

Maine Summer 2021 Politics Update: The Power of Elections, and Elections about Power

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The Pine Tree State has had no shortage of political drama over the past year. This includes, among other things, the most expensive election ever in Maine, a potential election collision between the current governor and her immediate predecessor, conflict over the future of energy policy, and much more. This article will look at these and other issues, starting with the 2020 November 2020 election.

The 2020 General Election

For a small state, Maine received a substantial degree of attention in the November 2020 election. There were three main reasons why. First, Maine’s Second Congressional District and its one electoral vote was “in play” and Donald Trump said during the campaign that he expected that he would win Maine as a whole after losing it by fewer than five points in 2016. Second, Maine’s U.S. Senate seat held for many terms by Senator Susan Collins, who was seeking another term, was also in play—an unusual phenomenon in a state that had not voted out an incumbent senator since 1978—attracting an enormous amount of money and attention from around the nation. Finally, both the Senate race and, for the first time, the presidential race, were held using Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) rules. Many observers speculated that RCV could play a significant role in determining winners in both cases.

The Presidential Race

In 1969, Maine became the first state since the 1890s to install a method for dividing its electoral votes. Its district plan allots two electors for the popular vote winner of the state, and one electoral vote to the winner of each congressional district.¹ From 1972 to 2002, Maine’s congressional districts both voted each time for the same winner as the state as a whole, so there was no split in Maine’s electoral vote in any of these elections. This changed in 2016, when Republican Donald Trump won Maine’s more conservative and rural Second District, while

Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton won the state as a whole and the First District. Trump also came closer to winning Maine as a whole than any Republican since the last one to win the state, George Herbert Walker Bush in 1988. Trump's electoral vote from Maine was the only one he received in the entire Northeast (Leip 2021).

Trump's 2016 victory in CD 2 was tied to two factors. First, compared to recent Republican presidential nominees, Trump had an unusually strong appeal to white voters without college degrees, which his opponent, Hillary Clinton, did not have (O'Connor 2020), and such voters are much more common in the second CD than in the first. Secondly, Trump benefitted from a steadily increasing divergence between the two districts in presidential voting which began to appear in the 2000 election. Since that time, the first district steadily has become more Democratic in presidential elections, while the second has become more Republican. In 2016, the partisan gap between the two districts became the largest yet, with the second district voting 25 points more Republican than the first (Fried and Melcher 2018).

Both parties had reason, therefore, to believe that the CD 2 would be competitive, and Trump himself said that he expected to carry the entire state. Trump did in fact get more votes in Maine in 2020 than he did in 2016, but the Democratic gain over 2016 with Joe Biden as their candidate was significantly larger. Biden did better than Hillary Clinton in the state as a whole and in both congressional districts. But this did not change the Electoral College vote from Maine: Once again, Trump and the Republicans carried the second district, garnering them one electoral vote, and the Democrats carried the state as a whole and the first district. In all three cases, Ranked Choice Voting was not used in 2020 to determine a winner, because in all three cases, the winner had more than 50% of the vote.

Along with Amy Fried, I examine the presidential vote patterns in more detail in an

upcoming book chapter (Melcher and Fried forthcoming), but three broad patterns emerge from the vote. First, Biden made large gains for the Democrats over Hillary Clinton's 2016 performance in the first district, particularly on the coast. Clinton won most first district cities and towns, but Biden won most of them by significantly larger margins. Table 1 gives examples, including the state's largest city, Portland.

Table 1 Major Democratic Gains in Presidential Vote in Selected District 1 Communities, by Democratic Margin, 2012-2020

Municipality	2012	2016	2020	2012-2020
Cumberland	8.1	26.0	37.9	29.8
Falmouth	10.9	27.4	38.5	27.6
Kennebunkport	10.2	17.8	31.0	20.8
Portland	55.3	56.4	65.7	10.4
South Portland	40.4	39.5	50.9	10.5
Southport	-3.7	9.0	27.1	30.8
Yarmouth	21.9	38.5	52.6	30.7

Source: Piper 2020

Second, Trump's weaker performance in 2020 compared to 2016 in the second district is due chiefly to losing vote share in many of the larger cities in the second district, such as Bangor.

