

What's the Game of the Name? A Summer 2026 Update on Maine Politics

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One of the most distinctive things about the 2026 election is how that even though the ballot is full of open seat races, an unusually long list of familiar names—or, should I say, *familial* names—are there as well. Maine voters have seen last names like Bush, Pingree, King, Baldacci and Mason on their ballots before (and all but Mason statewide). But this time, there's someone with those names running who isn't the old candidate—it's one of their relatives (Cover, 2026A; Junker 2026). And even many of the initiatives brought back issues campaigns of the past. This article will look at how this and other issues played out in Maine over the past year, starting with Maine's 2025 ballot issues and moving into Maine's elections and policy issues in the first half of 2026.

2025 STATEWIDE INITIATIVE VOTES

Red flag law vote

Maine is a high gun ownership state which has a state Constitutional provision that the right to keep and bear arms “shall not be questioned.” Maine has had ballot initiatives about guns before. In 2016, the only ballot issue that failed was an effort backed by Everytown for Gun Safety to tighten background checks and firearms transfers. The latest controversy at the ballot box about guns came with a November 2025 vote on adding a Red Flag Law to Maine's present Yellow Flag law. These are different approaches to getting guns out of the hands of people who may be a danger to others or themselves.

One thing many were confused about in the statewide initiative to pass a Red Flag law was that many voters thought that it was intended to replace Maine's Yellow Flag law. But a passing vote for the Red Flag law left the Yellow Flag law provisions in place while adding the Red Flag process to the options available to temporarily keep people who might be a threat to themselves or others from possessing firearms.

Red flag laws are a relatively recent policy development. The first Red Flag Law was enacted by the state of Connecticut in 1999, in the wake of a shooting at the headquarters of the Connecticut Lottery. An employee at the Lottery had “displayed clear signs of troubling behavior well in advance” before murdering four of his bosses at the Lottery headquarters. Connecticut's Red Flag law (known initially in Connecticut as a “Risk Warrant Law”) was passed in response one year later, “making Connecticut the first state in the nation to allow gun confiscation before an act of violence” (Beck 2018; Swanson et. al. 2017)

In a different way, Maine, too, was a trailblazer in this area of law. Maine was the first (and to date, only) state to enact a different method for keeping guns out of the hands of people who may be a threat to themselves or others: a Yellow Flag law.

As discussed by Eesha Pendharkar in the Maine Morning Star (2025), yellow flag laws contrast with red flag laws in three ways: “Unlike traditional “red flag” laws, Maine's system required three strict steps: Law enforcement must take the individual into protective custody. A licensed medical practitioner must evaluate the person and sign off on their mental risk evaluation [and] a judge must approve the final order to temporarily seize the weapons.” The

unique law, passed in 2020 with bipartisan support by the Legislature and signed into law by Governor Mills, was the product of negotiations involving the Governor and the Sportsmen's Alliance of Maine, but some questioned its effectiveness after a mass shooting attack in Lewiston killed 18 people, a shocking incident for a state with a relatively low crime rate and no history of such mass shootings (for more details, see Melcher 2025).

Governor Mills opposed the red flag law initiative for multiple reasons, which she outlined in her weekly radio address (Mills 2025) and defended the Yellow Flag law, but did support a Republican alternative to Red Flag that would make modifications to the Yellow Flag Law (Kobin 2025). The Sportsman's Alliance also opposed the initiative, arguing that the tremendous increase in yellow flag use following the Lewiston shooting showed that the Yellow Flag law was working well (Bader 2025).

The results this time were very different from the 2016 vote on expanded background checks, which was defeated. Issue 1, establishing a new Red Flag law to supplement the Yellow Flag law, won with 64% of the vote (Ballotpedia 2025). Among the reasons cited for its victory was the perception after the Lewiston shootings that the Yellow Flag law worked too slowly and that additional measures were needed; support for the idea that, with a Red Flag law, families could directly petition a judge for gun removal; and that the Yes on 1 side greatly outspent its opponents (Bader 2025; Ohm 2025).

