

Maine voters will join the rest of the nation and head to the polls Tuesday for an Election Day that promises plenty of uncertainty, a myriad of surprises, and a late evening for local politicians. Races right here in the Dirigo State will reveal dynamics that may well inform us of both Maine's and the United States' political trajectory. A central question is whether the electoral trends of the last several years are here to stay or if they were a temporary outlier, an anomaly on the radar of history.

The 2010 election of Governor Paul LePage (R) may have forever changed the playing field of electoral politics in Maine. Running on his Franco heritage, Catholic upbringing, and milltown roots, LePage denied Democrats the coalition Gov. John Baldacci had relied on for plurality wins in 2002 and 2006 while also sweeping Republicans into full control of the Legislature for the first time since the early 1970s. While Democrats regained House and Senate majorities in 2012 this told us little about the depth of the Republican ascendancy's staying power in Maine. 2014 saw Gov. LePage reelected with more votes than any candidate for the Blaine House had ever received, as he outperformed polls and defeated moderate Franco Congressman Mike Michaud, a blue-collar mill worker whose Congressional seat was easily picked up by Republican Bruce Poliquin. Riding LePage's coattails Republicans regained a State Senate majority and ate into the House's blue wall. 2016 saw them make further gains when President Donald Trump handily won an electoral vote here, becoming the first Republican to do so since George H.W. Bush in 1988.

Democrats looked to a bright spot in narrowing their deficit in the state senate to only one seat. They also found themselves the beneficiaries of the electoral realignment that had hindered them since the outset of the decade. While their traditional bastions of support in predominantly Franco mill towns continue to trend to the GOP they now find gains in more populous coastal communities. Many of these ancestrally-Republican towns, places like Falmouth, Cape Elizabeth, or Camden, have not evolved in tandem with a national party whose conservative populism is out of favor there. With President Trump's approval mired in the low 40's, Democrats will look to make gains with disaffected Republican voters while also using a favorable environment to restore what they can of the statewide coalition that served them so well in the late 20th Century.

The 2018 midterms are already being compared to any number of prior elections, particularly other midterms. These tend to amplify pre-election buzz about a possible "Blue Wave" that would see significant Democratic gains at both the federal and state levels. While analysts wonder aloud how closely Tuesday's results might mirror elections ranging from 2006's Democratic wave that saw them wrest control of Congress to their own version of 2010 and 2014's Republican gubernatorial blowouts, the GOP has plenty of reason to remain optimistic. No matter which party or candidates

claim victory on Wednesday morning, Maine's races will be intently watched across America for their national significance and what they presage about the coming years in the United States.

## **State Level Races**

### **The Open Gubernatorial Contest: Mills v. Moody**

Gov. Paul LePage's impact on Maine's electoral story cannot be understated but to many he will be remembered for the conservative populism he brought to the State House. In particular, budget battles that approached government shutdowns in 2013 and 2015, and one that actually resulted in a state shut down in 2017, will define this era. Consequently Democrats are eager to move on now that he's termed out and barred from running for reelection while Republicans look to cast his legacy as one of reform and growth and worthy of a successor.

These two competing visions are vying to control the Blaine House on Tuesday as Attorney General Janet Mills and auto repair magnate Shawn Moody head up the Democratic and Republican tickets, respectively. The victor will be given the one and only opportunity to write the final chapter of the LePage era. And Mainers' decision on the matter is likely to foreshadow the one they will make in 2022: an incumbent Maine governor has not been defeated since Republican John Reed in 1966. That's a span of 52 years. The stakes could not be higher.

Mills hails from the more moderate, traditional wing of the Maine Democratic Party and overcame a crowded field of several candidates to win her nomination. Combat veteran and attorney Adam Cote of Sanford made a late surge in the final weeks of the Democratic Primary before finishing second to Mills in Maine's first use of Ranked-Choice Voting at the state level. Since then Democrats and their allies have largely coalesced around Mills and sense the chance to win the race.

Moody's path to the Republican nomination has been an intriguing one. The auto repair tycoon parlayed a long-shot 2010 independent bid for governor into the admiration of both major parties and was courted by them to varying extents for years afterward. Moody eventually became closer with Republican activists and registered with the GOP in 2017. While officially neutral LePage appeared to have thrown his nominal support to Moody, and the Gorham businessman easily rolled through the GOP primary, taking more than 50% of the vote in a four-way race.

