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New Hampshire's 2018 Midterms

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Abstract

After a tightly contested presidential election in 2016, the first midterm of the Trump presidency was a potential inflection point for the swing state of New Hampshire. Democrats emerged with reassuring signs that they retained the partisan edge they have enjoyed for much of the past decade. Two trends emerged from exit poll data: (1) Trump voters were more willing to cross party lines than Clinton voters, and (2) college-educated men, whom Clinton struggled to win over in 2016, trended Democratic in the midterms.

The 2018 midterm elections provided New Hampshire political observers with an opportunity to judge whether 2016 was an inflection point for the sole swing state in New England. Hillary Clinton did keep the Granite State in the Democratic column for the fourth consecutive presidential election in 2016, but only by a margin of fewer than 3,000 votes. Her vote share in New Hampshire lagged behind her percentage of the national popular vote, the first time this had occurred to a Democratic presidential candidate since Al Gore in 2000. Her opponent, Donald Trump, retained traditionally Republican strongholds in wealthy towns and made inroads in rural areas that previously tilted Democratic. At the time, it was unclear whether these shifts were one-time anomalies, or signs of approaching realignment for the Granite State.

My research note examines this question by analyzing the Granite State's midterm election results with both individual-level and aggregate-level data. First, I offer an overview of the magnitude of the Democratic victory. New Hampshire's municipalities are employed as the units of analysis across three regions of the Granite State: the populous southern tier; the Connecticut River Valley bordering Vermont in the west; and the northern rural counties. Four electoral outcomes from 2018 are considered: Voter turnout rate; Democratic candidates' percentage of the two-party vote in gubernatorial and congressional elections; split outcomes in which gubernatorial and congressional candidates won varying amounts of votes; and the amount of "swing" toward or away from the Democratic congressional candidates, compared to the percentage of the vote cast for Clinton in 2016. Next, I analyze data from a national exit poll that used innovative techniques to reach midterm voters. In particular, I seek to answer the following questions on the role of education and gender in New Hampshire politics during the Trump presidency: Did men and women without a college degree persist in supporting Republican candidates in an election without Trump at the top of the ticket? Did men and women

with a college degree continue to move toward the Democratic Party in the first midterm of the Trump presidency?

Data Sources

For individual-level data, I used AP VoteCast, a national survey that NORC at the University of Chicago executed for The Associated Press and Fox News. Across the country, NORC surveyed 138,929 voters “via phone and web,” including 3,278 interviews in New Hampshire (NORC, 2019).

For aggregate-level data, I downloaded demographic variables on New Hampshire municipalities from the Census Bureau’s 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Data on New Hampshire’s 2018 elections were accessed from the website of the New Hampshire Secretary of State. Data on New Hampshire’s 2016 elections were accessed from New Hampshire Public Radio’s online electoral database. Very small municipalities, with fewer than 30 votes cast, were not included in the analysis.

New Hampshire’s 2018 Midterms: An Overview

Recent midterm elections have displayed New Hampshire’s “swing state” status at its most mercurial. In 2006, Democrats capitalized on President George W. Bush’s dismal approval numbers, seizing both seats of the state’s delegation to the House of Representatives, as well as majority control of the Executive Council (a five-member body that participates in the management of state government, including the approval of gubernatorial appointments and state contracts) and both chambers of the state legislature. During the Obama presidency, Republicans regained both House seats in 2010, as well as both chambers of the state legislature. In Obama’s second midterm in 2014, the GOP once again took total control of the state legislature, though they only won back one House seat and failed to defeat incumbent Democratic Senator Jeanne

Shaheen or incumbent Democratic Governor Maggie Hassan. Volatile midterms have been the norm in the last decade of Granite State politics.

In 2018, for the fourth straight midterm, New Hampshire voters rallied to the side of the party out of power. Slightly more than 580,000 voters participated, in a population of 1.36 million (New Hampshire Secretary of State). The results were not as striking as in previous midterms because New Hampshire Democrats performed relatively well locally in the 2016 elections, even as national results cast their party out of the White House.¹ In addition, Granite State voters almost always grant freshman governors a second 2-year term, and in 2018, Republican Chris Sununu was no exception. But the governor, though personally popular, was held to a single-digit margin (53 percent to 46 percent) of victory over former state senator Molly Kelly. And Sununu's coattails proved too short to benefit Republicans further down the ticket.

