

**Pandemic Politics: Connecticut's General Assembly and Gubernatorial Policymaking in  
2020**

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## **Introduction**

This year proved to be a challenging one as the result of the coronavirus pandemic, an economic slump and social justice protests. For political scientists associated with the New England Political Science Association, we unfortunately did not have our annual conference as it was supposed to take place in Mystic, Connecticut. Since 2018, I have been fortunate to represent politics in the “Constitution State” along with other New England professors representing their respective states at the Clyde McKee Memorial New England Politics Roundtable. So this piece offers an analysis of what took place in Connecticut’s General Assembly session as well as political concerns for the near future. While officials pushed back highway tolls and hardly resolved the state’s ongoing budgetary problems, Connecticut’s legislative body faced an immediate pressing concern: how to address coronavirus concerns. In fact, Governor Ned Lamont was often the one publicly confronting the pandemic. Many lawmakers, especially Republicans, challenged the governor’s authority. Since Lamont was coordinating with other New York tri-state area governors, he received notable media attention (Gosselin 2020a). The timing of the pandemic and economic crisis was concerning since 2020 is an election year not only for national offices but also for the General Assembly. Politics then between the branches and parties during a pandemic and before an election came to a crescendo during late night special legislative sessions (Krasselt 2020a). At the same time, Connecticut may face some resurgence since its suburban coastline saw New Yorkers migrating north because of coronavirus in the nation’s largest city (Keating 2020a).

## **In the Beginning**

At the beginning of the year, 2020 appeared to be just another legislative session for Connecticut's General Assembly. Among the various proposals and hearings planned, highway tolls and child immunization drew significant attention. The state's legislative body has a troubling habit of delaying controversial initiatives as well as drawing more attention to problematic concerns than it should. During an election year especially, the General Assembly would only delay controversial matters further (Satter 2004, 110).

Highway tolls in Connecticut have been an ongoing saga and Governor Ned Lamont continued delaying several initiatives last year. Initially, the General Assembly planned to present a proposal in the summer of 2019, then for the fall and then at the beginning of 2020. The governor was fickle as to when was the best time to discuss tolls legislation. Also lawmakers, including his party's leaders, were concerned about an appropriate time to introduce proposals. Even worse, there was not one actual plan but several proposals that varied significantly (Keating 2020b). A number of studies by think tanks, agencies and media suggested the possibility of tolls on nearly all federal highways and a number of state roadways. Some proposals suggested tolling only trucks while others considered tolls at bridges or major highway junction points. These initiatives were drastically different than what Connecticut toll roads were before the state did away with them in the 1990s. Back then, a large share of tolls came from two key shoreline roadways: the I-95 Connecticut Turnpike and Route 15 Merritt Parkway. These new proposals instead called for more highways and roadways to have automated gantry points. Connecticut remains a rare northeast state that does not have tolls. But the state has a significant budgetary deficit and can barely address crumbling bridges, viaducts and other major

infrastructure projects. So tolls became a centerpiece of the 2018 gubernatorial election since Lamont suggested that he would support truck tolls but not passenger car tolls. Then, he reversed his decision since tolling cars could be a significant revenue booster. Plus, Rhode Island tried to toll only trucks and it led to various legal challenges (Altimari 2020a).

By the time any proposal was being planned with the governor and legislative leaders in early 2020, tolling became even more unpopular. The countless proposals and delays only caused less support among a number of lawmakers, even within the Democrat caucus. Once again, Lamont was uncertain which proposal and when the General Assembly should take up proposals. A number of interest groups, especially in the trucking-related industry, weighed in with their concerns. The media attention was tremendous and the political pressure remained significant. After early polling of lawmakers, many were hesitant to support tolls, especially among party leaders. With 2020 being an election year, they were even more skittish on the issue than six months earlier. By February, the two General Assembly chambers had two proposals on tolls but each chamber had to vote on the other's proposal (Pazniokas 2020a). In other words, legislative leaders were divided and the governor hardly led on the issue. So, the General Assembly never held a vote and Lamont planned for general obligation bonds instead (Pazniokas and Phaneuf 2020a).