One of the largest variables that could impact the outcome of this race is the presence of State Treasurer and former Democratic State Representative Terry Hayes. Hayes is now an "Unenrolled" (Maine's legal version of an "independent") candidate and qualified for public financing under the recently enhanced Maine Clean Election Act. Hayes hoped to capitalize on the relative success of

Eliot Cutler's unenrolled gubernatorial bids and has the remnants of his organization behind her. However, she appears unlikely to replicate the comparative strength of past unenrolled candidates like Cutler (2010) and Barbara Merrill (2006) and trails both Mills and Moody. Democrats were hampered by Cutler's presence in the field in past races but it remains unclear whether Hayes's candidacy really hinders Mills any more than Moody.

The contest to be Maine's chief executive is rated by some national analysts as "leans Democratic" but is considered by most a toss-up, particularly in-state. Sparse public polling has shown a Mills lead in the high single-digits but operatives on both sides believe the race to be closer than that. Most of Maine's municipalities, totaling nearly 500, will have reported their results before anyone feels comfortable calling this close race. Like much of recent Maine political history precedent may tell us very little about what to expect in this gubernatorial battleground.

## **State Legislative Chambers**

Control of Maine's State Senate and House of Representatives could come down to just a handful of seats. Even now, narrow majorities exist in each chamber: Senate Republicans hung on to a 18-17 advantage that mathematically could not be any closer following the 2016 elections, and House Democrats maintain a razor-thin margin over their GOP counterparts, buoyed by unenrolled members.

It is difficult to objectively look at these races and not see Democrats' position as the more enviable one. Maine has followed the national mood for several cycles now and dozens of legislators have been swept in and out of office thanks only to the partisan current of the moment. In this case, Democrats clearly have the wind at their backs. The president's party traditionally suffers during midterm election years, particularly when the commander-in-chief has a low approval rating. Democrats learned this lesson the hard way during the Obama years when they lost not only control of Congress but hundreds of legislative races around the country. They are now looking to make gains.

Legislative Republicans may also find themselves victims of their past success. An entire cohort of legislators elected in the Red Wave of 2010 now finds itself termed-out. Many of these members hold key seats where the power of incumbency sustained GOP strength, having hung on in a succession of challenging races. Democrats are now poised to pick up seats in some of these districts that have long trended toward them at the top of the ticket but are only now becoming more competitive in legislative races. These include senate districts anchored by communities like Bar Harbor and Belfast, and house seats in the smaller towns that surround similar communities.

Another factor benefiting Democrats is the sizeable fundraising advantage they've amassed over the Republican campaign committees. For instance, the Senate Democratic Campaign Committee has outraised all other caucus campaigns in each finance quarter since the end of the 2016 cycle. This cash advantage can allow a campaign committee to widen the playing field of competitive seats, pursue more varied media options, and muscle up with added organizing staff. This year's most expensive legislative contest is Senate District #20, a seat anchored on Auburn and its exurbs where more than \$400,000 has been reported in campaign and outside spending.

Republicans have reason for optimism and paths to a majority in both chambers, however. President Trump remains popular in much of rural Maine, and seats that have long trended away from Democrats in Franco strongholds continued to erode from their legislative coalition in 2016. Look for Republicans to focus on seats won by Trump where his low national approval ratings (generally in the low 40's) will be less of an albatross around their necks and perhaps an asset. While it is more difficult to imagine the House of Representatives flipping, there is certainly a scenario where Senate Republicans hold their majority and even improve on it.

Control of these legislative chambers will have immense impact on a myriad of issues in Maine. The direction of countless policy areas hinge on the makeup of these chambers paired with the gubernatorial contest's outcome. Most notable among these public policy questions could be voter-approved Medicaid expansion's fate.

## **State Referendums**

Maine has long been known as a hotbed of activity for statewide referendums, citizens' initiatives, and peoples' vetoes. This year there will be four bond issues and a citizens' initiative on the ballot. The various bond issues would fund construction projects ranging from multimodal transportation and public education facilities to water treatment. The citizens' initiative seeks to fund universal home care by way of a 3.8% surcharge on household income over \$128,000.

## **Federal Races**

### **US Senate Race, Class 1 Seat: King v. Brakey, Ringelstein**

For all the fervor from popular Senator Angus King's Democratic and Republican challengers expect this contest to remain an uneventful one Tuesday night. One of two unenrolled/independents, King's seat has not been seriously targeted by Republicans or by Democrats, whom he caucuses with. The former two-term governor has maintained one of the loftiest approval ratings of any United States senator and appears set to cruise to a second term in D.C.

That doesn't mean his challengers haven't been taking this candidacies seriously. Both Republican nominee Eric Brakey and Democratic nominee Zak Ringelstein have generated excitement among pools of activists in their respective parties. As with Maine's two congressional seats, this race will make use of Ranked-Choice Voting. While King is nearly certain to easily clear 50% and avoid triggering it, Brakey has polled better than Ringelstein, likely because of the Senator's closeness to the Democratic Party.