Voter ID/absentee ballot change vote

The other initiative on the November 2025 ballot also considered an area subject to much disagreement in Maine in the past two decades: election law. Since the early 2010s, Republicans around the nation have called for more stringent voting regulations (see Clayton 2023; Williams 2022; Jones and Polsky 2021; and Hicks et al. 2015). In addition to President Trump's SAVE Act proposal (Parks 2026), many states have considered such changes to elections. These have included tightening access to absentee ballots, eliminating same day voter registration, requiring proof of citizenship when registering to vote, and more. Maine was one of a number of states where Republicans had sought to place more restrictions on voting, and in Maine, voters considered such changes in a 2025 ballot initiative which "would implement a photo ID requirement for voters, limit the use of drop boxes for returning completed ballots and make numerous changes to the state's absentee voting system" (Whittle 2025). Conservatives backing the proposal admitted that Maine had not experienced serious problems with voter impersonation fraud or other issues related to their ballot question but said that their proposal would help head off future problems and inspire more confidence in the election system. Democrats and other foes of the proposal, such as the Maine League of Women Voters (who called the vote the "Voter Suppression Referendum") (2025) noted that few election problems the initiative was designed to address have happened. But perhaps most key to their work that successfully defeated the initiative was how well they framed the initiative as attacking Maine's traditions of absentee voting. Even their campaign signs said "Save Absentee Voting" (Strimling 2025).

The Maine elections status quo was indeed upheld. The No side won in a landslide, 64.2% to 35.8% for the Yes side (Ballotpedia 2025). As the initiative was largely defeated because of objections to what it would do to absentee voting, the next step for the supporters of this initiative might be to try a new initiative more focused on voter ID requirements.

2026 Gubernatorial Primaries: Democratic

With incumbent Democratic Governor Janet Mills termed out, the open spot in the Blaine House brought out a large field of both Democrats and Republicans, as well as a prominent Independent. Maine does not have a Lieutenant Governor, nor does it elect any constitutional offices (instead, they are chosen by the Legislature), many of which are commonly elected in other states. As a result, neither party had an obvious or groomed candidate to replace Mills. Five candidates emerged: Secretary of State Shenna Bellows of Manchester; former State Senate President Troy Jackson of Allagash; former Maine House Speaker Hannah Pingree of North Haven; businessman Angus King III of Portland; and former Maine CDC Director Nirav Shah of Brunswick. Both Pingree and King are the children of current Maine members of Congress. Pingree is the daughter of 1st District Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, and King is the son of U. S. Senator Angus King.

The race was competitive all the way. King led some early polls (e.g. WGME Staff 2025), but this may have stemmed in part from recognition of his last name coupled with people thinking that his father, Angus King Jr., was the candidate.

Overall, the campaign had a minimum of negativity and attacks on their fellow Democrats. The one notable exception came near the end of the campaign. As is often the case with attack ads in Maine, these were paid for by out of state groups. Jackson was attacked by a group called 314 Action Fund which questioned his support for abortion rights, a claim Jackson strongly denied. On the other hand, the New York-based Working Families Party spent on behalf of Pingree, Jackson and Bellows, and urging voters not to rank Shah and King, who they saw as insufficiently progressive (Livigston, Mistler and Wight 2026). Pingree, Jackson and Bellows, all of whom had served in the Maine Legislature (unlike King and Shah), formed an alliance of the sort RCV may encourage: they pledged to rank each other in their top three, and strongly encouraged their supporters to do the same (Mundry 2026).

This alliance may have swung the election. Nirav Shah had led most polls in the months before the election, though his lead was never large and other candidates had been gaining ground on him. But, just like the 2018 Maine 2d District general election race, the first round leader did not win the election. Shah finished first in the first round, but by far short of a majority, leading RCV to go into play. As the candidates were eliminated and secondary choices were reallocated, Shah lost ground, particularly when Bellows and then Jackson were eliminated, because he got relatively few secondary votes from their supporters. In the final round, Hannah Pingree jumped ahead of Nirav Shah partly because of her second and third choice votes from backers of Bellows and Jackson (Strimling 2026).

But as Maine political reporter Michael Shepherd notes, the race would have turned out very differently if Shenna Bellows could have swung fewer than 300 first place votes from Troy Jackson. In that scenario, Bellows would have made it out of the second round instead of Jackson. Had that happened, Bellows would have eliminated Pingree in the next round and won a very narrow victory over Shah in the final round (Shepherd 2026).