Another problem facing state lawmakers was vaccination regulations surrounding child immunization laws. For years, Connecticut allowed parents to have their children opt out of taking shots or preventive care for viruses and diseases especially based on religious grounds. While nearly 8,000 children filed for religious exemption in 2019, one proposal would end the exemption for new students entering public and private schools. The hearings in the capitol

complex garnered much attention as they were packed with families, officials and media for several days and went past midnight in some instances. One hearing had nearly 500 residents ready to testify and it lasted over 20 hours (Carlesso 2020a). In addition, hundreds of families arrived at the state capitol lobbying and rallying against and for proposals ending religious exemption of immunization laws. As much as this was a religious issue, it was also an ideological one. Some Connecticut residents disagreed that the state should interfere with a family's decision on an issue like vaccination. While a larger share of other families countered that immunizations was a public health issue and it would affect communities. Because of coronavirus, lawmakers debated whether to vote on a bill during a summer special session since the legislative sessions recessed in May (Carlesso 2020b).

### **Springtime Pandemic**

Because Connecticut is geographically adjacent to New York, the Constitution State experienced early but significant coronavirus infection rates. As a disease, coronavirus was an early public health concern since it impacted a person's cardiovascular system and especially those with problematic health-related preconditions. In various parts of the world, outbreaks were on the rise in early 2020. But the New York tri-state area did not see infection rates soar until March, especially with several notable "super spreading" events in nearby New Rochelle, New York (Ailworth and Berzon 2020a) and Westport, Connecticut (Williamson and Hussey 2020a). Although area municipalities closed bars and other commercial places, tri-state governors by mid-March initiated also coordinated plans among state governments.

Besides all three governors being Democrats, Lamont and Governor Andrew Cuomo (New York) and Phil Murphy (New Jersey) garnered much attention from local and large New

York media markets. They held daily briefings and press conferences for residents and the media about infection rates and lifting various restrictions (Ferre-Sadurni and McKinley 2020a).

Governors often receive much more attention than other state officials from the press and constituents since they head their respective state governments. “Because the governor is a single individual and the legislature is a collective institution, governors are more likely than legislatures to command attention from the media and from the people,” reminds Alan Rosenthal (1990, 24-25). Of course, one cannot forget that institutionally, the governor has the “upper hand” according to the political scientist. “In every state, the governor has the advantage of unity. He or she is a single figure elected statewide and with a statewide constituency. The legislature is a series of multiples – two houses, two parties, and anywhere from 60 to 424.” (2013, 204).

But the tri-state governors have unique politics and personalities separately as well as together. Lamont and Murphy are notable millionaires with little elected official experience. Plus, they are not exactly the most suave or backslapping politico types (Wharton 2020a). On the other hand, Cuomo is notable for his political family and his stage presence before constituents and the media. Some have argued that between the three governors, Cuomo was leading where and how coordinating efforts would be addressed for coronavirus. But Cuomo can be brash if not Machiavellian and a “bully” while Lamont and Murphy are hardly dominant politicians (Smith 2020a). Still, the three governors appeared to be on the same page about organizing press conferences, sharing resources and medical supplies.

This tri-state area gubernatorial pact was not only an attempt to address coronavirus but was also a political response to federal attempts to address the pandemic. With the White House

and Congress largely ineffective at consistent messaging, state governments were attempting to take charge – in a smaller and more nimble manner compared to the federal government. Plus they did not want to compete against each other over much needed medical equipment (Mervosh and Rogers 2020a). But this did not mean that Lamont faced some scrutiny for organizing and managing official responses. In fact, a number of lawmakers voiced their concerns that little legislative branch coordinating and involvement took place (Klarides 2020a). Republican lawmakers raised concerns as did some Democrats especially since 2020 was an election year.

Another overlooked dynamic to the tri-state area partnership was Rhode Island's extremist response. Governor Gina Raimondo took drastic action by having State Police and National Guard at highway borders targeting out of state cars and demanding quarantine if visitors were staying in Rhode Island. It sparked some backlash among nearby state officials, especially Cuomo as he threatened to sue Raimondo. Only a week later, the Ocean State's governor dropped the initiative as it gained so much attention beyond New England and the New York tristate area (Bruni 2020a).

