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Howard Cody  
*University of Maine*

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## **Maine Politics 2014 Update: Republicans Win a Skewed Electorate**

Howard Cody  
University of Maine

Maine participated in 2014's national Republican surge, but in typically idiosyncratic circumstances. The election marked an impressive GOP recovery from a 2012 drubbing in which the party lost control of both houses of the state legislature.<sup>1</sup> Republican Governor Paul LePage, who had been deemed vulnerable to a strong opponent, defeated six-term Congressman Mike Michaud. Michaud's open Second District Congressional seat went to Republican Bruce Poliquin, who will become Maine's most conservative member of Congress in memory. Veteran incumbents GOP Senator Susan Collins and First District Democratic Congresswoman Chellie Pingree easily won reelection. The GOP regained control of the State Senate while Democrats salvaged a reduced majority in the House of Representatives. A ballot initiative to ban bear baiting proved so consequential in the election outcome that it demands our prime consideration.

### **The Bear Baiting Referendum**

Maine is the only state that permits the use of bait, traps and dogs in bear hunting. The Washington, DC-based Humane Society of the United States opposes these practices as inhumane, especially trapping and hounding. Mainers for Fair Bear Hunting, a group supported by the Humane Society, successfully petitioned to return bear baiting to Maine's ballot after a similar citizen initiative failed in 2004 by a 53%-47% margin. Like Maine's other change proponents, they invoked a better past by promising to "restore Maine's hunting tradition" to its

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<sup>1</sup> On Maine's 2012 election, see Howard Cody, "Maine Politics in 2013: Still Moralistic Yankeedom's Exemplar?" *New England Journal of Political Science* VII: 1, Spring 2013. On the period immediately preceding the events discussed in this essay, see Howard Cody, "Maine Politics in 2014: Still Different—But for How Much Longer?" *New England Journal of Political Science* VII: 2, Fall 2013.

earlier pre-baiting practices.<sup>2</sup> The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife argues that while Maine's bear population has grown from 23,000 to over 30,000 in the past decade, it would have increased faster without baiting. Eighty percent of bears killed in Maine are shot over bait.<sup>3</sup> Maine's wildlife biologists campaigned vigorously to defeat the initiative, even appearing in uniform in television advertising to the other side's consternation. Both sides used television extensively, especially pro-hunting forces that outspent the initiative's proponents by nearly two-to-one. Well over 90% of the money supporting the initiative came from outside Maine, as did perhaps half of the funds spent to preserve bear baiting.<sup>4</sup> Pro-hunters profitably stigmatized their opponents as "a group of well-funded, out-of-state activists who are more concerned about advancing their own agenda than they are the welfare of our own residents."<sup>5</sup>

During the fall campaign Maine's media devoted as much attention to the bear referendum as to the governor's race and more attention than to any of the Congressional contests. In the upshot, the initiative won coastal Maine. But it failed again by 53-47% after generating a heavy turnout in conservative rural and small-town inland areas that support hunting and have little use for people "from away", particularly (but not exclusively) when they tell Mainers how to live their lives. Maine's 58.5% turnout in 2014 was the nation's highest, but only because rural votes nearly equaled their 2012 levels. In bear-free Portland, Maine's largest city and a Democratic and liberal bastion, turnout fell 30% from 2012. A normal off-year urban vote combined with a high rural turnout skewed the election towards Republican candidates from the governor's race to the bottom of the ballot.

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<sup>2</sup> This tactic recalled casino proponents' argument that only casinos could resuscitate Maine's moribund harness racing industry.

<sup>3</sup> "Bear-baiting Case Not Made: We Say 'No' on Question 1." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, October 19, 2014, p. E2. (editorial)

<sup>4</sup> Deirdre Fleming, "Bear Debate Marked by Contrast in Funding." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, October 26, 2014, pp. T10, T22.

<sup>5</sup> Don Loprieno, "Bear Hunting Referendum's 'Out-of-State Syndrome.'" *Bangor Daily News*, November 19, 2014, p. A7.