2026 Gubernatorial Primaries: Republican

With incumbent Governor Janet Mills being termed out, Maine had an open seat for Governor for the first time since Mills first was elected in 2018. With 2022 nominee and former Governor Paul LePage choosing to run for the Second Congressional district seat, the field was wide open and attracted many candidates. Seven candidates were still running on Election Day,

the most since the seven candidates running in the 2010 Republican gubernatorial primary won by Paul LePage.¹

Unlike in Republican primaries in other states, President Trump did not endorse any of the candidates in the field. The candidate who perhaps tried hardest to emulate Trump was Bobby Charles. Charles was the clear frontrunner through most of the race. Charles not only attacked RCV but stated that he wanted his supporters to rank only him. He also declined to appear at some Republican candidate debates, and the candidates who were there were willing to criticize Charles. At a debate Charles did not attend, the five candidates who were there were asked to raise their hand if they would promise to vote for Charles if he won the nomination. None of them did. One reason why was that they were critical of Charles' plan to cut \$4 billion from the Maine state budget. Former Maine Senate Majority Leader Garrett Mason (who had run for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 2018 and finished, second, and whose mother, father and cousin had all served the Maine Legislature), was particularly critical (Simone 2026).

Alliances in the Republican gubernatorial race were less critical than in the Democratic race, but there were two of them. The more prominent one was between health care executive and entrepreneur Jonathan Bush (the cousin of former President George W. Bush and nephew of former President George H. W. Bush), and lesser-known Robert Wessels, a businessman and former Select Board member on the Town of Paris council. Not only did they pledge to make the other their second choice, but Wessels accepted an offer to be Bush's 2nd District campaign head if Bush won the primary (Bartow 2026). Businessman David Jones also announced at a May debate that he and Ben Midgley, a fitness club executive and entrepreneur, formed an alliance and that they, too, would rank the other candidate second (Simone 2026).

As expected, Charles led after the first round, but not with enough votes to avoid having the race go to RCV. Unlike Pingree, Charles did not do so well picking up secondary choices from the other candidates as they were eliminated. In fact, he did not win the most second choice votes in any of the seven rounds of balloting. However, his initial lead was large enough that it was enough to hold off the other candidates (Ballotpedia 2026). Maine Republicans continue to follow the national tendency for Republicans to be more critical of RCV than Democrats (e.g. Gaines and Gimpel 2025), but even as they criticized it as a policy, some candidates sought to explain to their voters how RCV works and that as long as it was there, they should use it to influence the outcome of the race.²

2026 Gubernatorial Race: The Independent

Maine is, of course, known for its willingness to elect Independents to office. James Longley won one term as governor in 1974, and then Angus King won the Blaine House twice, later going on to the Senate as an Independent. Not all Independent candidates for Governor are

¹The ballot, in fact, had 8 Republican candidates. One of them, State Senator James Libby of Standish, dropped out of the race in mid-April. He applied to run as a Clean Elections candidate but came up over 300 qualifying contributors short of the 3200 valid \$5 contributors needed to qualify. This was partly because the Maine Ethics Commission invalidated a significant number of his qualifying contributions and found that one of his contribution collectors committed fraud by listing people who had not made a \$5 contribution. Libby concluded he could not run an effective campaign without Clean Elections funding and withdrew (Miller 2026).

²Republican gubernatorial candidate Robert Wessels embodied this mixed view of RCV and voters using it. He called it a "terrible, confusing system", but went on to explain how it works, why people should use it as it is in practice, and how the "beauty" of RCV is that it allows a candidate to vote sincerely for their first choice and rank someone else next that they think has a better chance to win (Wessels 2026; Wessels 2026A.)

major players in every election, but this year a major, centrist Independent, former Senate Majority Leader and former Maine Republican Party Chair Rick Bennett, has a strong chance to run the strongest Independent campaign for Governor since former Democrat Eliot Cutler finished second, only two points behind winner Paul LePage, in 2010. Bennett took more liberal stands than his fellow Republicans on some key issues in the last legislative session and announced that he was leaving the Republican Party (Wade 2025). Bennett is more like old-school Maine Republicans like John McKernan, Olympia Snowe and Roger Katz than the rising MAGA wing of the party Bobby Charles represents. With few exceptions (notably Paul LePage's two statewide wins for Governor), Mainers have tended to choose moderates from both parties or from the Independent ranks for statewide offices for many years. If Charles and Pingree come off to voters as too extreme, Bennett could find an opening.

