

Still LePage at Center Stage: A 2015 Maine Politics Update

James P. Melcher
University of Maine at Farmington

In discussing recent Maine political events, there can be no better place to begin than with Maine's blunt, abrasive, assertive and conservative Governor, Paul LePage. First elected in 2013, LePage thought by many to be one of the nation's most vulnerable governors back in 2013. Many had seen his election with 39% of the vote in a five way race as a fluke, and LePage's Republican Party—which took both houses of the Maine Legislature for the first time in decades in 2010-- lost both houses of the Maine legislature in 2012. And short of bringing former Senator George Mitchell out of political retirement, Democrats got the candidate they most wanted—Second District Congressman Mike Michaud, and cleared the field for him, nudging businessman and former Independent US Senate candidate Steve Woods out of the race. Michaud represented the more conservative of Maine's congressional districts and been re-elected handily multiple times. Michaud received nationwide and even international attention for the possibility that he could be the first openly gay governor in American history (see, for example, *Daily Mail* Reporter 2013; Halloran 2013; Sharp 2013), but this received relatively little attention in Maine. (However, some speculated that some of his more rural, conservative and Catholic supporters might have quietly fallen away from him after his announcement).

So, Democrats were shocked to see just how well Paul LePage did in defeating Michaud, as well as Independent Eliot Cutler, who made a late sorta-kind withdrawal with a few weeks to go, but remained on the ballot. LePage won with a surprising and convincing 48.2% of the vote—the highest percentage of the vote for a candidate for Maine Governor since Independent Angus King's landslide re-election in 1998. Further, his re-election was just one part of a strong overall

Republican performance in Maine in 2014. Republicans also cheered gaining seats (though not control) in the Maine House, recapturing the Maine Senate, and taking the 2nd Congressional District seat for the first time since Representative Olympia Snowe was elected to the U. S. Senate in 1994, as former State Treasurer Bruce Poliquin upset Maine Senate Majority Leader Emily Cain.

How did this happen? Many Democrats blamed heavy rural 2nd District turnout by social conservatives, who showed up to vote against a Humane Society of the United States-backed initiative to place new curbs on bear hunting and stayed to vote for Republicans Others blamed Michaud's lackluster campaign, or overconfidence among Democrats that most Mainers were personally embarrassed by LePage and that as Cutler's support eroded, it would all flow to Michaud and sweep him to victory, while still others felt Democrats were not focused enough on specific economic issues of interest to blue collar voters and were too interested in postmaterial issues. (Moretto 2014).¹

But Governor LePage viewed it as a fresh approval by Maine voters of his performance in office—and since Michaud tried to make the race a referendum on LePage's performance and behavior, LePage had much reason to think so. As a result, Governor LePage has become even more confrontational and unwilling to compromise since November—even at times with his own party.

On policy issues, the clearest mandate LePage had was on welfare, a perennial issue in Maine. Ads paid for by \$5.1 million in donations to LePage's campaign from the Republican Governors Association (RGA 2015)—led by LePage's friend, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie—repeatedly (and inaccurately) accused Democrats of supporting welfare for illegal

¹For a fine, in-depth scholarly analysis of Maine's 2014 elections, see Cody 2015.

immigrants, something LePage said he would stop (see, for example, Durkin 2014). At issue were refugees, largely from Africa, who were seeking asylum from brutal regimes in their home countries, in the United States. While they legally are in the US awaiting disposition of their asylum applications, they are barred from seeking employment for the first six months they are in the United States. Consequently, a handful of Maine cities—most prominently Portland and Westbrook—provide welfare benefits for these asylum seekers living in their jurisdictions. Governor LePage and some of his conservative allies (such as Deb Sanderson, R-Chelsea) were strongly opposed to these payments, arguing they were taking money away from needy Maine natives, and blocked the ability of these localities to make them. An effort to remove these restrictions passed the Legislature but was rejected by the Governor (Thistle 2015).

So that was the end of the issue, right? Not exactly. Aside from debates in Portland, Westbrook and Lewiston about whether to fund services for the asylum seekers, there was another issue that affected this and 64 other bills. Governor LePage did set a record for vetoes—at one point saying he would veto all bills that had a Democratic co-sponsor—but he took an unusual strategy of neither signing or vetoing the bills as the Legislature wrapped up its work before taking a break from which it returned. Majorities in both houses—including many Republicans—argued that they had not adjourned and had told the Governor that they would come back. That would mean all 65 bills the Governor did not act upon—many of which he hates—are now law. The Governor interpreted it differently, and argues that he can come back and veto them later—meaning they are not currently law. As of the end of July, the Maine Supreme Judicial Court was sorting out this matter. While some of the Governor’s explicit vetoes have been sustained, many others have been overridden with extensive bipartisan support. The governor has had extensive conflict with legislators of his own party, particularly moderates such as Roger Katz (R-

Kennebec County) and Tom Saviello (R-Franklin County). Katz particularly aroused the Governor's ire by introducing legislation compelling the Governor to issue bonds approved by state voters. The Governor has withheld \$11 million in bonds, saying that he will not issue them unless the Legislature votes to allow more timber harvesting on public (Higgins 2015).