Lewiston and Auburn, as well as college towns, such as Orono, Castine and Farmington. Table 2 gives examples of Trump vote share declines in such municipalities.

Table 2 Democratic Presidential Gains in Selected District 2 Municipalities from 2016 to 2020

Municipality*	Change in Democratic %
<i>Auburn</i>	+ 8.9
<i>Bangor</i>	+7.5
<i>Bar Harbor</i>	+4.8
<i>Belfast</i>	+ 9.7
<i>Brewer</i>	+7.2
<i>Castine</i>	+22.8
<i>Ellsworth</i>	+5.2
<i>Farmington</i>	+5.0
<i>Hampden</i>	+7.6
<i>Hermon</i>	+5.1
<i>Lewiston</i>	+8.6
<i>Norway</i>	+10.8
<i>Orono</i>	+13.1

Source: Piper 2020

*Municipalities that swung from Trump in 2016 to Biden in 2020 are in italics

Third, however, was a friendlier trend for Trump: his continued strength in rural areas of the second district. Trump flipped numerous second District towns from Democratic to Republican in 2016, and he not only held most of these towns in 2020, but he increased his vote share in many of them. The Trump gains over 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s percentages were generally sharpest in two places: Aroostook County; and in blue collar mill towns and their environs (such as Jay, Livermore Falls, Rumford, Mexico, Baileyville, Madawaska, and Millinocket). Table 3 gives examples of this pattern.

Table 3 Major Republican Gains in Presidential Voting in Selected District 2 Communities, by Democratic Margin, 2012-2020

Municipality	2012	2016	2020	2012-2020
Baileyville	19.2	-15.4	-27.1	-48.3
Canton	12.9	-16.7	-40.4	-53.3
Carthage	17.1	-16.8	-40.4	-57.5
Chesterville	22.6	-13.3	-18.3	-40.9
Dixfield	21.3	-22.5	-26.3	-47.6
Fort Kent	36.0	- 0.5	-3.2	-39.2
Frenchville	40.2	-7.7	-20.9	-61.1
Grand Isle	50.4	12.4	-5.2	-45.2
Jay	29.1	- 1.6	-5.8	-34.9
Livermore Falls	27.5	-12.0	-19.3	-46.8
Madawaska	48.0	14.8	9.6	-38.4
Mexico	40.7	-7.6	-9.4	-50.1
Millinocket	16.2	-10.9	-8.9	-25.1
Moscow	10.6	-25.5	-44.8	-55.4
Peru	20.1	-23.1	-26.3	-46.4
Rumford	27.7	-9.0	-7.9	-35.6

Source: Piper 2020

The gap in party vote share between the two CDs grew even more in 2020, to a record thirty points. The Trump elections of 2016 and 2020 mark the only time that Maine has divided its electoral vote in the district plan era (1972 to present), for in every election from 1972 through 2012, the same candidate won both congressional districts and the state as a whole. The 2020 election also continues a trend of steady increases in divergence between the districts,

which started in 2000. From 1972 through 2004, the difference in presidential margin between the First and Second Districts never reached 10 percentage points. Since 2008, it has never been **below** 10 percentage points (Melcher and Fried forthcoming). Table 4 shows how sharp this shift has been between 2012 and 2020.

Table 4 Presidential Vote, Democratic and Republican Candidates, 2012-2020

Year	Statewide	ME-1	ME-2
2012	56.3% - 41.0%	59.6% - 38.2%	53.0% - 44.4%
2016	47.8% - 45.9%	54.0% - 39.1%	51.3% - 41.0%
2020	53.1% - 44.0%	60.1% - 37.0%	52.3% - 44.8%

*Source: Percentages derived from Maine Secretary of State data
Democratic candidate percentage is bold*

The U.S. Senate Race

As in the presidential race, Maine’s U.S. Senate race involved a significant gap in party support between the first and second districts. Democratic nominee Sara Gideon from Freeport, the incumbent Speaker of the Maine House, carried her native first district by a narrow margin. However, Susan Collins more than made up for that with a clear victory in the second district that got her enough votes to win, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: 2020 Maine U. S. Senate Race by Congressional District

	Susan Collins (R) (Incumbent)	Sara Gideon (D)	Lisa Savage (Ind.)	Max Linn (Ind.)
CD 1	44.7%	48.5%	5.2%	1.4%
CD 2	58.4%	35.1%	4.6%	1.9%
Statewide*	51.1%	42.3%	4.9%	1.7%

Source: Figures calculated by the author from the Maine Secretary of State.