2026 Congressional Races: First District

As usual, there is relatively little drama in the First Congressional District. Incumbent Democrat Chellie Pingree is favored to win another term in this increasingly Democratic district. She has been re-elected each race since her first election to the House in 2008 and won a three-way race in 2024 with 59.8% of the vote (Hilton 2024). For a time, it looked possible that Pingree might have a serious challenger for the Democratic nomination, State Representative Tiffany Roberts (D-South Berwick.) However, Roberts failed to get the required number of signatures to get on the ballot and withdrew, leaving Pingree unopposed in the primary (Dauphinee 2026). She will have a rematch against her 2024 opponent, retired Army colonel Ron Russell. He defeated 26 year old challenger Joshua Pietrowicz in June's Republican primary (Budion 2026; Reed 2026).

2026 Congressional Races: Second District

Republicans

Two-term Governor Paul LePage, a populist conservative Republican, faced no Republican primary opposition. This is his first election appearance since his 2022 defeat for Maine Governor against incumbent Democrat Janet Mills. However, he did narrowly defeat Mills in the Second District in that race. There is no other Republican who could have run for this seat who is as well-known and popular with Maine's conservative activists as LePage. Thee 2024 Republican nominee, Austin Theriault, announced that he would not run in 2026 and would support LePage. Theriault is running to return to the Maine Legislature in 2026.

Democrats

The Democrats' Second District race has been much more complex. Incumbent Blue Dog-style Democrat Jared Golden, who was first elected in 2018 and had won three races for re-election, was widely expected to seek another term, and had been fundraising for it. Golden had irritated many liberal Maine Democrats with his relatively conservative voting record, and some wanted a primary challenger to end the race. They got their wish when State Auditor Matt Dunlap announced in October 2025 that he would challenge Golden (Howard 2025). Only a month later, Golden announced in an op-ed in the *Bangor Daily News* that he was pulling out of

the race. He cited his weariness with the “increasing incivility and plain nastiness” of American politics, and threats of violence that have been made against himself and his family. He took one last shot at Dunlap—who he said had no chance of beating Paul LePage—and LePage himself in the message: “My sincere hope is that by creating an open seat, my departure makes space for competitive primary for both Democrats and Republicans, as Paul LePage and Matt Dunlap are a far cry from being standard bearers of the generations that will inherit the legacy of today’s Congress” (Golden 2025).

Golden did not get this wish in the Republican primary, but he did on the Democratic side. Three more Democrats joined Dunlap in the race after Golden left it: state senator Joe Baldacci, the brother of John Baldacci, who once held this seat and served two terms as Governor; Jordan Wood,³ a former congressional staffer and election reformer; and social worker Paige Loud, who was the furthest left of these candidates and, at 29, the youngest.

Like the Democratic and Republican primaries for governor, no candidate came close to a majority of the vote in the first round. Baldacci finished first in the first round of voting, but Dunlap and Wood were within three points of him. It was clear that voter ranks would determine the election. Loud was well behind the others, but her voters played a significant role in swinging the election away from Baldacci. Her voters gave their second place votes overwhelmingly to Dunlap and Wood, pulling Dunlap closer after the second round. Wood only trailed Dunlap by 304 votes and Baldacci by about 1600, but he was third and out after that round. In the final round, 60% of the non-exhausted Wood ballots ranked Dunlap over Baldacci, giving Dunlap the victory with 52.5% (Ballotpedia 2026A). This race is another example of how even informal alliances can affect the outcome in a close RCV race with more than three candidates.

2026 Senate Race: Republicans

Republican incumbent Senator Susan Collins is seeking a sixth term in the U. S. Senate. While there were a handful of Republicans considering challenging her—less for her politics than for the sense that it was time for new blood in Congress—none qualified for the ballot, and she was unopposed in the primary. President Trump, who in January said she should never be elected to any office again, endorsed her for re-election the day after the primary election, saying “she’s not my best friend at all...[but] she’s a sane person and she’s a person that never missed a vote in many years.” At the same press conference, President Trump added how much he dislikes her opponent, Democrat Graham Platner, saying Platner is “worse than any human being that’s run for office probably...He’s a cheap, no-good person. He’s like a pig” (Whittle and Weissert 2026).

