

Maine Policy Review


Volume 3 | Issue 2

1994

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Recommended Citation

Spruce, Christopher. "Exploring Maine's North-South Dichotomy." *Maine Policy Review* 3.2 (1994) : 102 -103, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol3/iss2/15>.

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Commentary

Exploring Maine's north-south dichotomy

Maine Policy Review (1994). Volume 3, Number 2

by Christopher Spruce

No statewide election in recent memory has so starkly contrasted the differences between Maine's northern and southern regions. Congresswoman Olympia Snowe, who has represented Maine's Second Congressional District for 16 years, is poised to wrest a U.S. Senate seat from the Democrats, who have held it since the late 1950s. Thomas Andrews, a two-term First District congressman, is finding out how difficult it is for a southern Mainer, most often characterized by his critics as ultraliberal, to make inroads into the more conservative, rural Second District.

Although some may conclude that the apparently limited extent of Andrews' support in the Second District has something to do with his vote to support the Base Closure Committee's decision to shut down Loring Air Force Base, or, his vote for the Brady Bill, those votes may not be the real reason he is not popular in many precincts in the Second District. Rather, Andrews' votes/which can be legitimately viewed as highly principled and, in many respects, courageous, are only relevant in that they are indicators of a more troubling phenomenon that has implications far beyond the outcome of this race for a U.S. Senate seat: The growing economic disparity between rural northern Maine and the more urbanized southern counties. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the "two Maines" theory, will not only influence the outcome of this year's U.S. Senate race, it will also continue to be a significant factor in the making of public policy in the halls of the State House in the next legislative session and beyond. Examples of such policy issues are the continuing efforts to develop an equitable school funding formula and the highly controversial auto emissions testing program.

Before pondering further the implications for the future, we must attempt to determine whether or not evidence exists to support the claim of a widening economic gap between northern and southern Maine. Although a definitive answer hinges on a more thorough and systematic study, our brief analysis suggests that there is good reason to further explore the "two Maines" theory.

For example, the 1990 census shows population continuing to decline or grow slowly in the north while rising at a more rapid rate in the south. Aroostook County's population declined from approximately 91,300 in 1980 to 86,900 in 1990, nearly a five percent drop. The closing of Loring, affected since the 1990 census data were collected, has further eroded the County's population base. Additionally, the populations of Washington and Piscataquis counties rose only marginally between 1980 and 1990, one and six percent, respectively. At the same time, the population of Cumberland and York counties rose 12.5 and 18 percent, respectively.

Because population growth may not be an indicator of relative economic health (Waldo County, for example, experienced a 17 percent increase in population between 1980 and 1990, but saw average wages and per capita income slip significantly), it is necessary to check other indicators.

One such measure, average annual wages, shows that in 1981, Washington County residents had an average annual wage of \$11,316, which was about 91 percent of the statewide average wage of \$12,370 per year. By 1992, this ratio had fallen to 82 percent. (Washington County residents earned an average of \$17,552 annually, compared to the statewide average annual wage of \$21,374.) During this same period, the average annual wage in Aroostook dropped from nearly 94 percent to barely 84 percent of the statewide average. In Cumberland County, statistics collected by the state show that the average annual wage of residents rose from 106 percent of the statewide average in 1981 to 110 percent of that average in 1992. In York County, the average annual wage jumped from slightly more than 88.5 percent of the statewide average in 1981 to more than 93 percent of that average in 1992. These figures clearly support the theory that residents of northern Maine are backsliding economically, while simultaneously residents of the southern counties are making economic gains.

Do these numbers mean the rich counties are getting richer and the poor counties are getting poorer? They may. A review of recent unemployment rate data indicates very clearly that access to jobs varies widely by region. According to the Maine Department of Labor, Maine recorded a 7.8 percent overall unemployment rate in December 1993. During this period, the Portland Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMA) recorded a jobless rate of five percent, the Bangor SMA was at 6.3 percent, and the Lewiston-Auburn SMA at 8.4 percent. The Kittery-York labor market's unemployment rate was only 4.3 percent. During this same period, the Calais-Eastport labor market reported a 13.5 percent unemployment rate. Caribou-Presque Isle was at 12.6 percent unemployment. Greenville recorded a 12.9 percent rate, and southern Penobscot's labor market had a 12.6 percent jobless rate. Clearly, then, northern Maine continues to experience unemployment rates that are double (and in some cases, triple) that of southern Maine. Combined with the wage figures cited above, the unemployment rates indicate that northern Maine is struggling with the dual burden of low wages accompanied by inadequate access to jobs.

As suggested above, these statistics lend support to the "two Maines" theory, but do not conclusively prove it. There are exceptions to the north-south dichotomy even in the numbers referenced here (trends in Lewiston-Auburn, for example, appear to more closely parallel what's happening in the northern counties). Nevertheless, these figures clearly indicate that economic fortunes in southern Maine are in ascendancy, while those in northern Maine are either in decline or barely rising. The longer this situation continues to exist/the greater the tension will be between the "haves" in the southern part of the state, and the "have-nots" living north, east and west of Waterville. Obviously, this tension will continue to be reflected in State House politics.

For instance, it was not lost on many northern Mainers that one obvious result of the successful effort to oust House Speaker John Martin last winter, in combination with the defeat of State Senator Charles Pray in 1992, was to shift the leadership of the legislature southward. Dennis Dutremble of York County became Senate President, Dan Gwadosky of Fairfield (barely north of Waterville!) became House Speaker. Given the southward drift of population, Martin and Pray may have been the last northern Mainers to hold legislative leadership positions for some time to come.

Whether the issue is school funding or auto emissions testing, the north-south split will continue to influence the direction of public policy in Maine. Although state legislators as a body may wish to act in the best interests of the state as a whole, it is difficult for individual legislators to ignore the needs and demands of their constituents. They do so at their own peril. In that context, it is difficult to imagine how the conflicting interests of rural and urban Maine will be adequately or even fairly resolved in the months and years ahead. If the political relationship between northern and southern Maine is to be more than a marriage of convenience, then that context needs to change and to change soon. Perhaps our attention ought to be focused less on what divides north and south and more on what we might do to put the two Maines back together.