**Statewide percentages include UOCAVA votes (cast by military personnel stationed elsewhere and by voters abroad). These votes are not broken down beyond the state level by the Secretary of State’s office, so they are not included in the CD level percentages.*

This was a very different race for Collins, who had easily won re-election in her last two

re-election bids. Her margin was especially large in 2014, with a roughly 2-1 margin over Democratic candidate Shenna Bellows. Unlike 2014, however, Collins had lost much of her popularity, particularly with Democratic and Independent women. In 2015, the year before Donald Trump was elected president, Collins was the second most popular incumbent senator in the nation, behind only Bernie Sanders of Vermont (Wilson 2015). Just under five years later, the same poll showed her as the least popular senator in the nation (Bolton 2020). After the election of Donald Trump, Collins found it difficult to hold on to support both from increasingly conservative-populist Trump style Republicans (who saw her as too liberal and insufficiently supportive of President Trump) and her liberal, moderate and independent past supporters, who found her too *supportive* of President Trump.

Collins' vote to confirm Brett Kavanaugh was a crucial turning point. Not only did pro-choice voters fear that Kavanaugh would vote to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, but accusations of sexual misbehavior during a time of the rise of the #MeToo movement fueled opposition to Collins, both in Maine and nationally. (On the other hand, her approval among Republicans rose significantly and no primary challenger emerged).

The Kavanaugh vote spurred a group called "Be a Hero" to raise money for whoever the Democratic nominee would be against Collins, long before Gideon won the primary (Stackhouse 2020). Along with a sense that Collins' decline in approval made her vulnerable in a Senate that looked to be up for grabs, an unprecedented amount of money flowed into both sides of the race. Not only was it the most expensive election in Maine history ("Collins versus Gideon" 2020), but it was one of the most expensive races in the nation, unheard of for a small state like Maine. This was heavily fueled by out of state donations. With two weeks to go in the campaign, both Collins and Gideon had raised over 90% of their funds from out of state (Geng 2020). Each

campaign pointed fingers at the other's sources of money: Gideon (and others) criticized Collins for Wall Street-linked donations, while Collins rapped Gideon for taking money from Hollywood figures and others from out of state (Elliot and Meyer 2020; Collins for Senator 2020).

Polls before the election mostly showed a close race, though Gideon often had a lead in the high single digits. Collins never had a statistically significant lead in a poll before the election. Some also speculated that the race between Collins and Gideon would be close enough that it would be settled by the ranked choice votes for the two independent candidates: longtime Green activist Lisa Savage and conservative former Republican Max Linn. It seemed likely many of these voters would cast their second choice vote for Gideon. Savage, in fact, explicitly encouraged voters to do this, using the slogan "Rank Lisa First." Linn, who has billed himself as "Trump Strong," represented conservatives and populists who found Collins to be a "Republican In Name Only," and many of them were eager to have Collins out of the Republican picture in Maine.²

However, on Election Day, Collins won an unexpectedly clear victory with 51% of the vote, surprising many observers and rendering RCV irrelevant for determining a winner. After the election, many asked what had happened. One piece of the puzzle is that while Gideon led polls, which attracted press attention, in most cases her lead was in single digits, and was often not statistically significant. Another factor was in how some modeled the election. Colby College political scientists Daniel M. Shea, Nicholas Jacobs and Carrie LeVan wrote a much-noted article, which argued that they and others had overestimated how much the national trend toward more straight ticket voting would affect the Senate race. Furthermore, they had underestimated how many Biden voters would split their ticket and vote for Collins (Shea, and LeVan 2020). In

fact, Maine was the only case out of 35 states with Senate races in 2020 (including Georgia's race carrying into early 2021) in which the state chose candidates of different parties for president and senate (DeSilver 2021).

What reactions were Maine voters having that may have moved the race to Collins? One out of state political scientist argued that Collins' vote against confirming Amy Coney Barrett late in the campaign redeemed her in voters' eyes, who then moved her way: "Ultimately, this vote proved to be a political resurrection for Susan Collins. Although Collins did not enjoy the advantage typically given to incumbents, the benefit of distancing herself from her own party paid off" (Bombini 2021, 6).

