

Connecticut Politics in 2025-2026: Resistance, Restraint, and the Road to November

Stefanie Chambers
Trinity College

The period from spring 2025 through early 2026 was among the most consequential stretches in recent Connecticut political history. Against the backdrop of record state budget surpluses (the fiscal year ending June 2025 closed with a \$2.5 billion surplus, one of the largest in the state's history), Connecticut's leaders spent the better part of a year navigating mounting tensions on three fronts simultaneously: between the governor and his own party over housing, labor, and the pace of investment; between the state and the Trump administration over immigration enforcement, health care, and the federal safety net; and between a two-term incumbent seeking an unprecedented third term and a restless Democratic coalition still processing his most consequential political misjudgment of his tenure. By the opening of the 2026 legislative session in February, the political landscape had shifted considerably, not enough to fundamentally threaten Governor Lamont, but enough to make the fall election more contested than any he has previously faced.

The Budget and the Guardrails Debate

The 2025 legislative session, which ran from January through June, was anchored by a long-running structural argument over Connecticut's so-called "fiscal guardrails," budget controls enacted in 2017 that had generated billions in surpluses while, critics argued, starving core public services of investment. The guardrails have achieved much, including billions in a rainy-day fund, billions paid to unfunded pension liability, increased bond rating, and lower borrowing costs for the state and municipalities. Governor Lamont had entered the year proposing a \$55.2 billion biennial budget that loosened those controls modestly; by late May, the friction between what the administration would accept and what the Democratic majority wanted to spend had grown severe enough that House Speaker Matt Ritter floated scrapping the biennial budget cycle entirely in favor of a one-year plan. Lamont threatened a veto. "We all know that we're waiting for the other shoe to drop in the fall," Senate President Pro Tem Martin M. Looney told the CT Mirror, referring to the deepening uncertainty around federal funding (Phaneuf, CT Mirror, May 28, 2025).

The two-year budget that ultimately passed in June relied on creative fiscal practices to stay within the constitutional spending cap while still funding priorities including special education, child care, and nonprofit human services (Phaneuf, CT Mirror, June 4, 2025). Its signature domestic achievement was Senate Bill 1, Lamont's early childhood education initiative. The legislation established a new endowment drawing on surplus revenues, up to \$300 million annually, with the long-term goal of eliminating child care costs entirely for families earning below \$100,000 a year, and capping expenses at seven percent of household income for those earning more (Tillman, CT Mirror, June 2, 2025). Advocates called it a potential national model, while Republican critics argued that the off-budget funding mechanism gutted the guardrails without formally saying so.

The Housing Saga: Veto, Fallout, and an Imperfect Repair

No storyline better captured the political tensions of the period than Connecticut's omnibus housing bill. By virtually every measure, the state's housing market is in crisis: housing production ranks near the bottom nationally, vacancy rates have dropped to among the lowest in the country, and analysts estimate a shortage of more than 100,000 units affordable to low-income renters (Monk, CT Mirror, November 26, 2025). House Bill 5002, which the Lamont administration had helped draft, cleared the legislature in May, winning House passage 84 to 67 and Senate passage 20 to 15, with provisions including municipal fair-share housing targets.

What followed was among the more striking acts of gubernatorial self-contradiction in recent Connecticut political history. In June, Lamont vetoed the bill his own staff had negotiated, citing a desire for greater local "buy-in." The veto came without a courtesy call to House Majority Leader Jason Rojas, the bill's chief sponsor (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, June 24, 2025). Text messages later obtained by the CT Mirror made clear that electoral politics had played a significant role: advisors explicitly warned Lamont that signing the bill risked his suburban support heading into a third-term race, with one recommending a "veto followed by a special session" as the better political path (Monk, CT Mirror, September 19, 2025).

The veto simultaneously killed a second Democratic priority. Lamont also refused to sign legislation extending unemployment benefits to striking workers, prompting Connecticut AFL-CIO president Ed Hawthorne to observe that "the state elected Democrats, and Democrats put two bills on his desk that would have made a difference to working people. And he sided with Republicans" (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, June 24, 2025). The twin vetoes opened a rift between the governor and his party that would take months to resolve.

