

Maine Politics Update 2011: The LePage Era Begins

In 2010 Tea Party-endorsed Republican Paul LePage was elected Maine's governor with 38% of the vote against three moderate-to-liberal opponents. Gruff, disrespectful, and confrontational, LePage differs strikingly from most past and present Maine politicians. By resembling other states' politicians in our current political climate, LePage discredits Maine's supposed "way life should be" exceptionalism. Republicans also captured both houses of the legislature from the Democrats in 2010.

LePage's policies have proved unusually divisive by Maine's relatively nonpartisan standards. March's labor mural controversy took symbolic pride of place in his first year. LePage ordered the removal of a little known mural honoring workers from the lobby of the State Department of Labor building. The mural included Frances Perkins, F. D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor whose family was from Maine. The governor, who proclaims that Maine is "open for business," argued that the mural dissuaded companies from creating jobs in Maine by implying a bias for labor over management. The ensuing uproar gained national publicity. The mural remains in storage. The governor's policies to stimulate business investment and job creation amidst continued revenue shortfalls are proving controversial. He proposes to comfort the already comfortable (by reducing top income tax rates) and afflict the already afflicted (by removing Medicaid coverage from 65,000 low income Mainers, among other proposed cutbacks in assistance to Maine's disproportionately numerous poor residents). For the most part the GOP-controlled legislature has supported LePage's policies. This includes scaling back state pensioners' (including teachers') annual cost-of-living increments. But with all legislators up for reelection in 2012, LePage's fellow Republicans may resist some of his more contentious proposals to save their seats.

In Maine's plebiscitarian polity, every year is election year. The year 2011 was no exception. Mainers were bombarded by robo-calls, mailings and televised appeals leading up to November referenda on casinos and same-day voter registration. As in the past, these referenda preserved or restored the status quo: they gave Mainers an opportunity to avert change and, through "citizens' vetoes," to undo change that the legislature and governor had recently imposed. The legislature referred two casino referenda to voters. One would have authorized construction of "racinos" (slot machine parlors outside harness racing facilities) near Scarborough Downs in southern Maine and also near Passamaquoddy Indian lands on the eastern border with New Brunswick. A second referendum question proposed a full-service casino in Lewiston, less than twenty miles from a casino currently under construction in Oxford. Casino and racino supporters made no effort to depict their projects as desirable for their own sake. Instead they portrayed them as job and revenue creators needed in a poor economy. In a heavy off-year vote both proposals failed statewide. Many Mainers were unprepared to build three new gambling venues all at once to create five such facilities, including one already operating in Bangor.

The casino/racino referenda focused attention on *ad hoc* policymaking-by-referendum's defects. Unlike Massachusetts, Maine did not solicit bids to extract the maximum revenues from casino operators. A coordinated and comprehensive approach to such an issue lacks appeal when voters can (and often do) overturn some or all of a policy's components through referenda. Why should

elected officials take the time and trouble to devise policy when they may not see it implemented? Maine's legislators largely accept that the voters ultimately decide most contested issues, gambling included.

These referenda had another, equally unfortunate impact on Maine. For the first time in a state long known for its solidarity, campaign appeals openly divided Mainers on geographic grounds. Voters in the Bangor area were warned that casinos elsewhere in Maine would cause Penobscot County to lose jobs and tax revenues. Other voters also rejected casinos that might compete with those closer to home.

A second November vote was a citizens' veto of a new Republican law to end same-day registration, which had been in place since 1973 as a bipartisan initiative to encourage turnout. The practice had been accepted for decades without problems or controversy. Republicans asserted early in 2011 that same-day registration was open to abuse. With LePage's support they passed legislation to end it. A citizens' veto to restore same-day registration promptly followed. Unlike the recent and successful citizens' vetoes of same-sex marriage and tax reform, this initiative came from the left. It proved equally successful. Veto opponents appealed to (especially rural) Mainers' xenophobia by darkly suggesting that infiltrators "from away" (Massachusetts and New Hampshire were identified in advertising) might subvert Maine's political process through same-day registration. Unfortunately for those supporting the end to same-day registration, there was no evidence to support these claims. The law was rejected across the state, even in heavily Republican towns. Curiously, opponents of same-day registration employed the same unscrupulous campaign tactics (like insinuating that gay rights activists supported same-day registration) previously more associated with some states whose residents they warned might corrupt Maine's elections.

The year 2012 will feature additional budget cuts, which began under Democratic Governor John Baldacci. The major difference from the Democratic era is the heavier burden of Republican cuts on low income Mainers. Following the failure of the same-day registration ban, Republicans may impose photo identification on voters and trigger still another citizens' veto. With LePage's support, Republican legislators also may try to make Maine the first Right to Work state in the Northeast. Vigorous opposition from labor unions may persuade some GOP lawmakers concerned about reelection to reject this initiative. As usual, Maine's 2012 Congressional races will favor incumbents. Well-funded moderate Republican Senator Olympia Snowe faces possibly two Tea Party-supported primary challengers, but most observers expect her to win the nomination and the general election. The two House Democrats also may be safe. Aware that only one incumbent Maine member of Congress has lost his or her seat since the 1970s, Republicans tried to redraw Maine's two districts to put both incumbents in the same district. They failed, but only because redistricting requires a two-thirds majority in the legislature.

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