## **Maine Reelects Paul LePage**

Democrats considered controversial Governor Paul LePage vulnerable in 2014, partly because he took only 38% of the vote in 2010. They lacked a credible candidate until they persuaded a reluctant Mike Michaud to give up his relatively safe Congressional seat to challenge LePage. In 2010, LePage won his first term when Independent Eliot Cutler finished a close second while winning twice as many votes as Democrat Elizabeth Mitchell.<sup>6</sup> When it became clear that Cutler would run again, Democrats were determined to marginalize him and force a two-way contest they expected Michaud to win. LePage was vulnerable, and not only for his brusque and confrontational manner. In 2010 LePage had pledged to make Maine “open for business” and attractive to job-creating investment. But Maine has regained only 57% of its jobs lost in the Great Recession; the six-state New England figure is 122%.<sup>7</sup> Maine’s private sector employment growth under LePage has ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the nation.<sup>8</sup> LePage achieved income tax cuts, but they largely benefit Mainers in the highest bracket. Further, LePage has made Maine the only state in the region to reject Medicaid expansion despite its status as the poorest state in the Northeast and the one which has the fewest residents with health insurance. Through 2022 Maine is forgoing \$690 million in federal funding which would have insured 70,000 Mainers who make an average of \$15,500 each year.<sup>9</sup> Mainers already have the shortest life expectancy in New England; their lifespans lag behind their neighbors in New Hampshire and Vermont by more than a year.<sup>10</sup> LePage’s policies may widen this gap.

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<sup>6</sup> On Maine’s 2010 election, see Howard Cody, “Maine Politics in 2010: So Much for ‘The Way Life Should Be’?” *New England Journal of Political Science* V: 1, Fall 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Fried, “Investigate the Case of the Materializing Ballots.” *Bangor Daily News*, December 3, 2014, p. A7.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Cuzzi, “Imagine Four More Years of Governor LePage, Then Vote Michaud.” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, November 2, 2014, p. E3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “Life Expectancy at Birth.” *AARP Bulletin* 55: 9, November 2014, p. 38.

Michaud seemed an ideal candidate for the Democrats.<sup>11</sup> A paper mill worker from a small upstate town, Michaud built a reputation as a quietly effective bipartisan consensus builder in the State Senate and in Congress, where he was his party's only moderate "blue dog" caucus member from the Northeast.<sup>12</sup> But Michaud's low-key approach hurt him this time, and his late 2013 acknowledgement of his homosexuality did not help. He appeared to believe he needed only to be seen as the alternative to an unpopular governor.<sup>13</sup> One aspect of Michaud's strategy seemed to work when Cutler failed to gain traction; in a tight two-way race he remained well back in the polls. Still, the *Bangor Daily News*, deploring LePage's "unusual contempt for consensus-based governing" and his "vilifying recipients of public assistance", endorsed Cutler despite his poor chances. It praised Cutler's tax reform and other policies while associating Michaud with traditional Democratic big government and spending.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, LePage softened his rhetoric during the campaign and took credit for Maine's real but relatively modest economic and jobs recovery. All that, plus the strong mostly Republican rural vote mobilized by the bear baiting referendum, helped LePage to gain ground in the campaign's late stages and win a second term with 48%, five percentage points ahead of Michaud. Cutler took 8%.<sup>15</sup>

### Congressional and State Legislative Races

In the Congressional elections, the *New York Times* affirmed three-term Senator Susan Collins' moderate credentials, at least by GOP standards, by identifying her and Alaska's Lisa Murkowski as the Republicans who defied their party most often in the past two years. Collins

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<sup>11</sup> It is hard to tell which is more striking, the fact that for the first time both major party nominees for governor were descended from French-speaking immigrants from Quebec, or the fact that virtually no one mentioned it.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Cousins, "Taking the Measure of Michaud." *Bangor Daily News*, October 27, 2014, pp. A1, A4.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Mistler, "Anti-Obama Tide, Economic Issues Carried LePage and Party to Convincing Victory." *Portland Press Herald*, November 6, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> "Cutler Would Bring Dignity, Vision to Blaine House." *Bangor Daily News*, October 23, 2014, p. A6. (editorial)