After months of negotiation aimed at bringing municipal officials on board, a condition Lamont had set, a revised housing bill, House Bill 8002, cleared the Senate 24-10 in a special session and was signed into law in late November (Monk, CT Mirror, November 26, 2025). The new measure replaced mandatory fair-share housing quotas with an opt-in incentive framework, required towns to develop housing growth plans, removed minimum parking requirements for smaller developments, and gave the state Department of Housing new authority to act as a direct developer on state land. Housing advocates acknowledged the compromise was weaker than what had originally passed. "I still haven't quite gotten over the fact that the governor vetoed," said Housing Committee co-chair Senator Martha Marx (Monk, CT Mirror, November 14, 2025). The bill took effect January 1, 2026, one of nearly two dozen new laws entering force at the start of the new year (CT Mirror, December 22, 2025).

Federal-State Conflict

If one theme dominated Connecticut politics from summer 2025 into the new year, it was the escalating collision between the state's policy commitments and the Trump administration's sustained campaign of federal retrenchment. The federal reconciliation bill passed by Congress and signed into law on July 1 imposed new SNAP work requirements that analysts projected would eliminate benefits for roughly 36,000 Connecticut residents, including immigrants, young adults, veterans, and people experiencing homelessness, beginning in December (Phaneuf, CT Mirror, November 10, 2025). Separately, Connecticut Voices for Children projected by January 2026 that the cumulative impact of federal cuts on the state's fiscal year 2027 budget would approach \$1 billion, more than double what the state's emergency fund had been set up to cover (Phaneuf, CT Mirror, January 8, 2026).

The fall brought on an acute crisis when a 43-day federal government shutdown (October 1 through mid-November) directly threatened SNAP benefits for more than 360,000 Connecticut residents. Governor Lamont responded by announcing a \$500 million state reserve fund and pledging to cover the full cost of November food assistance, roughly \$72 million, if Washington failed to act (Phaneuf, CT Mirror, November 10, 2025). When the Trump administration directed states to reduce November SNAP disbursements, Connecticut refused. “This herky-jerky back and forth is driving people crazy,” Lamont told reporters. “Let’s take care of people. We can afford to do it” (CT Mirror, November 7, 2025). The special session called in November also addressed immigration directly, with legislators approving measures barring masked immigration arrests, limiting state data-sharing with federal agencies, and codifying a state Supreme Court ruling against warrantless courthouse arrests (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, November 7, 2025).

As the calendar flipped to 2026, it became clear the emergency was far from over. With approximately \$330 million of the original \$500 million still unspent, Lamont and legislative leaders announced in late January that they would ask lawmakers to extend the fund rather than return to the general budget reserve. “The emergency is not over,” Lamont said at a January 29 press conference. “We still have a three-alarm fire, and every day there's more incoming” (Phaneuf and Peck-Suzuki, CT Mirror, January 29, 2026). On the first day of the 2026 regular session, the Senate voted 28-8, with three Republicans joining all 25 Democrats, to extend the governor’s emergency authority over those contingency funds (Pazniokas and Tillman, CT Mirror, February 4, 2026). The House followed the next day, 97-48. The largely party-line votes reflected a broader alignment between Lamont and Democratic legislators.

The 2026 Session Opens: Tax Rebates, ICE, and Early Friction

The 2026 legislative session, which opened February 4 and runs through May 6, began with an unusually strong show of executive-legislative solidarity, at least among Democrats. Lamont’s State of the State address set a combative tone toward the Trump administration without ever naming the president. His most quoted line came in a direct address to Immigration and Customs Enforcement: “Go home. We’re keeping Connecticut safe without you.” Democrats rose in sustained applause; several Republicans shook their heads, and one walked out (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, February 4, 2026). The speech framed Connecticut’s fiscal discipline, its surpluses, its pension debt reduction, its rainy-day fund, as the very resource that had allowed the state to shield residents from federal cuts and cast Lamont’s record as a contrast to Washington’s dysfunction.