2026 Senate Race: Democrats

After years of winning easy re-elections, Susan Collins had a much tougher race in 2020 than in the past. The rise of President Trump frequently put Collins, as a traditional New England moderate Republican, in very difficult positions. In particular, she voted to confirm Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court justice, which angered many of her more moderate and liberal supporters. She had often said in the past that she would not support a Justice who would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and after speaking at length with him, she felt that she could safely vote

³ Wood was originally in the Maine Senate primary, but shifted to the Second District race after Janet Mills got in the Senate race and after Jared Golden left the 2d district race, saying he did not want to have to fight Platner and Mills for campaign funding (Kobin 2026)

for him (Abrams 2018), and got tremendous criticism from pro-choice Mainers, particularly after Kavanaugh voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Democrats were furious at this, and many wished to take their anger out on Senator Collins by defeating her in 2020. Maine House Speaker Sara Gideon won the Democratic primary, and raised an unprecedented \$63.7 million in contributions to her campaign (Open Secrets, n.d) But in spite of Collins and her allies being dramatically outspent, she won by a nine-point margin, even as Democrat Joe Biden won the state (Becker 2020).

Democrats have been no less eager to defeat Susan Collins in 2026. Once again, and as expected, the race is drawing enormous amounts of money and will be pivotal for control of the U. S. Senate.

What was not expected a year before the primary is who would win it: oyster farmer and Marine combat veteran Graham Platner. Almost nobody had heard of him in Maine a year ago. While Democrats recruited him to run for a state senate seat in 2020, he declined, and his only Maine experience in government has been serving on the planning board in his small town of Sullivan (Keefe 2026). He was recruited to run by labor (Keefe 2026) and by what the conservative *New York Post* derisively calls “a champagne Socialist duo”, Daniel Moraff and Leanne Fan, who have recruited other progressive, non-traditional candidates (Moore 2026).

Platner’s story quickly caught the attention of the national media as a symbol of new kinds of Democratic candidates. He had never been elected to office, is an oyster farmer, is in his 40s at a time when many young people are critical of how old political leaders as a group are, had served in the Marines in Afghanistan and Iraq, echoed Senator Bernie Sanders’ economic populist rhetoric and seemed to be an antiestablishment, working class hero. This narrative fascinated the media and attracted support nationwide. Platner also built a strong grassroots organization deeply committed to him and his ideals.

Meanwhile, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, seeing Maine as crucial to Democratic hopes to retake the Senate, set his sights on recruiting a more traditional candidate, and one who in more normal times, could have been a near-ideal candidate: Governor Janet Mills. Mills was the best known Democrat in Maine, famously fought back against Donald Trump on multiple fronts, was born and raised in Maine, and was elected twice as Maine governor, making her the only Democrat to be elected statewide since 2006. She was seen as a relative moderate—and it has often been noted that with few exceptions, it is moderates who win statewide elections in Maine. She got in the race (Roarty et al. 2026).

Unfortunately for Mills, she was a perfect foil for Platner’s anti-establishment, populist campaign at a time when many Maine Democrats were tired of establishment politicians, especially Schumer. They wanted a bolder, more confrontational approach to Trump than even Mills had shown, and both he and Mills looked to them like establishment leaders. Activists, especially younger ones, felt Mills had been too conservative on issues such as tribal sovereignty, data centers and the justice system. Many of them were fervently opposed to the Netanyahu government in Israel and thought Mills should have been more critical of it, as Platner had been. But more than anything else, Mills was hurt badly by her age. At 77, she would have been one of the oldest freshman senators in history, and she promised to serve only one term. But at a time when many Democratic activists were unhappy at the power that had and is held by older people (Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Chuck Schumer, Mitch McConnell and others), Mills faced many in her party who essentially said “Look, Janet Mills was a great leader, the first woman Governor of Maine, and she was right for her time. But it’s time for a new, more progressive generation to take power.” While Mills held even in polling with Platner with older

voters—especially older women who admired Mills’ career—she did very poorly with voters under 50, particularly under 40.⁴

Even as embarrassing Reddit posts made by Platner 12 years ago (when he was mentally struggling by his own admission) came to light, in which he made numerous offensive statements about various groups, Platner’s supporters, for the most part, felt that this showed his authenticity, accepted that he apologized for most of the statements, and felt he was now a different, better man, and refused to abandon their support for him. The same was true of the reaction to a tattoo he had gotten in Croatia which featured an SS logo. He said he didn’t know what it was, he was horrified to find out, and had the tattoo covered. Again, his supporters largely brushed this issue off as a youthful error.

