the policy change (Lawlor 2025). The Trump Administration has made numerous threats in 2025 to cancel funding for Maine programs over the trans students in sports issue (Deprez and Fried 2025).

2025 BALLOT ISSUES

Maine has two initiatives on its November 2025 ballot that should produce extensive discussion: a proposal to require photo ID for voting (along with other new restrictions) and a proposal to change Maine's "yellow flag" law to a "red flag" law.

Maine has considered various changes over the past two decades to tighten voting or voter registration access. The only one that passed came when Republicans controlled the Blaine House (the Governor's mansion) and both houses of the Maine Legislature following the 2010 election. It changed Maine's 1973 law permitting same-day voter registration by requiring voters be registered to vote at least two business days before the election. But a People's Veto vote to repeal the new law won in a landslide in 2011 (Associated Press 2011; Fried and Shaw 2012).

As in other states, Republicans have continued to seek greater restrictions on voting, and they have succeeded in getting such an initiative on the November ballot:

"Do you want to change Maine election laws to eliminate two days of absentee voting, prohibit requests for absentee ballots by phone or family members, end ongoing absentee voter status for seniors and people with disabilities, ban prepaid postage on absentee ballot return envelopes, limit the number of drop boxes, require voters to show certain photo ID before voting, and make other changes to our elections?"

Representative Laurel Libby (R-Auburn)'s comments backing the initiative reflected themes in other Republican comments backing this type of legislation: "At its core, this initiative is about making sure that our elections are fair, that they are transparent, and that they are secure. It's not complicated, not partisan, just common sense. This is how we strengthen our elections." (Palanza 2025).

Many Maine opponents of the initiative, including the Maine League of Women Voters, have a harsher term for Voter ID laws: "voter suppression" (League of Women Voters-Maine 2025). Frequently, political scientists, legal scholars and other election observers have used the same term to describe expanded voter ID laws and the like (e.g. Wang 2012; Bentele and O'Brien 2013; Hardy 2019; Darrah-Okike, Rita, and Logan 2021; Fraga and Miller 2022). Some of these make particular note of reductions in the voting rates of persons of color. However, while the majority of scholarly observers find a host of negative effects from Voter ID laws, some have found that their impact on voter turnout is negligible, and/or that election outcomes are not significantly affected by Voter ID laws (Mycoff, Wagner and Wilson 2009; Harden and Campos 2023).

Voter initiative: Yellow flag and red flag laws

The other initiative facing Maine voters in November 2025 is whether or not Maine should replace its “yellow flag” law with a “red flag” law. Both laws are designed to get guns out of the hands of specific people who may be an immediate violent threat to others. Maine is the only state with a yellow flag law, which it enacted as a compromise measure in 2020 with extensive input from groups like the Sportsman’s Alliance of Maine and bipartisan backing. It creates a process with more steps necessary to take someone’s firearm temporarily away than red flag laws do, which gun owners see as a safeguard of gunowner rights. Most prominently, this requires a professional mental health assessment. By contrast, red flag laws (sometimes called Extreme Risk Protection Order laws; see Rhoads-Doyle 2025, 117-118), as seen in Massachusetts and other states, work more quickly; a judge can issue a court order (after one is requested by a roommate or family member) in which the gun owner must immediately relinquish their guns (Rex 2023).

In the wake of the October 2023 Robert Card mass shootings in Lewiston, which killed 18 people, observers noted flaws in how the yellow flag process was carried out (or not carried out) in his case.⁴ The attention given to the Card case may have led police and sheriff’s departments to carry out the yellow flag law more effectively. Governor Mills, who opposes a red flag law, has thrown her support behind a Republican-backed plan for enhancements of the yellow flag law (Othot 2025). Others, however, argue that a red flag law would be more effective and should be enacted (Rhoads-Doyle 2025).

2026 ELECTIONS

Looking ahead to 2026, the three most interesting elections for office in Maine should be the open seat race for Governor, Susan Collins’ likely bid for reelection to the US Senate, and the contest for Maine’s 2nd Congressional District.

Governor race

Maine will elect a new governor in 2026. Incumbent Democratic Governor Janet Mills was first elected in 2018 and was then re-elected in a 2022 race pitting her against two-term Republican Governor Paul LePage. Under Maine’s term limits law, she cannot run for another term in 2026. And since Maine is one of the few states with no lieutenant governor, there is no obvious successor.

Both Democrats and Republicans have numerous candidates seeking the gubernatorial nomination. As of July 5, the Democratic candidates are better known overall than the Republicans, but some potential major Republican candidates, in particular State Representative Laurel Libby (R-Auburn), have not yet announced. The Democrats include Secretary of State and former state senator Shenna Bellows; State Senate President Troy Jackson; former Maine House Speaker and head of Governor Mills’ Office of Policy Innovation and the Future Hannah Pingree; and Angus King III, son of the former governor and current U.S. Senator. The Republicans include Bobby Charles, an Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs under President George W. Bush; State Senator James Libby;

⁴For a discussion of the Robert Card shootings and their immediate aftermath, see Melcher 2023.

businessman Owen McCarthy; and former Paris Town Selectman Robert Wessels. (Bartow 2025; Ohm 2025b).

In addition to the two major parties, Maine has often had major independent candidates for Governor. James Longley, a populist, conservative Independent, was elected to one term as Governor in 1974 (Reiter 1977; Siegel 1985). Angus King has done even more as an independent; he was elected to two consecutive terms as governor and has gone on to be elected three times in a row to the US Senate as an Independent. (On King as an independent gubernatorial candidate, see Gold 2022). Counting Longley's successful 1974 race, an independent or third party candidate has received at least 10% of the vote for governor in Maine in 7 of the 13 races from 1974 through 2022, and several more have gained between 5% and 9.9% (Politico 2025a, Politico 2025b).