On another issue involving Maine legislative leaders, the Governor took very clear and aggressive action. Maine has a part time legislature, with members earning about \$24,000 for a two year period. As a result, nearly all of the legislators who aren't retired have another job. Mark Eves, the Democratic Speaker of the Maine House, was looking for another job. He applied for and won the position as head of Good Will-Hinckley, a Maine educational and social institution dating back to the late 19th century located between Waterville and Skowhegan. Among the programs at GWH is a charter high school, the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences. Governor LePage, a strong supporter of charter and voucher schools programs, wrote GWH when he learned that Eves had applied for a job there. The letter said that GWH should not hire Eves, in part because LePage felt Eves had not been a strong enough supporter as a legislator of charter schools to be suited to the post. (This wasn't the first time LePage had been publicly critical of Eves; this spring, speaking of the California-born Speaker and the Senate Minority Leader, LePage said, "I think the speaker of the House should go back home to where he was born, and I think that Mr. Alford should be put in a playpen" (Cousins 2015). And Eves and Alford aren't the only leading Democrats in the Governor's doghouse. After a number of public disputes with Attorney General Janet Mills, Governor LePage proposed amending the state Constitution to provide for gubernatorial appointment (and firing) of the Attorney General. ²

²This topic was discussed extensively on an hour-long episode of the statewide public radio talk show "Maine Calling" on June 3, 2015. I joined host Jennfer Rooks, Republican state

LePage's was plenty unusual, but what was stranger still was that once Eves was offered the position, LePage reportedly retaliated against GWH by threatening to cut a major state appropriation to them. That, in turn, led the private Alford Foundation to question the financial health of GWH, and they said they, too, would cut their donation. At that point, GWH rescinded their offer that they had just made to Alford in order to protect their financial future, according to Eves. Eves has filed a lawsuit against LePage, and some legislators have called for an investigation into LePage's actions (Mazzo 2015). A few have even called for impeachment proceedings against the governor (see Edwards 2015; Fried 2015).

Initiatives and referenda

Yet another flashpoint between the Governor and the Legislature was the Legislature's rejection of LePage's proposal this spring for a statewide referendum to phase out the state's income tax by 2020. But even before this, LePage was working on an initiative proposal to do the same thing, and he now has the official backing of the Maine Republican Party (Russell 2015). If that proposal gets enough signatures to make the November ballot, it is likely it will have company. Initiatives concerning campaign finance and marijuana legalization are among those that may appear on Maine ballots in November or perhaps in 2016.

Two Maine towns have held nonbinding referenda in the past few months about a longstanding controversy: should Maine support the creation of a Maine Woods National Park in the area of north central Maine near Baxter State Park, the home of Mount Katahdin. Such proposals have been around for several decades now, but have generally been much less popular in the areas most directly affected than the areas farther away. Local residents have various fears about such a project: that it could harm Maine's timber industry and paper mills; that it could

senator Andre Cushing and Democratic state representative Danny Martin for the show. It can be

limit recreational opportunities such as snowmobiling; and that it would represent too much of a loss of local control. However, as Maine's paper industry continues to have significant difficulties, the areas affected most by the potential park experience serious economic problems, and park proponents have scaled back the size of their proposals (and become more accommodating), there has been an increased willingness in north central Maine to consider the possibility of a new national park in Maine.

So, has opposition to the park idea advanced enough that voters in north central Maine would vote for the idea? This proposition was put to the test in Medway and East Millinocket a week apart in late June, which along with Millinocket are among the most affected towns by the proposal. Voters in both towns, however, rejected the idea of a park by a decisive margin: Medway voted 71% no, and 63% voted against the plan in East Millinocket (Richardson 2015). The idea of a new national park won't go away, but these votes likely slowed the momentum toward it.