However, no such shift in the polls after her vote appeared, and there seemed to be little evidence in Maine that this vote affected voters nearly as much as the Kavanaugh vote. In this campaign in which major policy issues took a back seat to more candidate-based assessments, and in which out of state independent expenditures subjected Mainers to far more negative and personal attack advertisements that Mainers tend to find comfortable, some found campaign ads by Bill Green backing Collins to have played a significant role (Nemitz 2020). Green retired from News Center Maine (the news arm of Maine's two NBC television affiliates) in 2019 after over thirty years as a reporter. Perhaps more importantly, he had a longstanding and very popular show on those stations called "Bill Green's Maine." Green, a registered Democrat, brought his low-key, friendly style to stories about Maine, particularly Maine's outdoors. He had never taken a visible public stance before but agreed to record ads on behalf of Senator Collins, whom Green has known for over 25 years and who is close to his sister. The ads were in a similarly folksy style to his recently concluded TV show, did not discuss controversial policy issues. They spoke to Mainers' weariness of negative campaigning, lamenting what he called "a smear campaign"

against her. They also reinforced a key Collins theme: her bona fide status as a native Mainer (Nemitz 2020). It was a throwback in style to how Collins had campaigned in her previous races when she had won by commanding margins.

That so many voters opposed to Collins wrote letters to the editor decrying and expressing disappointment in the Green ads was a sure indication that they had hit a nerve. They were also so similar to his Bill Green's Maine stories that News Center Maine felt the need during a newscast after the ads came out to explain. While Green was still "a beloved friend" who was entitled to endorse any candidate he wishes, he was not speaking for News Center Maine (and that News Center Maine never endorses candidates). Since the ads ran during their newscasts, they noted they were not connected to them (News Center Maine 2020).

US House Races

In the 2018 Second District race, Democratic candidate Jared Golden ousted Republican incumbent Bruce Poliquin. This race featured a reversal against Poliquin, who initially won a plurality of the first choice voting when second place votes from backers of two independent candidates put Golden over the top in what political scientists call a "come from behind victory" (e.g. Cerrone and McClintock 2021). Subsequent lawsuits did not reverse the outcome. Many expected another close, exciting race in 2020 in one of the few relatively competitive House seats in the nation. Republicans, however, needed a new candidate because Bruce Poliquin, while not ruling out a future run, announced he would not run for his old seat in order to take care of elderly relatives. With Poliquin out, three candidates vied for the Republican nomination, which was won by former State Senator Dale Crafts, who enjoyed the endorsement of former Governor Paul LePage.

Like 2018, national money poured into Maine for the campaign. Unlike 2018, however,

the race attracted relatively little attention or excitement in Maine, as energy and attention were focused on the Senate and Presidential races. While not all Maine Democrats were entirely happy with Golden's moderate voting record (which included voting against Nancy Pelosi for Speaker, and against one of the two articles of impeachment against President Trump in 2019), Golden faced neither a primary challenge, nor an independent challenge from his left. In fact, no independent candidates ran in 2020, taking away the possibility of a second consecutive race being decided by RCV. Crafts' campaign seemed to lack the passion from supporters that other Republican campaigns had, and in the end, Golden won re-election by six points in a district carried again by Donald Trump, showing both an example of the "sophomore surge" (e.g. Lockerbie 1994) in vote share and the ticket-splitting tendencies of Maine voters ("Jared Golden" 2021).

Predictably, the race in the more Democratic first district lacked drama. Donors around the country looking to give to candidates in close races generally avoided putting money into this race, leading to relatively little advertising. Incumbent Democrat Chellie Pingree had no primary opponent, and only one general election opponent, little-known medical doctor and political novice Jay Allen. Allen said he was motivated by what he saw as "extreme socialism" in the Democratic Party, and sought to run a campaign on small government, libertarian principles (Houk 2019). Unlike 2018, when former Democratic state representative Martin Grohman ran as a centrist independent, there were no independents this time. As expected, Pingree won handily in a district also carried by Joe Biden, with just over 62% of the vote ("Chellie Pingree" 2021).

