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State Reports

Maine Politics 2009: Money, Sex and Religion Take Center Stage in an “Off-Year”

Howard Cody
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Welcome to Maine! You’ve come in a busy political year. Forget “off-years.” We don’t have them. Thanks to our “plebiscitarian polity,” we get to hold divisive referenda every year. This time we should outdo even ourselves and generate a record November voter turnout with referenda on tax policies and same-sex marriage. The national debate on health care will affect Mainers in more ways than one. But first...

Let’s recap last year’s elections. As expected, it was generally a good year for Democrats. Barack Obama out-organized Hillary Clinton in the caucuses and carried the state in November with 59% of the two-party vote. The Republicans tried but failed to carry the rural, socially conservative upstate Second District and its single electoral vote. GOP Senator Susan Collins won even more decisively than Obama. She defeated First District Congressman Tom Allen, a strong opponent, with 61%. She showed once again that Maine’s Independents like consensus-seeking Republican moderates who can horse-trade for new federal spending in Maine. Besides, our incumbents of both parties in Congress must behave egregiously to lose: the default position is to keep incumbents and let them build seniority and policy leverage. Chellie Pingree held Allen’s House seat for Democrats with 55% and Second District Congressman Mike Michaud predictably kept his seat with 67% of the vote.

Democrats increased their margins in the state legislature, to 95-55-1 in the House and 20-15 in the Senate. Voters rejected a resort casino for Oxford County, but this proposal is being reworked. Bangor won't have Maine's only casino for long.

Maine's budget crisis keeps worsening. This year we heard, contrary to prevailing belief, that our state and local tax burden is 10% of income, 15th highest in the nation and only slightly above the 9.7% national average. Lame duck governor John Baldacci has proposed a two-year 2010-2011 budget that *reduces* spending for the first time in decades by \$200 million (to \$6.1 billion). Also, some Democrats want to cut the highest marginal state income tax rate from 8.5% to 6.5%. They would broaden sales taxes to make up the difference—and they say non-residents would pay half of the new tax. But none of this placates supporters of a new TABOR citizen's initiative on the ballot to limit spending increases to inflation and to (our minimal) population growth. All state and local tax increases would go to referendum under this proposal, a probably unconstitutional plan that Mainers endorse in recent polls. Another November initiative would cut in half the locally-collected auto excise taxes whose revenues our towns need. A new \$600 million shortfall now threatens ever-deepening cuts in state spending. This will affect the 12% of us who are poor, the highest poverty rate in our region. But for 2009's hot-button issue...

Same-sex marriage will appear on the November ballot too. This week the legislature passed same-sex marriage and Baldacci signed it! It will face a November "citizen's veto." Polls show the electorate split along our familiar social issues divide: Democrats, south/coastal, younger and more educated voters versus Republicans, north/inland, older and less educated ones. Other variables trump party, especially with the Catholic Church opposed. The Church may have to moderate its position for marriage rights to prevail. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland has been particularly active in this area, even directing the faithful in their electoral choices through church homilies and

parish bulletins. Nondiscrimination rights survived in 2006 only after the Church stopped actively opposing them.

Olympia Snow continues to play a pivotal role on the national stage. The Maine senator has emerged as the crucial “swing vote” on the Senate Health Committee. Her willingness to break ranks with fellow Republicans has caused some consternation among state Republicans but it also has been approved by Mainers who want substantive health care reform. National commentators have noted that she has helped to make Maine, with only 1.3 million residents, a key factor in determining the nation’s future in this area. How it will affect her long-term political future remains to be seen.

Thanks for visiting Maine—come back soon! Maine politics will continue to be volatile. The floods of last Spring could have longer term consequences for both the land and for the state’s psyche. Expect unexpected results in November and other future political confrontations around the state—and don’t forget Maine’s role on the national stage!