

New England State Reports

Connecticut's Hybrid Culture: Its Politics, Issues, and Future

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With its mixture of traditional, individualistic, and moralistic cultures, Connecticut remains a hybrid state. Political parties are strong because they control decision-making in the General Assembly and place candidates directly on ballots in local partisan elections. Candidates such as Ned Lamont and United States Senator Joseph Lieberman manipulate this state's election rules to achieve their individual political ambitions and ideological goals. Also, a few chief executives of local governments take opposing positions related to our nation's undocumented aliens. Connecticut's voters appear to favor the checks and balances provided by the model of divided government because Republican Governor Jodi Rell enjoys a consistent 70% favorable job rating while voters elect Democrats to hold veto-proof majorities in both houses of the General Assembly.

Connecticut continues to rank first in per capita income while its capital city continues to have one of the highest percentages of residents in poverty, one of the most segregated school systems, and one of the highest percentages of properties that are exempt from property taxes. Also, the state's pension fund for public school teachers is greatly underfunded. Connecticut continues to lose population, young college-educated residents, good-paying professional jobs, and Republican congressional seats. Democrats occupy four of this state's five congressional seats and both United States Senate seats.

The results of the 2007 local elections reveal that the two-party system is, still, strong at the local level. Democrats won control of 61 local governments, Republican candidates won 54 of them, and one minor-party candidate was successful in becoming a local chief executive. There were uncontested elections in 15 towns and the average voter-turnout was 37.4%. Twenty-one towns and cities exceeded 50% voter turnout while ten towns and cities had fewer than 25% voter participation. A significant number of local governments had candidates representing “minority” parties but they were composed mainly of Democrats and Republicans who had lost endorsement by their local town committees and ran as “independents” (much like the situation with Lieberman in his most recent Senate contest) in the general elections. Because Connecticut has a closed-party primary system, approximately 900,000 unaffiliated voters are excluded from participation in primary elections. Bills to create election-day registration were proposed in the 2007 legislative session and have the endorsement of the Secretary of State but have yet to be enacted.

The most interesting and exciting political event this year was Connecticut’s presidential primary that was held on February 5th—“Super Tuesday.” A month before this election there was a common belief that the major Democratic and Republican candidates would by-pass Connecticut. Polls indicated that Senator Clinton held a solid 14% advantage over Senator Obama. Among Connecticut’s 60 Democratic delegates, only 48 of them would be apportioned by the election. Among the 30 Republican delegates, only 27 of them would be apportioned. Senator Clinton had 3,800 volunteer campaign workers in place and the endorsements of Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and Comptroller Nancy Wyman.

As February 5th approached, this situation changed, rapidly. Senator Obama received the public endorsements of former Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry, United States Senator Ted Kennedy, and Caroline

Kennedy. Next, Connecticut's Representatives John Larson, Rosa DeLauro, Chris Murphy, and United States Senator Chris Dodd all endorsed Senator Obama. United States Senator Joe Lieberman endorsed Republican Senator John McCain.

Large numbers of students from Yale University and Trinity College became active members in the campaign of Senator Obama. New Haven Alderman Joseph Rodrigues organized that city's Hispanic voters to support Obama. In Hartford, Obama attracted more than 17,000 potential voters to a campaign rally at a civic center. Equally important, Obama received far more campaign contributions from Connecticut's eight country districts than any of the other Democratic or Republican candidates. The result of this presidential primary was Senator Obama won 53% of the Democratic popular vote and 26 delegates to Senator Clinton's 47% of the popular vote and 22 delegates. Senator McCain won 52% of the Republican vote to 33% of that vote for Romney and 7% of that vote for Huckabee.

