

New Hampshire State Politics Report 2026: Both parties brace for midterm challenges

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New Hampshire Politics and Trump 2.0

New Hampshire is often an outlier among New England states, and that continues to be the case regarding the second Trump presidency. While governors like Janet Mills and state attorneys general across the region have had high-profile conflicts with the Trump administration in the courts and in public statements, New Hampshire, the only state in New England with a Republican governor and state legislature, has been far more aligned with the administration and its priorities. It is the only state in New England with local police departments acting in partnership with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Guzmán 2026), and whose local police departments are required by state law to cooperate with federal immigration authorities (Guzmán 2025). Last August, the state banned several forms of gender-affirming care for minors, a move in keeping with the second Trump administration's ongoing assault on transgender citizens (Gokee 2025). Governor Kelly Ayotte was the only New England governor who did not participate in an effort last year to limit the fallout from the Trump administration's trade war with Canada (Garrity 2025).

That is not to say that New Hampshire has been completely absent from opposing the Trump administration. But the resistance we have seen has generally not come from elected officials at the state level. New Hampshire's branch of the American Civil Liberties Union has taken a leading role in challenging Trump initiatives like his executive order purporting to end birthright citizenship (Porter 2025) and its ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in public schools (Timmins 2026). In the face of Trump efforts to seize state voter lists and control of election administration, secretary of state Dave Scanlan – no one's idea of a resistance leader – has steadfastly refused to comply (Skipworth 2026c).

Governor Kelly Ayotte has had two high-profile breaks with the Trump administration. She was an early obstacle to Trump's demand that states with Republican governors and legislatures redraw their congressional district lines to create additional Republican-leaning seats in advance of the 2026 midterm elections, and despite some interest among GOP legislators, the effort in New Hampshire sputtered to a close early this year (Porter 2026). She also worked with then-DHS Secretary Kristi Noem to end plans to construct a detention center for deportees in Merrimack, following widespread protests from citizens (Wormald 2026). These actions are best understood in the context of serving Ayotte's re-election campaign, as is her signing of a bill to ban the use of college identification cards as valid forms of voter ID (Matherly 2026b).

On the electoral front, the Granite State was home to a dramatic special election in March to fill a vacant state house seat representing Carroll County District 7. Democrat Bobbi Boudman, who had run unsuccessfully for this seat in 2022 and 2024, won in an upset. Boudman's 52-48% margin represents a 13-point improvement over Kamala Harris' performance in this district, which Donald Trump carried 54-45% in 2024. Boudman was also badly outspent by her opponent, Republican Dale Fincher, and outside groups spent over \$30,000 on Fincher's

behalf (Nir 2026). For context, just 4,249 votes were cast. This election does not much change the composition of the 400-seat lower house, but it is a leading cause of Democratic optimism heading into this year's general election.

US Senate race

Senator Jeanne Shaheen announced last year that she would not seek a fourth term in office, and Chris Pappas, who has represented the first congressional district since 2018, quickly announced his candidacy. A number of activists are also running for the Democratic nomination, but Pappas is the strong favorite in the Democratic primary. If elected, he will become New Hampshire's first openly gay US Senator.

On the Republican side, the state party recruited a Sununu, but not necessarily their preferred Sununu. Republicans have been trying to convince Chris Sununu, the state's popular former governor, to run for federal office for years, but he is currently enjoying his job working as an airline lobbyist. The front-runner for the Republican nomination is Sununu's older brother, John E. Sununu, who held this Senate seat for one term before losing to Shaheen in the 2008 Democratic wave, and who has demurred past attempts to recruit him to run for office again. As recently as last spring, Sununu was telling audiences he had no interest in ever running for office again. Sununu was the youngest member of the Senate throughout his term – he was in his early forties at the end of his term -- but is now running as something of a nostalgia candidate, presenting himself as an ambassador from an earlier, more harmonious political era. It is an open question whether this will land with voters who actually remember the George W. Bush era.

Sununu brings name recognition, fundraising prowess, and deep ties to the state's Republican establishment to the table. He has also met with and been endorsed by Donald Trump (Kashinsky 2025), despite his past criticism of Trump and his endorsement of Nikki Haley in 2024, and by Americans for Prosperity, which has begun advertising on Sununu's behalf (Landrigan 2026). Sununu is enough of a heavyweight that his entry to the race led state senator Dan Innis to end his own candidacy and endorse Sununu (Matherly 2025).

