

VERMONT POLITICS IN 2026: CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCY

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Vermont in 2026 is continuing to experience headwinds from a number of intersecting policy challenges at both the state and national levels. Housing, education, and cost of living concerns are all putting pressure on the daily lives of Vermonters, and the Vermont Legislature has struggled to reach consensus solutions to these issues. This is potentially leading to a growing bifurcation in the state's electoral politics: substantial stability at the statewide office level (including Congressional offices), but growing disaffection and Republican inroads at the state legislative level. The possible electoral results in November are likely to reflect a critical tension: will Vermont voters be more guided by continuing differences with the Trump administration and the Republican Congress, or will frustrations with local issues lead them to enlarge their support of the Republican minority in the Legislature? Or will both occur (as Vermonters have a long tradition of split ticket voting)?

2026 Electoral Politics: Likely Statewide Office Stability for Democrats (And Governor Scott); Local Republican Inroads?

On the statewide level, U.S. House representative Becca Balint (D) is running for her 3rd term, and the seat is considered either solid or safely Democratic by multiple political analysts, with small business owner Mark Coester and veteran and business executive Gerald Malloy (who had previously run for the U.S. Senate in 2022 and 2024) contesting an August primary for the Republican nomination (Ballotpedia 2026). While Balint's margin of victory in 2024 was slightly reduced from her 2022 performance, she maintains solid public support.

Governor Phil Scott (R) is running for a historic 6th term, and maintains broad bipartisan popularity, with the seat being considered solidly or safely Republican; economist and community organizer Amanda Janoo and former CEO of Let's Grow Kids Aly Richards are contesting the Democratic primary to oppose Governor Scott (Ballotpedia 2026). While both Janoo and Richards have policy positions that are likely to be broadly appealing to Vermont voters, the consistent distance that Governor Scott has kept from the Trump administrations since 2016 (as well as his demonstrated bipartisan voter base) is likely to give him the edge for re-election (barring an intense Democratic voter reaction in November against any candidate with the Republican label, even Governor Scott).

Scott's lieutenant governor, John Rodgers (R), who narrowly beat incumbent David Zuckerman in 2024, may face a stiff challenge in 2026, with 3 Democrats contesting an August Democratic primary to oppose him: Esther Charleston (co-chair of Vermont's Commission on Women), Molly Gray (Lieutenant Governor 2021-2023), and Ryan McLaren (former top aide to U.S. House Rep. and U.S. Senator Peter Welch) (Ballotpedia 2026). While Gray is in the lead in the latest polling, 42% of potential voters are undecided or unfamiliar with the candidates (Cutler 2026b). Given Vermont's strong reactions to current national Republican policies, and the degree of resulting voter energy, it is possible that Rodgers may lose, even as Governor Scott is likely to win.

Vermont's other statewide executive offices are likely to remain in Democratic hands in 2026. Democratic incumbents Attorney General Charity Clark, Secretary of State Sarah

Copeland Hanzas, and State Treasurer Michael Pieciak are all facing opposition from multioffice candidate Republican H. Brooke Paige (who is contesting for these offices as well as the State Auditor position). The State Auditor's race is an open seat, with Democrats Timothy Ashe, Nicholas Graeter, and Dan Towle in an August primary to oppose Paige (Ballotpedia 2026). Given the national and state political dynamics, combined with the singular Republican facing them, it appears likely that Democrats will maintain control over these offices in 2026.

It is at the state legislative level that Republicans (may) have some hope of maintaining or augmenting their current level of representation. In 2024, Republicans gained 18 seats in the 150 member Vermont House of Representatives (breaking the Democratic supermajority) and 6 seats in the 30 member Vermont Senate (with an 87-56-7 Democratic balance in the House and a 16-13-1 balance in the Senate). Of equal note, the 2022 and 2024 elections both saw record turnover of seats to new members (Wrask 2025). While Vermont electoral politics may still be dominated by the Democratic Party, these recent legislative cycles indicate that there is real ferment in the localized Vermont electorate, which may continue to express itself in 2026. These changes and currents may be driven by, and in turn fuel, real public policy concerns of Vermont voters, to be discussed in the next section.