One of the central issues in Connecticut's current politics is this state's continuing efforts to deal with metastasized corruption in its state and local governments. Central to this issue was the resignation of Republican Governor John Rowland, who was under federal court indictment and investigation by a state legislative impeachment committee. Two of his key staff members were found guilty of running a major operation of bribes for contracts out of the governor's office. The mayors of Bridgeport and Waterbury were found guilty of major crimes related to bribes for city contracts. One state senator also is serving a prison term for bribery. At this time, Hartford's Mayor Eddie Perez is under federal investigation for alleged corruption related to a \$20,000 home renovation project by a contractor who has a \$20 million contract with the city. Mayor Perez also is being investigated for alleged corruption related to granting public

parking franchises to a Democratic boss who controls a significant number of votes on the Democratic Town Committee, which endorses local candidates.

Related to personal corruption by state and local officials is the failed administrative policies of the Connecticut Department of Transportation. It awarded private contracts exceeding \$60 million for the repair of I-84. Rather than using state engineers and in-house maintenance workers, this department hired private contractors and private overseers to inspect the work. The result was millions of dollars of work not completed and sub-standard work that had to be redone. This department presently is being reorganized and a new departmental commissioner is being appointed.

Also part of Connecticut's corruption problem is the issue of state ethics reform. The current General Assembly is attempting to resolve five related questions: Should convicted state officials automatically lose their state pensions or should judges trying corruption cases have authority to reduce pensions as part of the sentencing process? Should the loss of pensions be made retroactive? Should the legislature create a new ethics committee or create an independent ethics board? Should those persons who lobby before the legislature be barred from serving on appointed local and state boards? Should the state government mandate that all local governments create codes of ethics and organizations for enforcement?

Connecticut's most enduring, intractable, and, potentially, most costly problem may change the relationship between the state and local governments—a relationship established in 1960 by this state's abolition of county government. In 1989, using the Connecticut Constitution, a state district court judge ruled in *Sheff vs. O'Neil* that the state must end racial isolation in Hartford's schools. Since that historic decision, the state and Hartford have tried a number of experiments with charter and magnet schools. Racial balance benchmarks,

established in 2003, have not been met. Hartford's schools remain more than 90% segregated by race and ethnicity.

The members of the General Assembly have, tentatively agreed to a \$600 million regional approach for the next five years. This plan gives the state educational commissioner authority to force Hartford's 22 suburban communities to create magnet and technical high schools to enroll Hartford's students. This new plan requires that 80% of Hartford's students who wish to enroll in an intra-district magnet, charter, or suburban school be accommodated by 2013. The legislature has allocated \$9.9 million to implement this plan during 2008-2009. Given the current plan to abolish 60 local probate courts in which judges are elected rather than appointed, this intra-regional school plan will force the state to fill the void of county government.

What is the forecast for Connecticut's political future? Republican Governor Jodi Rell will retain her high job-approval rating and run for reelection in 2010. Forecasting Democratic politics is more difficult. Much of that prediction depends upon two factors: who wins the office of president; who is selected to join a new national Democratic administration. If Senator Clinton becomes president, Connecticut's Attorney General Richard Blumenthal will likely become the United States Attorney General. If Senator Obama becomes president, United States Senator Dodd is likely to be offered a top position in his administration. If that last scenario occurs, Blumenthal is likely to run for Dodd's vacant senate seat.

Connecticut Democratic House Speaker James Amman and Connecticut President Pro-Tempore Donald Williams have, both, expressed an interest in running for governor. But Ned Lamont should not be forgotten. In beating Senator Lieberman in a Democratic challenge primary, he gained wide name recognition as a major proponent of ending the Iraq War. He remains active as a speaker on Connecticut's college campuses and has campaigned for Democratic

candidates in other states. Meanwhile, Senator Lieberman has antagonized Connecticut voters by campaigning for Senator John McCain. If Senator McCain becomes president, Senator Lieberman may be given a significant position in a Republican administration. That scenario would mean that Ned Lamont would become a strong contender for Lieberman's vacant seat.

Finally, Connecticut's battle with state and local corruption will not end for two main reasons. First, corruption has become ingrained in this state's ethics. Second, this state's leading newspapers have so deeply cut their state and local reporters that there are few talented and well-placed journalists to investigate and report wrongdoing by Connecticut public officials. These factors and conditions mean that Connecticut likely will remain a "hybrid" state with its mixture of individualistic, moralistic, and traditional cultures.