Janet Mills found herself down by double digits and running out of money. She took one last big shot: running two attack ads on Platner’s Reddit comments, including running an ad with women reading quotes about women from Platner’s “dark period” (Roarty 2026). SuperPACS supporting Susan Collins were running similar ads well before the primary as well.

It did very little to tighten the race, shake Platner’s backers, or to bring in money to Mills’ campaign, which was badly trailing Platner’s campaign fundraising. After the ads had little effect, she stopped spending money on ads (Kail 2026), and a few weeks after that, suspended her campaign (Panetta and Rupar 2026). As more allegations against Platner came out close to the primary, involving claims of ill treatment by former girlfriends, and of Platner “sexting” at least six women and having a profile on Kik, Mills reminded the public that she was still on the ballot (Collins 2026). But neither she, greatly underfunded 2024 Democratic nominee David Costello, nor left wing write-in candidate Andrea LaFlamme were able to slow Platner down in the final results. Platner won with about 70% of the vote and received the highest number of primary votes in Maine Democratic history (Stackhouse 2026).

POLICY ISSUES

The Initiative that Wasn’t: The Effort to Get a Transgender Sports Ban on the Ballot.

In the past two years, Maine has had a number of controversies over transgender people and schools. The most nationally prominent of these happened at the White House in February, 2025, at a gathering of state governors with President Trump (I discuss this further in my 2025 update, Melcher 2025; see also Sotille 2025).

This White House dustup led to additional fights between the State (which argued that protection of transgender rights was mandated by the state’s Human Rights Statute) and the Trump Administration (which argued that Maine was violating Trump’s executive order “Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports” and Title IX). This led to threats by the Trump Administration to cut off various areas of federal funding to Maine (Mistler and Miller 2025), but these conflicts generally ended by May 2025 with the Trump Administration backing off of many of its threatened sanctions (Wiggins 2025). The victory of a transgender girl in the pole vault at the state track meet was followed by a firestorm of activity from conservatives, who argued that allowing someone identified as male at birth to compete with girls was illegal gender

⁴Not even the famous gap in support between younger and older voters Donald Trump produced—especially in 2016 and 2020—came close to the age gap between Platner and Mills. It may be the largest such gap I have ever seen.

discrimination (Kingkade 2025).⁵

In the wake of the controversy, a group called Protect Girls' Sports in Maine built support to get an initiative on the November 2026 statewide ballot to, in their words, ensure that sports participation and private facilities in schools are designated by sex. Absolutely everyone gets to play sports, and everyone gets access to single-sex spaces" (Protect Girls' Sports in Maine, n.d.) The initiative would not only keep transgender students out of high school sports in Maine in the gender with which they identify but also enact similar restrictions on place such as locker rooms and restrooms.

As is often the case with statewide initiatives in Maine, this one received national attention and funding. An estimated 40% of those who gathered signatures in Maine were from out of state, and the Maine Monitor reported that "Almost all of the funding supporting the push so far has flowed from a single midwestern billionaire. State campaign finance data shows that Richard Uihlein, a major conservative donor, gave \$800,000 to support the ballot question in October 2025" (Junker 2026). However, the support for the initiative's idea had strong support in Maine as well as outside the state. The University of New Hampshire's Pine Tree Poll found in March that "64% believe transgender female athletes should not be allowed to compete in women's sports" (Cover 2026).

The backers of the initiative submitted more than the required number of signatures in early 2026 to get on the ballot (Pendharkar 2026). While Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows initially approved the initiative for the November ballot, a group of opponents sought to have the approval either removed or remanded to the Secretary of State for further review, and a state court agreed to a remand (*Gilbert et. al. v. Bellows*, 2026).