Lamont’s \$28.7 billion budget proposal for fiscal year 2027, also released on February 4, proposed a \$200-per-person tax rebate for individuals earning under \$200,000, distributing roughly \$500 million of the sales tax receipts among approximately 2.2 million residents. The plan preserved earlier investments in K-12 education and special education, proposed universal free school breakfast, and made modest increases to social services spending. But it notably declined to establish a state-funded SNAP replacement program and fell well short of what progressive advocates called for amid federal cuts (Monk, CT Mirror, February 4, 2026; Phaneuf, CT Mirror, February 4, 2026). The Working Families Party criticized the plan for failing to raise taxes on the wealthy to offset federal losses.

Within the first three weeks of the session, Democratic leaders moved quickly on a sweeping 98-section “emergency” bill, Senate Bill 298, which was fast-tracked without the usual committee vetting process. The measure revived significant legislation that had passed the House in 2025 but never reached a Senate vote, including new worker protections for warehouse employees, provisions on police training for interactions with people with mental illness, and a moratorium extension on addressing racial imbalances in schools (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, February 24-26, 2026). The use of emergency certification drew criticism from Republicans, who objected both to the process and to specific provisions, particularly the warehouse worker standards they argued would burden major employers.

The confrontation between Connecticut and Washington reached a new level in April 2026, when the U.S. Department of Justice sued both the state and the City of New Haven over their so-called “sanctuary policies.” Filed in the U.S. District of Connecticut, the complaint argued that state law and local ordinances were obstructing federal immigration enforcement and shielding criminals from federal law enforcement. The Justice Department specifically took aim at Connecticut’s Trust Act and New Haven’s municipal identification program, arguing they violated the president’s constitutional authority to enforce immigration law. Lamont and New Haven officials said they would fight the suit; for the governor, it was the latest front in a conflict he had been preparing for since taking office (Otte, CT Mirror, April 14, 2026).

The Governor’s Race

Lamont formally entered the 2026 race in November, filing papers to create a campaign committee he called “Ned for CT,” making him the first Connecticut governor to seek three consecutive terms since John G. Rowland in 2002 (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, November 7, 2025). His State of the State address in February served as an effective campaign launch, positioning the governor as the adult in the room relative to Washington while acknowledging the strains on Connecticut families. “I’ve been around for a while, and never have I seen the world so divided,” he said (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, February 4, 2026).

The Republican field has two notable candidates. State Senator Ryan Fazio of Greenwich, 35, has centered his campaign on generational change and Connecticut’s position near the top of national electricity rate rankings as evidence of Lamont’s governing failures. New Britain Mayor former Erin Stewart, 38, is another of the challengers. A late entrant, Betsy McCaughey, a Newsmax host and former New York lieutenant governor, drew little name recognition in early polling (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, February 25, 2026). On the Democratic side, Representative Josh Elliott of Hamden has mounted a progressive primary challenge, arguing that Lamont fails to grasp the severity of the federal threat and that the state’s surpluses should be deployed far more aggressively.

By late February 2026, Lamont led Elliott 57% to 13% among likely Democratic primary voters in the Nutmeg State Poll conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center, with 29% still undecided. His job approval stood at a net positive of four points (49% approving, 45% disapproving), a notably smaller number than prior surveys (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, February 25, 2026). Earlier polling by the same outlet had found that a targeted framing highlighting the housing veto and the governor’s resistance to wealth taxes could dramatically erode his support, particularly among non-white primary voters. Electricity costs, the looming U.S. House primary in the 1st Congressional District, where Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin and several others are challenging long-serving incumbent John Larson, and the ongoing fallout from

federal cuts collectively add layers of complexity to what was once expected to be a relatively straightforward election year (CT Mirror, January 2, 2026). Connecticut is not alone in confronting these pressures. A New York Times analysis from April 2026 documented how Democratic-led states across the Northeast have been quietly retreating from ambitious climate commitments, squeezed between soaring electricity bills, the Trump administration's assault on offshore wind, and mounting local opposition to renewable energy siting. Lamont himself told the New York Times that affordability had become the new governing standard: New England governors, he said, were now willing to consider virtually any energy source that could bring costs down. It was a notable posture for a governor who had spent years positioning Connecticut as a national model on climate (Plumer, New York Times, April 11, 2026).