Democrats retained both House seats with ease in 2018, despite having to defend an open seat after First District Congresswoman Carol Shea-Porter's retirement. Executive Councilor Chris Pappas, the favorite of the state party elite, weathered a vigorous challenge in a multicandidate September primary. Statewide, 126,474 voters participated in the Democratic primaries (which also included a competitive gubernatorial primary), compared to 100,590 in the Republican primaries (which had competitive primaries in both congressional districts but no competitive gubernatorial primary) (New Hampshire Secretary of State).² In the two-month general election campaign, Pappas enjoyed significant financial advantages over his opponent, former police chief and liquor enforcement official Eddie Edwards, and ultimately carried 54 percent of the vote. In the Second Congressional District, three-term Democratic incumbent Ann McLane Kuster easily deflected a challenge from state representative Steven Negron, achieving a personal-best 56 percent of the vote in her fifth electoral contest.

Races further down ticket displayed the depth of the Democratic victory. Democrats seized control of both chambers of the state legislature for the first time in eight years, as well as the Executive Council. In the 400-member lower house, Democrats gained more than 60 seats for a total of 234, their largest majority since 2006. Their majority in the State Senate was their first since 2010 (Ballotpedia). In his second term in office, Sununu found himself contending with an opposing-party majority in the legislature, an unusual position for a New Hampshire Republican governor.

New Hampshire's Southern Tier

Approximately three-quarters of New Hampshire's voters reside in four of its southern counties. They include Hillsborough County, a bellwether that contains the state's two largest cities, Manchester and Nashua; Rockingham County on the state's Seacoast, a relatively fast-growing county that has retained a Republican tilt; Democratic-leaning Merrimack County, home of Concord, the state capital; and Strafford County, a traditional Democratic stronghold bolstered by the presence of the state university.

Across the southern tier, turnout rate (as a percentage of 2016 turnout) in municipalities was close to the statewide median of 80 percent (see Table 1). Majorities of varying sizes in all four of these southern-tier counties backed Democratic congressional candidates. As expected, Democratic-tilting Merrimack and Strafford counties displayed the strongest support, Republican-leaning Rockingham the least, and bellwether Hillsborough in-between. (Pappas, the Democratic nominee for the First Congressional District, enjoyed significant name recognition in Hillsborough County. He had served as Executive Councilor for a significant part of the county, and his family owns a popular restaurant in the city of Manchester.)

Table 1 New Hampshire Counties in 2018 Midterms

County	Number of voters, 2016	Republican partisan voting index, 2016	Median municipal turnout rate, 2018	Democratic percentage, congressional vote, 2018	Democratic percentage, gubernatorial vote, 2018	Median swing, 2016 - 2018	Median split outcome, 2016-2018
Southern Tier							
Hillsborough	217,917	R + 1	79	55	45	5	8
Merrimack	84,993	R - 3	78	58	48	6	10
Rockingham	184,000	R + 4	80	52	43	4	9
Strafford	70,077	R - 5	80	59	51	4	8
Connecticut River Valley							
Cheshire	42,526	R - 9	79	63	57	6	6
Grafton	51,904	R - 10	82	66	58	6	8
Sullivan	22,957	R - 2	80	55	45	6	9
Northern New Hampshire							
Belknap	35,604	R + 7	77	47	37	5	10
Carroll	30,021	R + 3	85	51	44	4	7
Coos	15,851	R - 1	76	55	44	9	9

N. B. Turnout rate measured by dividing 2018 municipal turnout by 2016 turnout. Partisan voting index (Wasserman and Finn 2017) is calculated by comparing the political party's average share of the major-party presidential vote in that area to that political party's average share of the national major-party presidential vote, over two consecutive elections. Democratic congressional and gubernatorial vote equals percentage of the two-party vote in a municipality. Swing vote measured by subtracting 2016 Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote from Democratic share of the 2018 Congressional vote in a municipality. Split outcomes were measured by subtracting Republican congressional two-party vote share from Republican gubernatorial two-party vote share in a municipality.

While Democratic congressional candidates carried all four southern tier counties, Sununu consistently outperformed his fellow Republicans at the top of the ticket. Across the southern tier, Sununu ran 8 to 10 points ahead of congressional Republican candidates, winning all counties but Strafford.

Connecticut River Valley

The Connecticut River Valley counties of Cheshire, Sullivan, and Grafton are sparsely populated compared to the southern tier. But for more than a decade, they have been a key component of the Democratic advantage in statewide elections. Grafton (which contains

Dartmouth College) and Cheshire (which includes Keene State College) now possess the strongest partisan tilt in the state. Sullivan, in contrast, was a rural county carried by Barack Obama in 2012 that swung sharply toward Trump four years later.