<sup>15</sup> Amy Fried, "How LePage Won a Second Term." *Bangor Daily News*, November 6, 2014, p. A7.

recently has voted with her party a mere 58% of the time.<sup>16</sup> (This figure may reflect the national GOP's steady rightward drift, as Collins had stayed loyal on 79% of votes in the late 1990s.<sup>17</sup>) Because everyone saw Collins' reelection as inevitable, the Democratic Party gave scant support to her opponent, Shenna Bellows, a former state Executive Director for the American Civil Liberties Union. Even so, Bellows ran a spirited campaign and bought enough television advertising to criticize Collins from the left for opposing President Obama on the Affordable Care Act, the federal minimum wage, and environmental concerns like the Keystone XL oil pipeline.<sup>18</sup> Collins won 68% of the vote. In the First Congressional District, Chellie Pingree, a liberal in a liberal-leaning district, cruised to reelection against two opponents. The GOP did little to help its candidate, a conservative 25-year-old college student named Isaac Misiuk.

In contrast, the northern, more rural and conservative open Second District featured heavy and often negative advertising from both parties and from the out-of-state third-party interests that recently have spread to Maine. Democrat Emily Cain, a University of Maine administrator, was a State Senator who ran as a consensus builder from her successes in forging bipartisan agreements on a range of issues, not least a state budget. But Cain endorses gay and abortion rights, the Affordable Care Act, and pursuing alternative energy sources like wind and solar power. Her GOP opponent, former State Treasurer Bruce Poliquin, is much more fiscally and socially conservative than Senator Collins, who endorsed him anyway. Poliquin took positions directly opposing Cain on most issues.<sup>19</sup> The *Bangor Daily News* endorsed Cain for her deal-making successes and for forging productive relationships with Republicans—qualities

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<sup>16</sup> Kevin Miller, "The Veteran vs. the First Timer." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, October 12, 2014, pp. A1, A8.

<sup>17</sup> "Reelect Susan Collins." *Bangor Daily News*, October 25-26, 2014, p. D2. (editorial)

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Miller, "U.S. Senate Candidates on the Issues." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, October 26, 2014, p. T11.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Shepherd, "The Race for the Second District." *Maine Sunday Telegram*, October 26, 2014, pp. T14-T15.

Michaud shares but the paper overlooked in his case.<sup>20</sup> Poliquin countered by criticizing Cain for supporting welfare (Medicaid) for able-bodied adults and more generally for being a tax-and-spend liberal. Tellingly, Poliquin pointed out that he had been born in Maine while Cain had moved to Maine from New Jersey at age eighteen, making her permanently “from away.”<sup>21</sup> Cain led in most polls throughout the campaign, but the bear baiting turnout benefited Poliquin.<sup>22</sup> He won with 47% of the vote to Cain’s 42%, despite the presence of a second conservative candidate, libertarian Blaine Richardson, who took a surprising 11% as an Independent despite a nearly invisible campaign.

## Discussion

Maine’s political culture and its Republican Party increasingly conform to national patterns. Daniel Elazar associated Maine with a moralistic political culture that honors elected leaders who practice consensus politics.<sup>23</sup> Mainers have long praised their Congressional icons of both parties for bipartisan consensus seeking. But their plebiscitarian polity erodes a politics of accommodation when polarizing issues become all-or-nothing citizen initiatives. Subjects like bear baiting energize opinionated Mainers likely to support candidates who approach politics as they do. Like many Republicans in other states, Paul LePage and Bruce Poliquin repudiate consensus politics on principle and embody a politics of conviction untarnished by compromise. This suited them to Maine’s 2014 electorate. Looking ahead, the 2016 election may feature an equally polarizing initiative on marijuana legalization. Two rival groups aspire to get on the