However, Sununu does not have a clear path to the nomination. Former Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown, who lost a race for this seat to Jeanne Shaheen in 2014 (Galdieri 2019), announced his candidacy early. Despite having served in the first Trump administration as ambassador to New Zealand, Brown did not win Trump's endorsement. A SuperPAC supporting Brown's campaign raised eyebrows with a recent attack on Sununu over his name's single appearance in the Jeffrey Epstein files, specifically an email in which Epstein writes, "John Sununu has good stories" (Sexton 2026a). It is unclear whether this is a reference to John E. Sununu, the once and would-be senator, or to his father, former governor and White House chief of staff John H. Sununu, and both Sununus have declared that they never had any contact or interactions with Epstein. A mailer making this attack went out to voters of all registrations, including voters who have never taken part in a Republican primary, which suggests the goal was publicity rather than a direct appeal to GOP primary voters. But this is not the attack of someone who feels the race is going his way, and Brown is already being asked if he is remaining in the race (Everett 2026). Certainly many state and national party leaders would prefer a clear field for Sununu to a lengthy negative campaign through the September 8 primary.

That primary will see two former United States senators face off against each other, which has not happened since the last time Scott Brown ran for this seat. The GOP primary is the latest reminder that, for all its success at the state level, the party has no farm team. This is the second cycle in a row when the party turned to a defeated former officeholder to run for an open seat.

In the general election, Pappas is favored to win the election. Sununu is the stronger Republican candidate, and while polls show him running closer to Pappas than Brown, Sununu still trails in head-to-head matchups with Pappas. The national environment will be a punishing one for a Republican in a state that has exclusively sent Democrats to Congress since 2016 and last elected a Republican to the Senate in 2010. But the closer this race is, the more resources Democrats will have to spend here defending this seat rather than trying to expand a difficult Senate map.

House races

In the first congressional district, Chris Pappas' Senate candidacy has opened up this seat for the first time since his election in 2018. The leading Democratic candidate is Stefany Shaheen, daughter of the retiring Senator and a former Portsmouth city councilor. Her chief rival among the other candidates is Maura Sullivan, a former Obama administration official who ran for this seat in 2018 and faced charges of carpetbagging and district-shopping (Chjoolian 2018), but has remained active in New Hampshire Democratic politics since then. Sullivan has outraised Shaheen throughout the campaign, but this has not yet translated into an advantage in the polls. Several less-known candidates are also in the mix but are running far behind Shaheen and Sullivan.

Two business owners, Anthony DiLorenzo and Hollie Noveletsky, lead the Republican field. But as with the Senate race, the national environment will provide punishing headwinds for any Republican nominee, and Democrats are likely to hold this seat regardless of who the parties nominate. For many years the first district was regarded as one of the swingiest bellwethers in the country, but in 2024 the district was an afterthought and saw almost no national attention or spending.

In the second district, incumbent Maggie Goodlander is strongly favored to hold her seat for a second term. Goodlander, whose resume includes service in the Navy Reserve, made headlines last year as one of six congressional Democrats to record a message to servicemembers reminding them of their obligation to disobey illegal orders (Rogers 2025). The video provoked furious criticism from Republicans in the Trump administration and in New Hampshire, as well as a bomb threat against her district office in Concord (Wilson 2025), but has not harmed her political standing in this solidly Democratic district, and indeed has probably improved it. The Trump administration attempted to indict Goodlander and the other five Democrats in the video, but were unable to convince a grand jury that these six members of Congress had committed any crime (Matherly 2026a). It is hard to imagine any of her potential Republican opponents making much headway against her in the likely environment of the fall general election.

State races

Democrats in the Granite State are feeling optimistic about their chances in this year's elections for the state legislature, but it should be noted that they also felt that way in 2020, 2022, and 2024, all years in which Republicans won control. That said, the Carroll County special election discussed earlier does provide concrete support for them to hold a certain degree of hope heading into November. But those Democratic hopes must be tempered by institutional realities. While control of the state legislature's lower chamber is clearly in reach, the state senate is so heavily gerrymandered that anything beyond a 12-12 tie would require not just a blue wave but a blue tsunami (Plourde 2022). The districts for the state's five-member executive council similarly favor the council's Republicans to a degree that it would take an overwhelming Democratic tide to flip the four seats currently held by Republicans.