RCV and Maine

As the first state to use RCV in congressional elections and in primaries for state offices, Maine's RCV law has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (e.g. Cerrone and McClintock

2021; Nunan 2020; Anthony et.al. 2019; Reilly 2019; Santucci 2018).³ But the original RCV law did not include presidential elections. These were passed into law in 2019. Republicans, who have overwhelmingly opposed RCV in Maine since it became a topic of discussion, challenged this new law in court and sought to put a people's veto vote on the ballot. Either could have blocked RCV from being applied to the 2020 presidential election in Maine. However, they lost in court and were found by the Secretary of State to have failed to submit enough signatures to get the people's veto on the ballot. This process meant that Mainers only found out for certain that they would be using RCV in the presidential general election a few months before it was held (for more detail, see Melcher and Fried forthcoming).

In the end, however, two factors meant that RCV did not come into play in finding a winner in Maine's presidential election. One factor was the decisive victories of Joe Biden in the state overall and in the first district, and of Donald Trump in the second district. In all three cases, the winner had well over 50% of the vote, so RCV was not used to determine a winner. In turn, part of why that happened was the lack of a strong third party candidate capable of breaking off enough votes to deny a winner a majority. All third party candidates combined had just under 3% of the total vote. By contrast in 2016, third party candidates, led by Libertarian Gary Johnson with just over 5% of the vote, had over 7% of the vote, and no candidate won a majority of the statewide vote partly as a result (Leip 2021).

The Maine Legislature

In addition to control of the Blaine House, Maine Democrats went into the 2020 elections with control of both houses of the Maine legislature. While they were able to hold both houses, it was in a weakened position. Democrats had a net gain of just one seat in the State Senate (made possible by the upset defeat of Republican Senate Minority Leader Dana Dow by Democrat

Chloe Maxmin). They lost seven seats in the Maine House. With a decline in independents and the filling of open seats, Republicans had a net gain of 12 House seats. However, one month after the election, Republicans lost one of their House members, John Andrews of Paris, to the Libertarian Party. Andrews, who had been critical of Republican legislative leadership and was unhappy about losing a committee seat he had enjoyed, became the first Libertarian Party member in the Maine Legislature (Andrews 2020). Andrews went on to make headlines by refusing to wear a mask, violating COVID-19 policies set in the state legislature (Andrews 2021).

Other conflicts around COVID-19 were evident in the Maine Legislature in 2021. Legislative Republicans, along with some Democrats, argued that Governor Mills had overstepped her emergency authority in dealing with the pandemic, and that she was not doing enough to consult with the legislature. They went on to call for an end to the emergency declaration in March 2021. Republicans had made similar arguments for the reduction of Mills' authority in 2020 (Carrigan 2020). Mills rejected these arguments and maintained the emergency. She gradually eased restrictions until ending the emergency order effective June 30, 2021 ("Governor Mills Announces" 2021).

The bills signed into law by Governor Mills reflected more liberal policies than seen in the LePage Administration. These included new laws protecting bees from nicotinoids (Fetcher and Chetwynd 2021), expanding paid medical leave to include care for sick grandchildren (Ford and Martin 2021), expanding community recovery centers (Maine Senate Democrats 2021), and extending dental benefits under Medicaid to adults (Lawlor 2021). In addition, she took action to give low level offenders more opportunity to perform community service instead of jail time ("Senate Enacts" 2021). She signed the first bill into law in North America mandating

divestment from state investments in fossil fuels (“Maine Becomes the First” 2021). She set more stringent standards limiting “forever chemicals” in drinking water (Rizzuto 2021) and established the Maine Connectivity Authority to work toward universal high speed internet access (“Governor Mills Signs” 2021).

Having both houses of the Legislature and a Democratic governor, legislative Democrats—particularly those to Mills’ left—did conflict with Governor Mills on several occasions in which she vetoed bills they had passed. Two of these concerned expanding access to prescription drugs (Lawlor 2021). Other bills she vetoed included would have raised real estate transfer taxes and closed the controversial Long Creek youth detention facility (Popp and Neumann 2021). Finally, she vetoed a bill that would have allowed tribes to operate casinos in Maine (Conneller 2021). In nearly all cases, Mills expressed sympathy with the causes of the bills, but argued that they were too broad, needed changes or would not be constitutional as written. (For more on conflict between Mills and the progressive wing of her party, see Mistler 2021).