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<sup>20</sup> “Cain Offers Productive Approach That’s Needed in Congress.” *Bangor Daily News*, October 24, 2014, p. A6. (editorial)

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Poliquin, “Maine Can’t Afford Emily Cain.” *Bangor Daily News*, October 29, 2014, p. A7.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Shepherd, “Republican Surge and Bear-baiting Referendum Seen as Keys to Poliquin Win.” *Kennebec Journal*, November 5, 2014. [pressherald.com](http://pressherald.com)

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Elazar, *The American Mosaic: The Impact of Space, Time, and Culture in American Politics*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 230-232.

2016 ballot to exploit a larger and presumably more liberal presidential election turnout. True to form, they portray change as restoring the past: “rural Maine is dying and we need to stop that” and save traditional family farming by shifting it to marijuana cultivation.<sup>24</sup> However this plays out, divisive plebiscitarian initiatives are combining with partisan national trends to undermine Maine’s distinctive political culture. Michael Cuzzi’s assertion that Congress-style hyper-partisan politics is becoming the “new normal” in Augusta may be premature, even with a reelected Paul LePage.<sup>25</sup> But Mike Michaud’s pride in his pragmatic and collaborative approach to politics in Maine and in Washington may soon evoke a bygone era in both capitals.<sup>26</sup>

Maine faces additional challenges, and so do its Democrats. Immigrants could grow a stagnant population and economy in the nation’s oldest and whitest state.<sup>27</sup> But suspicion of people “from away” deters Mainers from attracting and welcoming newcomers.<sup>28</sup> For example, Somali immigrants have been warmly received in the Twin Cities—in Minnesota, not in Maine. Maine’s economic situation is aggravating Democrats’ difficulties. Their reputation as tax-and-spenders “too burdened with sacred cows and powerful constituencies to make tough, long-term fiscal decisions” confers no favors in times of austerity.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Democrats must address a national trend, evident in Maine’s 2014 election, which endangers their support base. Blue collar whites are defecting to the GOP. The disappearance of manufacturing jobs is impairing labor union solidarity, faith in ineffectual governments, and support for the party associated with

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<sup>24</sup> Gillian Graham, “Group Unveils Details of Its Marijuana Legalization Plan for Maine.” *Portland Press Herald*, November 19, 2014. [pressherald.com](http://pressherald.com)

<sup>25</sup> Michael Cuzzi, “Recount Circus Bodes Ill for Legislative Cooperation This Session.” *Maine Sunday Telegram*, December 14, 2014, p. E3.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Cousins, “As His Three-decade Political Career Winds Down, Mike Michaud Is Ready for a Quiet Life Back in Maine.” *Bangor Daily News*, December 12, 2014, pp. A1, A2.

<sup>27</sup> Maine’s 18-34 year old demographic is shrinking faster than in the nation as a whole. Given a rapidly retiring workforce, “without a huge influx of new, young residents, the state will be sunk” economically. Scott Thistle, “Maine’s ‘Millennial’ (sic) Set Shrinking.” *Bangor Daily News*, December 8, 2014, pp. A1, A8.

<sup>28</sup> Maine’s iconic bumper sticker “Welcome to Maine. Now Go Home” may be apocryphal, but its sentiment prevails, especially away from the coast.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Milakovsky, “What’s a Pragmatic Centrist to Do?” *Bangor Daily News*, November 25-26, 2014, pp. D1, D3.



unions and government. Besides, Republicans better respect working class voters' social conservatism on issues like gay and abortion rights.<sup>30</sup> The Maine GOP's rightward shift may counterintuitively be widening its support base. Many working class Mainers voted for LePage and Poliquin, who openly share their traditional social values. Growing numbers of minority, immigrant, and (hence) young voters may compensate Democrats for white defectors elsewhere, but not in Maine. Recent trends are giving Mainers, and Maine's Democrats, much to ponder.

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, "The Demise of the White Democratic Voter." *New York Times*, November 11, 2014. [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)