Governor Kelly Ayotte is seeking a second two-year term. New Hampshire governors rarely lose their re-election bids – Craig Benson's 2004 loss was the most recent, and the first since Hugh Gallen's 1982 defeat – and Ayotte should be viewed as the favorite in this race. She has taken pains to keep some distance from the legislature's most extreme bills with carefully chosen vetoes of bills to vastly expand vaccine exemptions (Skipworth 2026a) and to exclude transgender people from bathrooms, locker rooms, and other spaces (Skipworth 2026b), but has also worked to stay on the right side of conservative voters in her own party through stunts like vetoing a paint recycling program with a social media post declaring the program a sales tax (Rogers 2026) and renting a billboard truck to patrol the streets of New York City urging businesses to relocate to New Hampshire following the election of Mayor Zohran Mamdani in November of last year (Micek 2025). While Donald Trump openly mused about finding a primary challenger when she declined to support redistricting the state, no primary challenger has emerged, in large part because the only recognizable name floated for such a challenge was that of Corey Lewandowski, last seen serving under Kristi Noem during her tumultuous tenure at Homeland Security. However, while Ayotte's approval ratings are in positive territory, they are also far below the stratospheric approval predecessors like Chris Sununu and John Lynch enjoyed. A March poll, for instance, found her at just 49% approval and 47% disapproval (Levesque and Sisco 2026).

Ayotte's likely Democratic opponents are proof that the GOP is not the only party in the state with a limited bench. At this writing, there are two declared Democratic candidates for governor. Jon Kiper owns a restaurant and has served in local government in Newmarket; he placed third in the 2024 primary for governor, and initially launched his 2026 campaign as an independent before rejoining the Democrats last fall (Sexton 2025). The other is Cinde Warmington, a former member of the state's executive council and the second-place finisher in the 2024 primary for governor. Warmington's past work as a lobbyist for pharmaceutical companies was a headache for her in 2024 and will be again in this campaign. Notably, Portsmouth mayor Portsmouth Mayor Deaglan McEachern explored running but ultimately opted not to (Sexton 2026b). The late primary will give the eventual nominee fewer than 60 days to unify the party and make their case against Governor Ayotte. And the 2024 campaign suggests Democrats are not sure how to run against her: That year, Democrats attacked her on both abortion rights and her newfound support for Donald Trump, in a turnaround from her break with him in her unsuccessful 2016 campaign (Lucas et al. 2018). But she was able to win by running against Massachusetts and Manchester.

That said, Ayotte won that race by 9.3 points. That margin is both commanding and meaningfully less than the average swing toward Democrats of 12.9 points in special elections during 2025 and 2026 (Donner et al. 2024). Either Democrat will have their work cut out for them in the general election, but there is some potential here for this race to become a sleeper. Keep an eye on the impact of Donald Trump's tariffs and tirades against Canada on summer tourism and visas for summer workers (Sexton 2026c), as well as the added impact of climbing gas prices thanks to Trump's war on Iran.

2028

It is, of course, never too early to talk about the 2028 presidential primary. Republicans plan to follow the traditional schedule of Iowa caucuses followed by the New Hampshire primary. As has been the case in previous cycles, many Democrats are unhappy with the idea of New Hampshire going first, thanks to its lack of diversity and a major urban center, as well as its recent tendency to support more progressive candidates like Bernie Sanders. However, the reality is that state law mandates New Hampshire conduct the first presidential primary and empowers the secretary of state to make decisions about the primary's timing unilaterally. That law is absolutely not going to change under the current Republican trifecta, nor will state Democrats make changes should they succeed beyond their wildest dreams and win a trifecta of their own in November. And unlike the 2024 primary, which began in controversy and ended with a write-in campaign for Joe Biden in an unsanctioned primary (Galdieri 2024), we are likely to see state and party leaders put would-be presidential contenders on the spot over their support for New Hampshire holding the first primary as they have in previous cycles (Moore and Smith 2015).

One might expect that the party with a primary calendar and a term-limited incumbent would see multiple potential candidates test the waters with visits to the state, appearances on behalf of Republican candidates, and other activity that falls under the heading of "party building," while the party whose calendar exists in a haze of uncertainty and controversy would see candidates keeping their powder dry. The opposite is the case. There has been virtually no visible activity here from likely Republican candidates like Vice President JD Vance. But Democrats keep coming to the state, including Governor Andy Beshear of Kentucky, former mayor and secretary of transportation Pete Buttigieg, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey, former ambassador and mayor Rahm Emanuel, Senator Ruben Gallego of Arizona, Senator Mark Kelly of Arizona, Representative Ro Khanna of California, Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, Governor Gavin Newsom of California, Governor JB Pritzker of Illinois, and Governor Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania, among others. Would-be Democratic nominees have the advantage of belonging to the party out of power; there is essentially no harm for them in visiting the state and holding a town hall or giving a speech at a party event. Republicans face a different landscape. While Donald Trump's occasional ramblings about an unconstitutional third term have become much less frequent, it is clear that he plans to play a heavy role in determining who his successor will be. Indeed, given the extent of many Republican voters' parasocial relationship to him, it is tough to imagine anyone being a viable candidate for the 2028 Republican nomination without Trump's approval, if not a full endorsement. That may change following the midterm elections, but for now the contest for the next Republican nomination is an inside game being played for an audience of one.

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