If there was one policy approach that was learned among officials and constituents was the age-old argument in American politics that states can do a better job of coordinating and responding to an issue like a pandemic. Various political scientists have stressed this in countless policy examples. “To put it simply, out of all the turmoil, state governments were pushed to become much more capable governing partners in the federal system,” remind Gary Moncrief and Peverill Squire. “This may not often be recognized by the media or even by members of Congress. But apparently the general public recognizes it on some fundamental level as evidenced by the fact that surveys consistently demonstrate a higher level of trust for state

government than national government” (Moncrief and Squire 2021, 8-9). The tri-state governors’ attempts to working together also raised many questions about the need for Washington and a reminder of the region’s past with the Federalists and Anti-Federalists’ stance about federalism and states’ rights.

### **Pandemic Migration**

The pandemic’s regional politics also led to a temporary relocation and migration of New Yorkers leaving for nearby suburbs including Connecticut’s wealthy towns. Since Fairfield County and New Haven County are the closest to New York and offers direct commuter train access, Connecticut saw a surge of new residents. Even the temporary rental market experienced a spike. Many New Yorkers wanted to leave the crowded but also shuttered city. Social distance, backyards and commercial outdoor spaces were already the norm in Connecticut’s suburbs. For New Yorkers, these characteristics proved to be a draw during the early coronavirus era.

A number of newspapers published some early statistics on New Yorker migration patterns. Based on moving company statistics and post office change of address forms, tens of thousands of New Yorkers lived in Connecticut during the spring and into the summer. Even real estate sales experienced a sudden surge since properties under contract nearly doubled compared to 2019 rates (De Avila and Kamp 2020a).

These early 2020 migration increases became a milestone since Connecticut’s economy had been slipping for nearly a generation. Also the state’s population growth dipped significantly since the early 2000s. The state lost much of its luster since New York City and Boston have been more attractive to both younger and retirement age generations. Connecticut, after all, is



largely a suburban population especially along its Long Island Sound shoreline where many commute to New York City or local coastal cities for employment. From the 1950s until the early 1990s, Connecticut experienced significant growth since taxes and cost of living expenses were less than New York City and New York State. But with tax increases and an income tax in the 1990s, various business communities lost interest in Connecticut. Plus, with the Great Recession in 2008, Connecticut's economic rebound hardly gained steam. Finally, the draw for larger nearby cities (New York, Boston) over medium sized cities in Connecticut (Hartford, New Haven) became a larger issue. A number of major corporations left the state recently for larger cities, including General Electric and Bristol Myers Squibb (Thompson 2017a).

Now in 2020, Connecticut could face an economic turnaround if New Yorkers and others leaving larger cities consider living and working in the state. Since many more Americans are working from home, working in large cities may not be necessary. Most importantly, if Connecticut were on the receiving end of this possible trend and tax revenue increases at least 5 percent within the next year or so, the state could financially benefit. However, this would require a long-term population trend based on higher paying jobs. Also, the in-state migration would have to be at same continuing rates as the last few months during this pandemic period. In other words, there would have to be a sustainable rate of white-collar jobs and those working from home willing to relocate to Connecticut, in order to increase in-state migration rates (Wharton, 2020b).

This population shift should be a reminder to state and local officials then to address ongoing problems in medium cities and even small towns as a possible way to resolve budgetary concerns. Once former industrialized towns and urban areas had robust manufacturing centers

but have fallen on hard times for generations especially with heroin abuse. This has been the case in various New England locales and a variety of scholars have researched these concerns, but Connecticut has hardly tackled these pressing issues (Chen and Bacon 2013). If the state is to succeed in the future especially with a possible population surge, it will need to also address the problems facing de-industrialized small towns and underdeveloped urban areas.

### **Future Concerns**

Beyond Connecticut's ongoing small town and urban issues, the state could face an even bigger problem with regionalization. Since Connecticut does not have county governance, municipalities have strong home rule power. Local rulemaking authority has been a potent force in addressing budgetary, education and economic development matters. If the state is on the verge of a population boom, Connecticut's municipalities will need to find pathways of working together as well as addressing various policymaking reforms. The good news is that some municipalities like Hartford are updating their zoning and planning laws, partly because of leaders like Planning and Zoning Chairwoman Sara Bronin trying to attract developers and investors to Connecticut's capital city and lobbying the General Assembly to address exclusionary zoning in nearby suburbs (Keating 2020c). While other municipalities are finding ways of sharing resources, like towns in Naugatuck Valley. Derby, Ansonia and Shelton, are considering approaches to voucher, merge or regionalize school districts to save costs as their student populations have dwindled (Mayko 2020). With these case study models, maybe there are some actual possibilities for Connecticut's municipalities to address redevelopment and regionalization reforms.

