

## **POLITICS IN VERMONT AND NEW HAMPSHIRE, 2012: THE STORM BEFORE THE CALM, THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM**

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As has often been the case in recent decades, the politics of the neighboring states of Vermont and New Hampshire found themselves diverging somewhat in 2011-2012. In Vermont, natural and political events in 2011 (Hurricane Irene and relicensing controversy over the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant) have been “the storm before the calm”, as political contests in 2012 (excepting the Burlington mayoral race) have been largely devoid of significant drama or competition. In New Hampshire, by contrast, the state continues to be politically contested, both in state races and the Presidential contest, with 2012 being a “stormy” year.

In Vermont, the single most consequential event in the last twelve months has been not a political, but a natural, event: Hurricane Irene. Though it was hit by tropical storm forces, the level of rain and damage from the August 2011 storm had not been seen by Vermonters since the flood of 1927. That event had provoked the famous quote from then-President Calvin Coolidge about his love of Vermont and the strength of its people. The response to Hurricane Irene confirmed and reinforced Coolidge’s sentiments about Vermonters.

Much of Vermont was deluged by up to 15 inches of rainfall on August 28, 2011 (USA Today, 8/30/2011). As the Rutland Herald’s account of the storm and its aftermath noted, the storm killed 4 people, damage or destroyed hundreds of homes, and closed 270 roads and 35 bridges. A number of towns had to have emergency supplies temporarily airlifted to them by the Vermont National Guard (Rutland Herald, Vermont Recovery,

Volume 1, 2011, p. 4) . The impact of nature was unexpected and devastating in its ferocity.

Yet it was the response of Vermonters to the storm's damage that was most revealing. Communities immediately set to work reconnecting themselves, often by their own efforts. Citizens in Jamaica used earthmoving equipment to temporarily rebuild a main road in the town in a matter of 8 hours. In Rochester, a local business put on a nightly community supper for the stranded town. Bethel residents used ATVs to traverse a damaged stretch of roadway. And in Mendon, a community effort monitored a path through the woods that enabled Children to go to school and citizens to go to work despite the closure of Route 4 due to washouts (Vermont Recovery, Volume 1, pp. 7-10). The demonstration of civic engagement, person to person, was widespread and critical for the communities involved.

While roads and bridges were rebuilt with sometimes amazing speed, even the spirit of Vermonters was not a Pollyannish "magic wand" for the affected communities. The storm's devastation is still clearly visible in many towns, including Coolidge's hometown of Plymouth (where one plaintive hand-painted sign on a damaged home still asks "why, Irene?"). Many businesses and homes remain closed and unrepaired; one trailer park in Waterbury was completely destroyed by the floodwaters. And despite substantial assistance, the state has still had to contest with FEMA over the total amount of financial assistance provided. The impact of Storm Irene will be felt for many years in Vermont.

The state also continued to be in an ongoing battle with Washington over its Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant. While the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has

decided to relicense the plant, Vermont (with near unanimity amongst its elected officials) has vigorously opposed the relicensure, based on safety concerns. While the issue is still in the legal realm, it appears thus far that Washington may have the last word on the issue, a source of frustration to historically independent Vermonters.

In contrast to Irene and Vermont Yankee in 2011, the state's 2012 electoral politics have been extremely quiet. While the Democrats regained control of the Burlington Mayor's office for the first time since 1981 (when Socialist candidate Bernie Sanders began his political rise by defeating Democratic Mayor Gordon Paquette by 12 votes), the statewide "map" is largely dominated by incumbents. Governor Shumlin, Congressman Welch, and Senator Sanders are all facing minimal opposition for reelection. On the Presidential level, an August Five Thirty Eight projection by the New York Times has Vermont at a 100% probability of being carried by President Obama (only his "home" states of Hawaii and Illinois have an equal percentage of probability for an Obama victory). Thus, 2012 politics in Vermont appear to be "the calm after the storm", with no significant realignment or conflict in sight, and Irene more significant than elections for many.

Across the Connecticut River, on the other hand, New Hampshire continues to be a state contested. While Vermont is at a 100% probability for President Obama to carry its electoral votes, New Hampshire has the lowest Five Thirty Eight probability in New England for an Obama majority in the state (72%). As a former governor of neighboring Massachusetts, Mitt Romney will be in a strong position to potentially carry New Hampshire for the Republicans. His 39% victory in the primary was muted by the 23% showing by Ron Paul, but many of those Paul voters are still likely to turn out for

Romney over Obama in November. While recent polls appear to give a slight edge to Obama in New Hampshire, the state is closely divided, and is the closest to a “toss up” of any state in New England. Romney is also a familiar face to the Granite State, getting much press coverage for his regular family vacation in Wolfeboro.

On the state level, New Hampshire also has actively contested Congressional and gubernatorial races, similar to recent election cycles (both US Senators are not up for re-election this year). With the retirement of Governor John Lynch, there are primary contests for the gubernatorial nomination in both parties, with many familiar names; with a September 11 primary, the victors will have less than two months to clarify their political standing, and the race is likely to be close (depending in part on whether Republican primary voters choose a moderate or extreme alternative in their primary). On the Congressional level, the Republicans have primaries for both of New Hampshire’s two seats, while the Democrats have clear candidates (Carol Shea-Porter and Ann Kuster, both repeat candidates from 2010). The Republican Party has the advantage (currently holding both seats), but maintaining this advantage will depend on whether their incumbents (Charlie Bass and Frank Guinta) can fight off their intraparty challengers (never a certainty among independent minded New Hampshire voters) .

Thus, while Vermont seems to have cemented its liberal bent for the moment and is experiencing a quiet 2012 election cycle, New Hampshire continues to experience more of the national political seesaws. Many New Hampshire state races (as well as the Presidential contest) are closely contested by both major parties, and the state’s Republican Party continues to be buffeted by many of the same divisive forces affecting the national party. While Vermont seems to have experienced a real life storm with Irene

in 2011, New Hampshire is the New England state experiencing the strongest political winds in 2012. If Vermont in 2012 is the calm after the storm , New Hampshire may be the perfect political storm in 2012. We await the primary and general election results with interest.