In the Second Congressional District contest, Kuster won strong majorities in all three counties (see Table 1). As past trends suggested, Kuster performed best in Cheshire and Grafton.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Molly Kelly, who hails from Cheshire County, fared best in the Connecticut River Valley, carrying two of the three counties. Although Sununu struggled in this heavily Democratic region, he did succeed in polling several points better than his Republican counterpart down ticket.

Northern New Hampshire

Northern New Hampshire is the ancestral home of the Yankee Republican, but presently the only source of GOP strength here is Belknap County, which contains much of the state's Lakes region. Amenity-rich Carroll County, which borders Maine in northeastern New Hampshire, has moved from Republican-dominated to bellwether. Coos County, an area that resides on the state's geographic and economic periphery, swung strongly toward Trump in 2016.

In 2018, midterm turnout was strongest in Carroll County, and weakest in Coos (see Table 1). Belknap County, the most Republican area of the state, was the one county where Democrats failed to achieve a majority of the congressional vote. Sununu carried all three counties easily.

Individual-level analysis of New Hampshire's 2018 midterms

Using VoteCast exit poll data, I will examine two topics of importance to New Hampshire voter demographics: the effects of gender and education on voting patterns; and the political behavior of 2016 Trump supporters in the first midterm of his presidency;

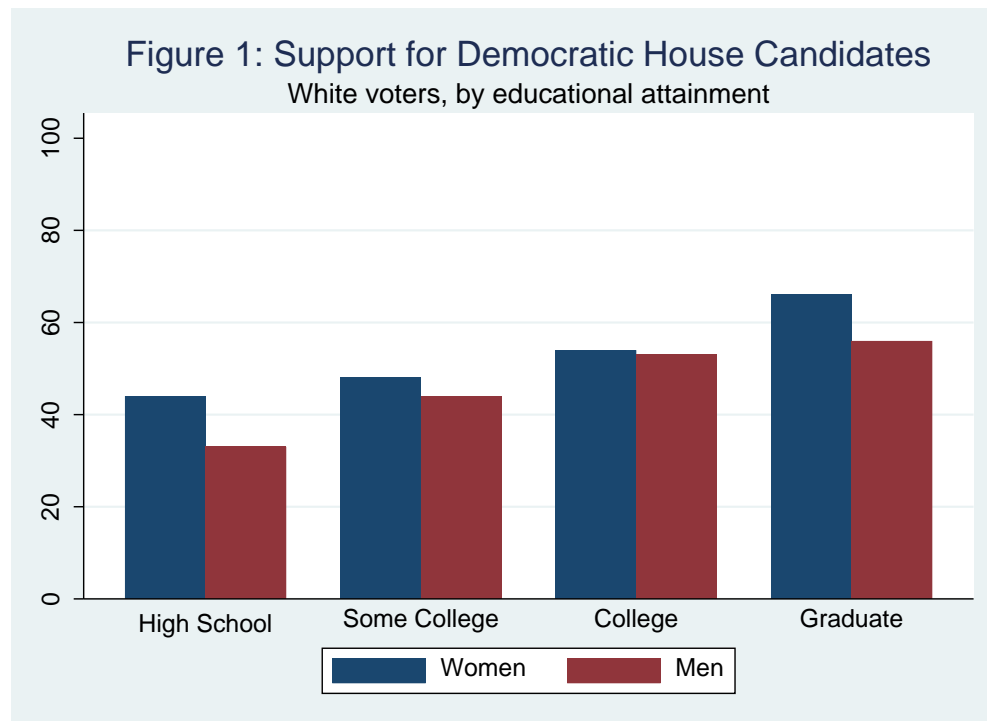
The gender gap in New Hampshire (and nationally), in which female voters tend to favor Democratic candidates more than male voters, persisted in 2018—but with one significant development. New Hampshire women were still more likely than their male counterparts to support Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives, but men were much more evenly divided in 2018 than they were in the 2016 presidential contest. Female voters favored Democratic House candidates by a 15-point margin in 2018, an advantage nearly identical to Hillary Clinton's advantage over Donald Trump among women in the 2016 presidential election, according to exit polls (Election2016). In contrast, men favored Republican candidates in the 2018 midterms, but only by three percentage points—a much smaller advantage than Trump's 13-point margin in 2016.

This trend among New Hampshire males was especially pronounced among those with a college degree. In 2016, Trump and Clinton split college-educated white men almost evenly, with 6 percent gravitating toward Libertarian nominee Gary Johnson, the former governor of New Mexico. Two years later, Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives carried 54 percent of this group, an 8-percent improvement over 2016. In contrast, white men without a college degree shifted just 4 percent toward Democrats, and a majority of this group sided with the Republican candidates for the House.