## **ME-01: Pingree v. Holbrook, Grohman**

Despite initial murmurs that Ranked-Choice Voting and the presence of a Democrat-turned-Unenrolled candidate could make this race interesting, Rep. Chellie Pingree has a solid hold on her district, anchored by Cumberland and York Counties.

2016 Republican nominee Mark Holbrook is back for another try at ME-01. And outgoing State Representative Marty Grohman of Biddeford is running as an unenrolled candidate after leaving the Democratic Party during the past legislative session. There was talk among Maine politicians that Grohman might be able to put the seat in play by consolidating enough centrist and conservative support to surpass Holbrook for the second slot after RCV eliminated the lowest vote getter. Theoretically, this may have allowed him to make a serious play at defeating Pingree by earning Holbrook's redistributed votes. In reality, that would have been very difficult to achieve in this district that has voted for a Republican only once in the last 30 years and given various Democratic nominees more than 60% of the vote in 9 of 15 contests during that time.

## **ME-02: Poliquin v. Golden**

Do not let the inclusion of this race at the bottom of our Election Day Primer detract from its significance or competitiveness: it couldn't be hotter. Bruce Poliquin surprised many observers when he defeated State Senator Emily Cain in 2014 and ended 20 years of Democratic hegemony in Maine's sprawling, rural 2nd District. That win foreshadowed President Trump's dominant win in the District two years later, a victory that earned him a lone electoral vote from Maine and helped Poliquin defeat Cain by a larger margin during their 2016 rematch. Poliquin, a once scoffed-at perennial candidate whose stint as State Treasurer was viewed by many as a fluke, quickly cemented himself as a major player in electoral politics and shattered fundraising records for freshman members of Congress from Maine.

Democrats had an interesting field to choose from in selecting their eventual nominee, Jared Golden. It ultimately came down to a two-way battle between Golden and conservationist Lucas St. Clair of Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument-fame. Golden is a combat veteran who

emphasized his progressive populism during the Democratic Primary, but many expected St. Clair to prevail due to his fundraising potential and popularity with Democrats supportive of the national monument.

However, Golden decisively defeated St. Clair in the June primary and quickly scaled up an impressive organization that has raised more than \$5,000,000 to date. Golden's well-oiled campaign, war chest, and background have paired well with his populist message and create probably the only conditions under which a Democrat could realistically compete with Poliquin. The 36-year-old veteran has turned a race initially viewed as unlikely to be competitive into a neck and neck heat, and some analysts give Golden slightly better odds though others still favor the incumbent. All said and done, this race will likely be viewed in retrospect as the priciest in Maine history

Poliquin can count the district's demographics among the factors working in his favor, however. This is a region that has mirrored other heavily white, working class regions and trended increasingly more Republican in recent years. The President has remained relatively popular here and actually serves as an asset to Poliquin in a year many Republican members of Congress are avoiding him in suburban districts. If Poliquin emerges victorious Tuesday despite the challenging environment and Golden's bona fides it not only means he's weathered the best Team Blue could throw at him – it means that 2nd District and rural Maine as a whole has probably completed the evolution from its ancestrally Democratic roots to reliably Republican.

## **Looking Forward**

Be prepared to stay up late Tuesday night. Observers eager to know which party has won a congressional majority might not have an answer until California's several swing districts close their polling locations at 11:00 p.m. EST. Likewise, competitive US Senate races in Arizona and Nevada won't begin to tabulate results until 9:00 and 10:00 p.m., respectively. Here in Maine polls will close at 8:00 p.m. but typically slow reporting from hundreds of small, understaffed Maine municipalities will mean that the gubernatorial and congressional contests, and certainly control of the state legislature, could be in question well into the early morning or perhaps for days if recounts are necessary.

Regardless of Tuesday night's outcome, this election will alter the electoral landscape in Maine. After years of non-competitive congressional and statewide races Maine is being viewed as a swing state. The answers we wake up to Wednesday morning may be of immediate interest to us. But Maine could be ground zero for control of the US Senate in 2020. Its electoral votes will likely be in question from the outset of Donald Trump's reelection campaign. And its state legislature shows no signs of

being any less volatile than we've seen them for successive cycles now. Preti Flaherty's legislative team has decades of experience dealing with Maine's evolving politics. We look forward to being there for whatever the future may bring, and we look forward to you joining us for the ride.

**Dan Walker**

Chair, Government Affairs Group  
dwalker@preti.com

**Chace Jackson**

Legislative Liaison  
chacejackson@preti.com