Congressional Races

The 2026 election cycle has also unsettled Connecticut's congressional delegation in ways that few anticipated. The most consequential intraparty drama is unfolding in the 1st Congressional District, where 14-term incumbent John Larson, 77, faces his first Democratic primary since winning the open seat in 1998. The challenge began quietly in July 2025 when Hartford school board member Ruth Fortune filed papers, followed quickly by Southington Councilman Jack Perry, who has since withdrawn, and then, more significantly, by former two-term Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin and state Representative Jillian Gilchrest of West Hartford (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, July 22, 2025; Brown, CT Mirror, August 26, 2025). The challengers share no ideological quarrel with Larson's voting record; their argument is generational, rooted in a sense that the Democratic Party needs new energy and a new playbook after the 2024 election. Larson's case for staying rests on seniority and the prospect of chairing the Social Security subcommittee if Democrats retake the House, a goal he has pursued for decades. But the race has taken on a more urgent quality given two health episodes in early 2025, and the fundraising numbers tell a story of unusual incumbent vulnerability: Bronin entered 2026 with nearly \$1.5 million in cash on hand compared to Larson's roughly \$956,000, having outraised the congressman for two consecutive quarters (Hagen, CT Mirror, February 2, 2026). When House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries traveled to Hartford in February to headline a Larson rally, he was candid that the effort was personal rather than strategic, as the CT Mirror observed, winning the Democratic primary in the heavily blue 1st District is tantamount to winning the seat itself (Pazniokas, CT Mirror, February 12, 2026).

Connecticut's only genuinely competitive general-election congressional seat remains the 5th District, where Representative Jahana Hayes won her fourth term in November 2024 by defeating Republican George Logan 53% to 47%, her second narrow victory over the same opponent in as many cycles (Hagen, CT Mirror, November 6, 2024). No credible Republican challenger for 2026 has yet emerged publicly, but in a midterm environment that historically disadvantages the president's party, and in a district that has been decided by razor-thin margins twice running, Hayes' race bears watching as a bellwether for the broader national environment.

The Larson primary story took an unexpected turn in April 2026, when the congressman filed articles of impeachment against President Trump and called on the Cabinet to invoke the 25th Amendment. Larson pointed to what he called an illegal war in Iran, American casualties, rising prices, and the president's recent threats, including remarks warning that "a whole civilization will die," as justification for removal. "Donald Trump has blown past every requirement to be removed from office," he said, calling it a duty of conscience if not yet a

political reality. Whether the move helps or hurts Larson with primary voters remains to be seen, but it reflects the intensity of anti-Trump feeling in a district where Democratic turnout in August will determine the outcome (Larson press release, April 7, 2026).

Conclusion: Governing at the Edge of the Storm

The period from spring 2025 through early 2026 confirmed a durable pattern in Connecticut politics: the state has more fiscal resources than almost any comparable moment in its modern history, yet its politics are characterized by caution, negotiation, and deferred ambition. Lamont governed as a centrist under pressure from multiple directions simultaneously: progressive Democrats pressing for bolder federal resistance and higher taxes on the wealthy, suburban moderates resistant to mandated zoning changes, Republicans insisting on guardrail integrity, and a Trump administration testing how much Connecticut's defiance would cost. The housing veto and its aftermath demonstrated that even a fiscally strong governor with a popular record is not immune to the pressures of electoral self-interest, and in a polarized environment, the gap between stated policy goals and political will remains wide.

What the period also demonstrated, however, is that Connecticut's accumulated fiscal strength gave it options that few other states possessed. The \$500 million contingency fund was not a symbolic gesture. Instead, it was a real intervention that kept food on tables and health coverage in place when Washington left people behind. Whether Lamont can successfully run on that record, and whether voters will judge him primarily as a competent steward or as an insufficiently bold leader, is the central question of the 2026 cycle. The answer will depend not only on the political skill of the competing campaigns but on what the next several months bring from Washington, which has shown no signs of becoming more predictable.

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