That remand led to the death of the initiative. Bellows' staff found numerous irregularities with a significant number of signatures for it, many traced to sloppy work by paid petition gatherers from out of state. They found enough signatures that they said should be disqualified that the initiative no longer had enough to get on the ballot. Bellows agreed, ruled that the initiative would be struck from the ballot as a result, a decision upheld by a Maine Superior Court Judge (Lobley 2026; Miller 2026A). Advocates of the initiative are currently appealing that ruling to the Maine Supreme Judicial Court. Given that the initiative (even with wording its advocates wanted changed) was leading in a recent Pan Atlantic Poll, it would seem likely that its backers will again try to get it on the ballot.

AI center veto

With the rise in use of artificial intelligence, many data centers have been proposed or constructed around the US. While their backers say they are necessary and will foster a stronger economy, opponents have expressed concerns about the heavy electricity and water use they require, as well as concerns about noise. State and local governments around the country have considered imposing moratoriums or prohibitions on data center construction (Scott 2026).

While a number of local governments (including Minneapolis, Seattle, Denver and New Orleans) have imposed moratoria on data centers, Maine could have been the first state to impose a statewide moratorium, which would have been welcome news to many environmental activists (Kim 2026; Hurwitz 2026). Governor Mills expressed support for such a moratorium in principle but told the Legislature that she would veto their bill if it did not include an exception for a

⁵My 2025 Maine Politics Summer Update discusses this conservative protest in more detail, and particularly the actions of State Representative Laurel Libby (R-Auburn).

project already underway in Jay, a paper mill town that took a large economic hit when a major paper mill there closed in 2023. Project developers had suggested that the project was not viable if a moratorium was imposed. The Legislature passed the bill anyway, and Governor Mills vetoed it, and the veto was upheld. Afterwards, Mills announced that she would form a committee to look at data center policy in Maine (Kool 2026; Othot 2026). Some towns in Maine, such as Bangor, had already enacted moratoriums on data center development in their communities before Governor Mills' veto of the broader moratorium (WABI News Desk 2026), and in the wake of this bill's failure, some Maine communities are beginning to consider moratoria of their own, and Westbrook has already passed a 180 day moratorium (News Center Maine Staff 2026).

ICE and Maine

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been used much more aggressively by the current Trump Administration than at any time in the past. ICE actions in Minnesota in Operation Metro Surge, which has been described by the Department of Homeland Security as the "largest immigration enforcement operation ever", have involved unprecedented conflict (including the ICE killings of Sandra Good and Alex Pretti), arrests, disruption and national attention in a far greater way than anywhere else in the United States (Boone 2026).

But the next place to which ICE turned its attention was Maine, where ICE called its program "Operation Catch of the Day". Like Minnesota, Maine has a significant population of Somali-Americans, as well as a more recent surge in Africans seeking asylum, particularly from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. However, this surge greatly slowed after 2024, when Donald Trump was elected to a second term as President (Zhang 2025; Barajas 2026). The operation in Maine was relatively brief, though it did result in around 400 arrests. An investigation by the *Maine Monitor* and *Bangor Daily News* showed that under 15% of those arrested had a criminal history (Loftus and Ferguson 2026; Vander Valk 2026).⁶

LESSONS

The big theme going into this season of Maine politics was the presence of the candidates from well-known families. But there wasn't a clear pattern in their performance. Hannah Pingree eked out a narrow victory, some other candidates with big names ran well but finished just short (both Jonathan Bush and Joe Baldacci finished second in their primaries, and Angus King III finished last). Their name recognition likely gave them a boost early on in their campaigns, but some had more staying power with it than others did.

The biggest lesson from this era may be how RCV may have alliance-building effects when fields are large, and that different candidates will react differently to its presence. This was more visible on the Democratic side than among Republicans, but even they had a formal alliance between Jonathan Bush and Robert Wessels. Bobby Charles, on the other hand, explicitly rejected forming alliances with any other campaign, and discouraged his backers from ranking anyone else. In an informal sense, the other candidates lined up against Charles. After Joe Baldacci received backing from the same Washington Democratic groups that tried to keep Matt Dunlap out of the race, the three other candidates did not form a formal alliance but tended

to focus attention on criticizing Baldacci (Shepherd 2026). Perhaps RCV in races with more than three candidates helps lead candidates to team up against the frontrunner.

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