Republican Censures of Senator Susan Collins

Senator Collins not only continues to face criticism from Democrats, but from within her own party as well. Most recently, she was censured by the Kennebec County Republican Party (KCRP)—a county that includes Augusta and Waterville. After a censure vote by the KCRP failed earlier in the year by a vote of 20-9, supporters of the move galvanized support and voted to censure Collins by a vote of 49-18 (Lowell 2021). The KCRP statement made it clear that they believed Collins had not supported President Trump enough, and that she was insufficiently conservative: “Kennebec County Republicans are ‘America First’ Republicans who care about keeping local voters engaged and are willing to fight on their behalf...” The statement went on to

quote Kennebec County Republican State Committeeman Dean Martin:

Maine Republicans are, by and large, Trump/LePage supporters. Kennebec County voters chose last night to censure Senator Susan Collins because our representatives must demonstrate clear and consistent leadership that supports our party's platform and candidates which her leadership clearly does not. Maine Republicans want “unity,” but not at the expense of turning a blind eye to party members who have lost touch with basic Republican principles. Collins supporters routinely call for her detractors to keep their criticism private as she openly and maliciously attacks issues and candidates fundamental to the Republican platform. That is a double standard we must address. The decision to censure Senator Collins was based on her endless attacks on former President Trump, and her consistent lack of support for a variety of Republican issues even party moderates would support (Kennebec County Republican Party 2021).

Echoing the criticism of Collins by Democrats in the 2020 campaign that “Susan Collins isn’t for you anymore” (e.g. “Not for You” 2020), Martin continued, “Local Mainers have countless stories of a very engaged and personable senator from years ago that stand in stark contrast to the Senator Collins of today. Republicans in Kennebec County continue to be fair minded and moderate. It’s Senator Collins who has changed” (Kennebec County Republican Party 2021).

The KCRP censure vote came after the state central committee rejected censuring Collins, but two other county parties also voted to censure her: Piscataquis and her home county of Aroostook. If any Maine county Republican Party would vote to censure her, it’s no surprise that it was Piscataquis County’s. Piscataquis County, in north central Maine, is well known for its conservatism and Republican Party strength. In each year from 2000 through 2020,

Piscataquis County gave the highest percentage of any county in the state to the Republican presidential candidate. In fact, it was the only one of Maine's 16 counties to vote against Democrat Barack Obama in either 2008 or 2012. And this Republican affinity has only gotten stronger under Donald Trump. Trump's percentages of 58.9% in 2016 and 62% in 2020 were easily the best Republican percentages in Piscataquis of the 2000s (Leip 2021).

Collins's censure in her native Aroostook County was a greater surprise. She has long been identified with what Mainers call "The County" and has even been called "The County Girl" (e.g. Nemitz 2020). But the county was another example of Donald Trump running ahead of other presidential nominees. In fact, Trump was the first Republican presidential candidate to carry Aroostook County since George W. Bush in 1988 (Leip 2021).

Collins was not the only Republican senator who voted to convict Donald Trump on impeachment charges that faced censure from her party, reflecting divisions within the Republican Party over Donald Trump. While the statewide Maine Republican Party rejected a censure resolution against Collins, two other Republican senators were censured for their vote by their state Republican parties: Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Richard Burr of North Carolina (Rupar 2021).

Looking Ahead

November 2021 Elections

As of this writing in July 2021, three issues will be on the statewide ballot in November 2021: a state constitutional amendment, a bond referendum, and an initiative. The constitutional amendment would protect "a natural, inherent and unalienable right to grow, raise, harvest, produce and consume the food of their own choosing." The amendment proposal had failed in previous years in the legislature, but this time benefitted from bipartisan support. It has also

encountered opposition from several groups, including the Maine Veterinary Medical Association and the Humane Society of the United States (Collins 2021; Shepherd 2021).