Maine and national politics

While Maine is usually not a major player in presidential nominating politics, Chris Christie's effort to regain momentum in the presidential campaign brought him to Maine this June. The national spotlight shone on Becky's Diner in Portland, a frequent venue for political events from around the political spectrum, when Governor LePage became the first Republican governor to endorse a candidate for president there (Cheney 2015). As I have written elsewhere in discussing this endorsement (Melcher 2015), presidential candidate endorsements don't swing a lot of votes by themselves, and Christie's campaign might never recover from the damage of the so-called "Bridgewater" affair. However, it was an excellent opportunity for him to not only

found here: <http://news.mpbn.net/post/choosing-maines-constitutional-officers>

get some positive media coverage, but to pick up a seal of approval from one of the most vocal and conservative governors in the country that could shore up his credibility with Republican primary and caucusgoers. Not every media outlet, however, thought LePage's endorsement was one worth having. For example, the Newark *Star-Ledger*, the largest newspaper in Christie's home state, castigated LePage in an editorial, stating that the endorsement "was about as appealing as a boil implant" (*Star-Ledger* editorial board 2015), and other coverage, such as an article in *Bloomberg Politics*, mentioned the controversies surrounding LePage as well, including calls from some for his possible impeachment (Dopp and Young 2015).

Freshman Congressman Bruce Poliquin has less need than Governor Christie to shore up his conservative credentials in Maine, although he did face a general election challenge on his right in 2014 from Independent challenger and Tea Party conservative Blaine Richardson. A congressional election victory for a Republican, especially in the U.S. House, is rare in New England these days, and national donors have taken notice. Knowing Poliquin's seat will be one of the most hotly contested in the nation in 2016, donations are flying into Maine at a clip that suggests that this race in 2016 could break the all-time Maine House campaign spending record, which Poliquin, Cain, Richardson and independent spenders collectively set in the 2014 race. Poliquin alone has already raised an astonishing \$1 million by mid-July (Shepherd 2015b). Not to be outdone, his 2014 opponent Emily Cain made what may be the earliest campaign announcement in Maine history, stating her intention to run in 2016 in early March of 2015--only a few months after her 2014 defeat (Fossel 2015). National Democratic leaders such as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi were already meeting with Cain in December of 2015 to encourage her to run again (Cahn 2014).

Cain's early candidacy and backing from national groups may have in part been done to

clear the field of a primary challenge, such as the fiercely contested race she had in 2012 against populist Troy Jackson of Allagash. One widely rumored candidate, Maine House Majority Leader Jeff McCabe of Skowhegan, announced this spring that he would not run for Congress in 2016 (Shepherd, 2015c). But another Democrat well known in party circles, Bangor City Councilor Joe Baldacci, filed papers in late July to challenge Cain in the Democratic primary (Shepherd 2015). If that name sounds familiar to people outside Maine, it may be because he is the younger brother of former 2nd District Congressman and two-term Democratic Governor John Baldacci. The Baldacci family has been connected to Maine politics for decades, and Joe Baldacci's slogan notes his state ties with a thinly veiled jab at Cain, who was born in Kentucky and who did not move to Maine until she came to attend the University of Maine: "Maine Born. Maine Bred. Maine First". In case anyone missed the point about his difference with Cain, who has enjoyed support from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and Poliquin, who has attracted extensive support from conservative business interests, he makes it clearer still on the front of his campaign site: "I am the only candidate who was born and lived his whole life in Maine. I am not a Wall Street Republican or a Washington Democrat. I am a life-long Mainer who wants to go to Washington." (Baldacci for Congress 2015).

While a bias against "people from away" in Maine is often discussed, and occasionally comes up in political discussion, it has usually not had a great deal of effect on election outcomes. To name two prominent examples: Maine's Independent U.S. Senator Angus King (who also served two terms as Governor) and 1st District Democratic Congresswoman Chellie Pingree have enjoyed extensive electoral success even though neither was born nor raised in Maine (hailing respectively from Virginia and Minnesota) (Melcher 2005; see also Fried 2014).

Poliquin (who while born in Waterville, Maine, was educated at Harvard and worked in

Chicago and New York before returning to Maine) has shown the sort of conservative voting record in Congress one would expect. However, he has shown some independence from national Republican positions on some key issues to Mainers. He received national attention for being one of only three House Republicans to vote against repeal of the Affordable Care Act (though highly critical of Obamacare in his campaign, he objected to repeal without a replacement ready to go) (Pappas 2015), voted against a bill in Congress that sought to bar states from requiring labeling of GMOs (Zerbe 2015), and has followed the opinion of his district—which has seen heavy manufacturing losses in recent decades—in expressing skepticism about new international trade agreements, leading him to vote against fast track authority for President Obama in such an agreement (Babbington 2015).

One thing on which all observers of Maine politics would find agreement: there are sure to be many more interesting controversies in Maine politics after this article goes to press, particularly so long as Paul LePage remains in Maine’s Executive Residence, the Blaine House. Stay tuned!

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