While no third party candidate for Maine governor has reached 10% of the vote in the last three general elections, the 2026 election looks likely to break that trend. This is chiefly due to former Maine Republican Party Chair, Maine Senate President, 1994 2d District Republican nominee for Congress and State Senator Rick Bennett choosing to leave the Republican Party in order to run for Governor as an Independent. Bennett has also served in the Maine House, was the Republican nominee for Maine's Second Congressional District in 1994, and has headed multiple businesses (Ohm 2025a). He is likely to be the strongest independent or third party candidate for Maine governor since Independent Eliot Cutler finished a close second to Paul LePage in 2010.

Senate race

Up until 2020, Republican Susan Collins' races for re-election had generally resulted in easy victories. Even when facing incumbent 1st District Congressman Tom Allen in 2008, she won by double digits in an election when Democrat Barack Obama also won Maine by double digits. But in the wake of the polarizing effects of the Trump presidency, Collins found it hard to hold all of her constituency together. MAGA Republicans felt she had not been supportive enough of Donald Trump, who she refused to endorse. Many former supporters, most notably liberal women, turned on her over her controversial vote in favor of the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court under heavy pressure from Senate Republican leadership (Folley 2019). With the Senate's partisan control in the balance, and the national belief that this would be one of the closest Senate races in the nation (and in a small state, where donations could go farther than in a larger state), an astonishing amount of money came in from out of state to both Collins' campaign and that of her Democratic challenger, former House Speaker Sara Gideon. And while Senate challengers have long been generally outspent by their incumbent opponents (e.g. Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000), Gideon outraised Collins 2-1 (Hall 2020) in a year (2020) when the average US Senate incumbents outspent their challengers by over 5-1 (Open Secrets, n.d.). This wound up being the most expensive race in Maine history for any office, a mark it reached well before Election Day (Hall 2020).

As of July 5, 2025, Collins has not formally announced her re-election bid but announced last year that she intended to run. She would face many of the same challenges she did in 2020, plus an environment where an April Pine Tree Poll found that 71% of Maine voters believe she

does not deserve re-election versus 21% who believe she does. Even 57% of Republicans and 60% of 2024 Trump voters said she did not deserve re-election (University of New Hampshire 2025) She has two conservative Republican challengers in Daniel Smeriglio and Carmen Calabrese (Bartow 2025), but neither is well known.

The Democratic picture is murkier. DemocracyFIRST founder Jordan Wood and little-known Natasha Alcala are in the race (Bartow 2025). But the big question is whether the candidate many Democrats think would be their strongest challenger, Governor Janet Mills, chooses to run (Gans 2025). As of July 5, 2025, nobody is certain what she will decide. Her only other race for Congress was back in 1994, when she finished third in a seven-way, open seat Democratic primary in the Second Congressional District (RightData, n.d.). If Mills runs, she would be a heavy favorite to win the Democratic primary.

Second Congressional District Race

Finally, what would a writeup of Maine politics and elections be without yet another dramatic race for Maine's 2nd Congressional District? This race is very likely to be close—and expensive—yet again. Incumbent “Blue Dog” style Democrat Jared Golden had been the subject of speculation that he might walk away from re-election to Congress in favor of a run for the open seat coming for Governor. Much of this speculation suggested that he might choose to run as an Independent, or with the centrist No Labels movement (for example, Robinson 2025). This was even pondered nationally. Roll Call writer Nathan L. Gonzalez (2025) wrote in February, “One of the biggest early questions of the cycle is, what will Maine Rep. Jared Golden do?”

In May: Golden announced what he would do: he would pass up a run for governor to seek re-election as a Democrat from the Second District (Leonard 2025). Just a few weeks earlier, his likely main opponent announced his candidacy: former Maine Governor Paul LePage. LePage is a Republican who won election as Governor in both 2010 and in 2014. He was termed out of running in 2018, but he returned to the race in 2022, again winning the Republican nomination, but losing by nearly 13 percentage points to Democratic incumbent Janet Mills. In endorsing Donald Trump for President in 2016, LePage famously said “I was Trump before Trump became popular” and today sees Trump as “a friend in the White House” (Steinhauser 2025).

LePage was known as Governor for his blunt speech and willingness to attack Democrats. He promises more of this style, as seen in his campaign announcement: “We need people who will fight the extreme woke policies that defy common sense and force girls into unfair sports competitions. I am running to serve the people of Maine and help the President fix Washington” (Coon 2025). He should have none of the name recognition issues many House challengers have, and he is likely to face no significant primary opposition. 2024 Republican nominee Austin Theriault announced that he would not run in 2026, would endorse LePage, and urged Republicans to avoid a “crowded, divisive primary” (Theriault 2025).

However, there is a chance as of this writing that Jared Golden could face a primary challenge from State Auditor and former Secretary of State Matt Dunlap. Many liberal and progressive Democrats have been unhappy with Golden and could jump to Dunlap if he chooses to run. Dunlap says he is now considering a run, which would be his first race for Congress since losing the Democratic primary for the US Senate in 2012 (Mistler 2025).

CONCLUSION

Maine continues to see a mix of familiar political figures and new political issues. A year ago, nobody could have predicted that trans athletes would be the preoccupying issue facing Maine in the first half of 2025. Stay tuned to see what will come next!

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