Partisan shifts among New Hampshire's white women voters from 2016 to 2018 were less significant overall than among white men, and were more pronounced among voters with

lower levels of education. White women without a college degree, like their male counterparts, shifted four percentage points toward the Democratic Party. White women with a college degree were strong supporters of Clinton in 2016, and remained steadfast behind Democratic House candidates in 2018, but their degree of support remained static.³

The end result of these partisan shifts was a New Hampshire “gender gap” that fluctuated with educational level, but not in linear fashion (see Figure 1). Among white voters, women were more likely than men to vote for Democratic House candidates at all educational levels. But the largest differences occurred at the lowest and highest levels of education, among those with a high school degree and those with a graduate degree. Men and women with college degrees (but not graduate degrees) voted for Democratic candidates at the same rates.



Converting Trump Voters

A subsample of New Hampshire respondents in the VoteCast exit poll (N = 751) was asked about their vote in the 2016 presidential election. As one might expect, given the overall

outcome of the 2018 House contests in New Hampshire, Trump voters in 2016 were more likely to vote for the opposite party in 2018 than Clinton voters, although the great majority remained loyal to Republican candidates. Clinton voters in 2016 almost unanimously voted for Democratic House candidates, while 12 percent of Trump voters said they cast ballots for Democrats. When I examined this subsample along divisions of gender and educational attainment, I found that Trump voters without a college degree, both men and women, were twice as likely to vote Democratic than those with a college degree. Just 5 percent of women and 8 percent of men with a college degree voted for Democratic congressional candidates after voting for Trump in 2016. Among those without a college degree, that percentage rose to 16 percent among male Trump voters, 14 percent for female Trump voters.

Multinomial Logistic Regression

To determine whether education and gender were significant factors in New Hampshire citizens' vote choice, even after controlling for a host of other variables, I performed a multinomial logistic regression on Votecast data from the New Hampshire sample. The dependent variable was the respondent's vote choice. The following variables were included: gender, race (white, non-white); age (18-24 years old, 25-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-64, 65 and older); education (college degree); income (whether the respondent's annual family income was \$100,000 or greater); and political party identification (Republican or non-Republican).⁴ For the analysis, I set supporters of Republican House candidates as the baseline comparison group.

Even after controlling for the powerful variable of party affiliation (see Table 2), a voter's education and gender still proved to be significant predictors of vote choice. Both variables affected vote choice in the same direction. Women were more likely than men to vote

for Democratic House candidates. Those with a college degree were more likely to vote Democratic than those without a degree.

Table 2 New Hampshire Democratic Voters, 2018 House of Representatives Contests

	B	SE	RRR
Female	0.38*	0.15	1.46
White	-0.00	0.24	1.00
Age	-0.02	0.05	0.98
College degree	0.42**	0.14	1.52
Income	-0.05	0.15	0.95
Republican	-3.35***	0.20	0.03
Constant	0.71*	0.32	2.04
N = 3,222			

Base category = Republican voters
 * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
 RRR = relative risk ratios, which are analogous to odds ratios.

Conclusions

After several close calls in 2016, New Hampshire Democrats doubtless benefited from its role as the party out of power in the 2018 midterms, especially with an unpopular president in the White House. Two trends among voters were particularly beneficial. First, Clinton voters in 2016 remained steadfastly loyal to Democratic House candidates in 2018. Trump voters were somewhat more likely to vote against House candidates from the president’s party. White men and white women without a college degree, key parts of Trump’s base in 2016, moved slightly Democratic in the midterms. Second, college-educated males shifted significantly Democratic, moving from minority support for Clinton in 2016 to majority support for Democratic House members in 2018.

To be sure, midterm elections typically are not predictive of presidential elections, and Democratic House candidates did enjoy resource advantages over their Republican challengers. Trump’s probable return to the top of the ticket in 2020 may attract white working-class voters to the Republican Party once again. But as of now, midterm voting patterns in New Hampshire did

not point to a Granite State realignment that would reverse the state's recent lean toward the Democratic Party.

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¹ For example, the Democrats traded victories with the Republicans at the top of the ticket in 2016, picking up a U.S. Senate seat but losing the governor’s office. They regained the First Congressional District seat, but failed to break the GOP hold on the state legislature.

² Democrats had a competitive gubernatorial primary. Republicans had competitive primaries in both congressional districts but no competitive gubernatorial primary.

³ Non-whites in New Hampshire comprise just 7 percent of the New Hampshire population (Census Bureau, 2018). Thus the subsample of minorities in the New Hampshire sample was quite small in the VoteCast exit poll.

⁴ I wanted to include frequency of religious attendance as a variable here, but that question was not asked of all respondents in the VoteCast sample.