Vermont Public Policy In 2026: Challenges Of A Changing Vermont

Vermont in 2026 finds itself continuing to be confronted with an interlocking group of public policy pressures. Vermont's population is steadily aging, with sufficient young workers hard to find in many areas. At the same time, Vermont faces an intense affordable and overall housing shortage for those who do want to live and work in the state. The state's healthcare system continues to face both financial challenges and overwhelmed providers, due in part to demographics. And these forces in turn are changing the face of Vermont, leading to vigorous debates about needed changes in the state's education and tax systems, among others. In many ways, Vermont's social liberalism is colliding with how it can be paid for and maintained over time, while still preserving the nature of Vermont as people have understood it (both literally and figuratively).

One of these policy issues, confronting the Legislature from multiple directions is a combination of cost of living and local control pressures. For example, in 2024, the Legislature had passed a major land use reform law, Act 181, part of which toughened requirements for Act 250 review of development proposals in environmentally sensitive areas. Local Vermonters widely perceived it as burdensome on those rural Vermonters who could least afford its restrictions on the use of their properties. After substantial public backlash expressed at 2026 legislative hearings on the law's impact, lawmakers began to rethink the law (McCallum 2026). On May 27, a bipartisan majority of the Legislature finalized the repeal of these toughened requirements, a clear reaction to intense and mobilized constituent opinion on the issue (Mountain Times 2026).

Another critical public challenge (with multiple implications) is the economic pressures facing young Vermonters, both those who are native and those who hope to make Vermont their permanent home. According to a recent University of New Hampshire poll, 60% of 18-34 year old Vermonters will "likely" leave Vermont within the next 5 years, substantially due to high housing and other costs. The poll also finds a massive 86% of Vermonters judging the state to be "at least somewhat unaffordable" (Curry 2026). Particularly in regards to young people, these numbers reflect the stakes facing Vermont policymakers. Can they develop policies that

construct or maintain a fiscally sustainable environment for all Vermonters, where housing is within reach and living costs (including taxes) are not prohibitive for many people? And will “Vermont”, as citizens have understood it, be recognizable? These are not easy political questions for policymakers of any party.

One policy area where these tensions have emerged is in the state’s system of funding K-12 education. During the 2026 session of the Legislature, Governor Scott insisted that the Legislature formulate and approve a restructuring of Vermont’s schools (funded in recent years by a statewide property tax) into a fiscally sustainable number of consolidated districts, before he would approve any overall state budget. This would lead to many towns losing their town-based and town-controlled schools, a major social change. After months of tension and conflict, Governor Scott and the Legislature compromised on a framework that “allows districts to voluntarily merge and share services to cut costs” , rather than state mandated consolidation (Cutler 2026a). In essence, the 2025 and 2026 legislative discussions and actions reflected the crosspressures of rising education costs colliding with a deep desire to maintain local control of education, resulting thus far in leaving the political choice to each town as to how to balance this cost versus control dynamic. This in many ways is in keeping with Vermont’s historic tradition of local town meeting governance, even as these towns confront the 21st century realities of rising costs and changing demography. From the evolution of Act 181 to this compromise on education funding, local control in Vermont is a persistent element in the content and formulation of public policies.

Conclusion: Political Stability and the Evolution of a Unique Policy Environment?

In facing the range of dynamic issues confronting the state in 2026, Vermont’s historic political structure and traditions may be a (not so?) hidden asset that help it to navigate its future. On the structural side, the longstanding practices of no required party registration for voters and primaries open to all voters have given the electoral system the flexibility to not have parties as easily captured by one faction (since all voters can potentially have a say in who a party nominates). Combined with Vermont’s small state demography and its town meeting tradition, it can be argued that this gives the political center (and decentralized local communities) of citizen opinion greater leverage over who emerges to hold office and lead the state. As a result, in the face of divisive national tensions, “the Vermont way” of meaningful dialogue across party lines on issues (as on recent commentator put it, “...a governing culture based on personal relationships, bipartisan cooperation and institutional trust”) is able to persist, arguably enabling a unique policymaking environment for these times (Bassett 2026).

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