Additional longstanding issues facing Connecticut include budgetary deficits and state employee contracts. In July, the promised 5 percent salary increase for state workers took place. There was some controversy surrounding it since 2020 had an economic downturn and the pandemic. Several lawmakers and organizations challenged the salary increase and Lamont urged unions to defer these increases even though they had been already negotiated and been part of an existing contract. Still, the state's budget has been an ongoing problem since each year Connecticut has faced additional deficits of several billion dollars into the next five years or so (Keating 2020d). Lamont and the General Assembly offered several approaches but little was resolved because of the economic downturn and pandemic crisis.

The General Assembly also attempted to have special legislative sessions to address specific policies. Since few meetings were online during the pandemic, lawmakers were concerned with hearings and proceedings being virtual. Future sessions may lead in this direction after much pressure from constituents, interest groups and journalists (Hardy 2020a). Even the July in-person special legislative session led to some discussions and votes of several police and voting measures. Because of the pandemic, absentee ballot voting by mail became a key legislative issue. Both chambers successfully voted on a proposal to allow voters to decide their preference in advance of 2020's election (Stuart 2020a). Also, in light of countless protests around Connecticut about police brutality following George Floyd's death, lawmakers centered much of their attention on police reform. But these sessions led to 4-hour delays and past midnight debates and votes on police qualified immunity, police training de-escalation, drug and psychological training. The police accountability bill divided various party leaders, chambers and both caucuses but it ultimately passed (Stuart 2020b). These late night special sessions were

also a reminder that the General Assembly continues their troubling habit of last minute decision-making and late night sessions despite calls for legislative reform (Satter 2004, 250).

As far as state electoral politics, November's races could offer where the 2022 gubernatorial race is headed. Connecticut's General Assembly seats were up for reelection and the party gap in each chamber increased for Democrats. Republicans narrowly lost a number of races in 2018 especially in the state Senate. Before the election, the upper body was tied 18-18 seats between both parties (Wharton 2019a). With only 36 seats, 2020 could see some contested election results and more Senate Democrat seats filled by Democrats especially with presidential and congressional elections. Polls indicate President Donald Trump remains unpopular in Connecticut. Also, with a number of state party leaders not running in 2020, both chambers will experience a significant leadership shift. In the state Senate, Republican Leader Len Fasano announced he is not running again for office (Keating 2020e). In the state's House of Representatives, Democrat Speaker Joe Aresimowicz and Republican Leader Themis Klarides have decided not to run for reelection as well. However, Klarides is considering a run for a statewide position (Pazniokas 2020b).

In addition to the House Republican Leader, other possible candidates for 2022's gubernatorial election could include former candidates in 2018's election. This includes New Britain Mayor Erin Stewart, as she has started a Political Action Committee for centrist Republican state candidates running in 2020 (Stacom 2020a). Former 2018 Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob Stefanowski hardly went away from the media spotlight as he and his wife Amy (Madison Republican chairwoman) helped distribute over a million personal protective equipment with Masks for Connecticut and he may run again for governor (Bass

2020a). So a number of Republicans will likely announce their candidacy in early 2021 for the 2022 gubernatorial race. The Democrats, especially with the real possibility of winning more General Assembly seats in 2020, would consider Lamont's incumbency or have the state's Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz run for governor. This would certainly shift party and state agencies' leadership. Although Lamont's popularity hovered at 30% to 40% until the pandemic, his favorability ratings increased to nearly 60% since the number of coronavirus deaths decreased by early summer (Radelat 2020a). Still, his popularity may be short-lived and he may not seek re-election. Besides, this year saw the Democrat state party chair change from former Lieutenant Governor Nancy Wyman to long time former chair Nancy DiNardo in preparation not only for 2020 elections but also for 2022's elections (Pazniokas 2020c).

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