The transportation bond referendum on the November 2021 ballot is likely to be less controversial. Most statewide bond proposals do well in Maine, and transportation bonds are among the types of bond referenda that do particularly well. Maine has not rejected a transportation bond referendum since 1994 and has not rejected any statewide bond referendum since 2012. All 20 statewide bond referenda since then have passed. Furthermore, bond referenda held outside of presidential elections have a greater chance of success (Melcher 2016; Melcher 2019; “Votes on Maine” 2021).

Perhaps the most controversial issue on the fall 2021 ballot, however, is an initiative that is designed to stop the New England Clean Energy Connect project. The project would build power lines from the Canadian border to Lewiston, linking hydroelectric power from Quebec to the New England electricity grid. Hydro Quebec currently cannot transmit all of the power that it could produce from its hydroelectric dams and Massachusetts wished to bring that energy there in order to fulfill its clean energy goals.

Supporters of the project note that it will expand renewable energy production arguing that some of the electricity produced will be usable in Maine. They argue that Massachusetts will pay for the project, which will create local construction jobs. The corridor will go through areas long used as working forest. In addition, it will improve infrastructure for electric vehicles and that it will facilitate expansion of broadband internet in Maine. It will also provide tax revenue to Maine municipalities (“Building a Clean” 2021).

The project has also produced intense opposition on a number of grounds. Much of the opposition centers on their belief that the project will despoil Maine’s environment for the

benefit of Massachusetts. Opponents frequently raise “from away” arguments (among many other arguments) that argue the project benefits those from outside Maine and makes Maine more like other states it does not want to resemble. For example, ads against the corridor argue that the corridor would be “wider than the New Jersey Turnpike” (Chrisos 2019). Resentment of Massachusetts is another theme in more informal settings.

Not only has the foreign ownership of CMP been raised as an issue—that the project, in the view of critics, benefits those from away far more than it benefits Maine—but CMP as a business has serious problems with public approval and trust. A 2021 survey of customers of 140 utilities around the nation ranked CMP (Maine’s largest utility) last in public trust, echoing other recent customer surveys that ranked CMP poorly (Hall 2021). (For arguments against the corridor, see Ely 2020). The negative reputation of CMP has also led to legislative efforts to have the state take over CMP and the second largest electricity supplier in Maine, Versant Power (Turler 2021). After those efforts narrowly failed, proponents of the new power authority, to be called Pine Tree Power, vowed to get an initiative on the ballot to create the new utility in November 2021 or in 2022 (Anderson 2021).

The 2022 Gubernatorial Race

Mainers are already looking ahead to the 2022 gubernatorial election. Since 1990, no former governor has challenged an incumbent governor in Maine for re-election. In that year, Democrat Joe Brennan, who had served two terms as Governor, ran against incumbent Republican Governor John McKernan. In 2022, 32 years later, two-term Republican Governor Paul LePage will challenge his successor, Democrat Janet Mills (Miller 2021; Thistle and Ohm 2021). Neither is likely to face a primary challenger. Maine has a strong tendency to re-elect its statewide elected incumbents—which in Maine are limited to U.S. Senator and Governor. No

sitting senator has been defeated since 1978 (when Republican Bill Cohen defeated Democrat William Hathaway), and no sitting governor has been defeated for re-election since 1966. LePage has a solid and enthusiastic following, combined with excellent name recognition. The race may be further complicated if former State Senator Tom Saviello enters the race as an Independent. Saviello served in the Legislature first as a Democrat, then as Unenrolled (Independent) and finally as a Republican (who frequently locked horns with Governor LePage). In this election, he would probably run as a centrist Independent with a focus on opposition to the New England Clean Energy Corridor (Jacobson 2021). Whether Saviello jumps in—or others do—the race should be interesting and competitive. The coming year in Maine politics promises to be interesting as well.

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¹ For more thorough discussion of how and why both Maine and Nebraska adopted this method, see Melcher 2010.

² References to Collins as a “RINO” from conservatives have been common for some time and continue today. See Seymour 2016 and Lucas 2021. The latter article quotes Donald Trump attacking Collins and seemingly including her in his criticism of “RINOs.”

³ Maine’s original RCV law was intended to include races for Governor and for State Legislature. But the Maine Supreme Judicial Court issued an advisory ruling in 2017 which held that the State Constitution required plurality voting for general elections for these offices, and so RCV has not been applied in these. As a result, only primaries for these offices use RCV.