

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF POLICY LEADERSHIP FROM A SMALL STATE: VERMONT AND NEW HAMPSHIRE

Paul Petterson
Central Connecticut State University

On a raw scale of factors for political influence, Vermont and New Hampshire would not seem to be prime candidates for leadership. Both are small population states with minimal diversity in their population mix, making them weak in potential representativeness and influence. Yet both states have supplied both policy leaders and policy innovation that has had a substantial impact. What has been the nature and limits of that impact? While both states have had a voice disproportionate to their size, the voice has not been unlimited in its power. These states have had influence only when specific factors have aligned to favor their representatives and ideas in national institutions and thereby in national cultural dynamics.

Vermont's leadership and policy advantages have flowed from their combination of political culture, longevity and stability of representation, and the continuing presence these have provided in Congress and public policy dialogues. Vermont's political culture has been one that has favored an expansive definition of who is entitled to liberties, from its antislavery roots to its leadership in the efforts for marriage equality. This has led to Vermont often being an initial pioneer and outlier in policy, willing to go where other states have initially been unprepared to go. Vermont's small and relatively homogeneous population has made it easier to reach a meaningful long term consensus on these issues, although the marriage equality conflict in 1999-2000 revealed that such consensus is not reached without division and emotion; a number of legislators saw their political careers ended by their local voters who did not share their views on the issue.

The stability of Vermont's congressional representatives has also allowed them to have an impact beyond their small numbers. One of Vermont's US Senate seats, for example, has been held since 1940 by only two men, George Aiken and Patrick Leahy. Both Aiken and Leahy developed longstanding influence in the Senate, enabled in part by their seniority and in part by the willingness of Vermont voters to support their policy stances that were sometimes out in front of national views (for example, Aiken's early call for the US to end its role in Vietnam). A small state without such a culture and representational stability would not give its leaders the same opportunities for influence.

This combination has also enabled two other Vermont leaders to become visible national figures in the 21st century: Howard Dean and Bernie Sanders. Howard Dean developed a platform thanks in part to his long service as governor of Vermont (1991-2003), and used this record to mount a major campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004, which in turn led to leadership of the Democratic National Committee and a key role in supporting the election of President Obama in 2008. This impact has allowed him to be a continuing presence in Democratic politics. Senator Sanders has also taken on a leadership voice on issues ranging from Veteran's Affairs to income inequality, staging a rare policy filibuster which he later turned into a book. Sanders is now being approached as a potential Presidential contender in 2016, and is actively travelling to explore this possibility.

Vermont's voice (as well as New Hampshire's) has also been aided by the dynamics of Presidential politics and policies in recent years. Vermont supplied one of the highest vote percentages to President Obama in both 2008 and 2012, and President Obama has publicly recognized Vermont for its role in supporting a higher minimum wage and health care reform. Vermont has gone from being a dependably Republican state in Presidential elections through

the 1980's, to being a regularly Democratic state since 1992. While this may seem a contradiction, it is reflective of Vermont's willingness to support innovative politicians and policies both with and against (as in the New Deal and the George W. Bush presidency) majority political and policy currents.

From a different political foundation, New Hampshire has also supplied its own national political leadership, thanks in greater measure to modern Presidential politics. While New Hampshire's consistent libertarianism has not always been in step with mainstream America, and its population has been as homogeneous as Vermont's for much of its history, the influence of its Presidential primary has meant that all aspiring national leaders have had to give its people and their views at least some attention. In addition, and paradoxically, New Hampshire's recent partisan competitiveness at the Presidential, Congressional and statewide levels have forced or encouraged both parties to be active in trying to influence policy and politics in the state. New Hampshire's current all female Congressional delegation has also gained it increased national visibility, and enabled cross party dialogues that would otherwise have been less likely to occur.

Looking forward to the 2014 and 2016 elections, both Vermont and New Hampshire will continue to have highly visible leaders in positions of influence, from former governor Howard Dean to current Senators from both states. There is no doubt that both states will continue to have vocal and distinct policy innovations. But looking below the surface, it is important to emphasize the ultimate limitations of both states' influence. In the end, their relative differences from the US as a whole, and their population size, will limit their impact.

Let us first consider Senator Sanders. While certain political circles are strongly encouraging him to run, being a self identified Socialist from a political outlier state will be hard

mountain to climb for political viability. Governor Dean was ultimately limited in his Presidential ambitions by being from deep blue Vermont, and Senator Sanders will ultimately face the same challenges if he chooses to pursue a national campaign. While those who support his leadership do so passionately, neither his following nor Governor Dean's has yet proved to be a viable national movement for the long term.

Vermont's efforts at healthcare reform also expose the limits of a small and particular state. While its health care system has pursued a single payer model, and helped to forward the national efforts for the Affordable Care Act, its actual ability to successfully implement its health care objectives is still in doubt. Its insurance marketplace has been plagued with issues thus far, and its single payer structure is still trying to formulate a successful financial model for making it viable by 2017. While the issues themselves are challenging, Vermont's relative size and finances, as well as the age and socioeconomics of its population, have also made it difficult to pursue its political visions. Ideas are still limited by hard resources, no matter the passion behind them. Vermont's nationally visible heroin epidemic is another challenge facing health care innovation as well.

In the case of New Hampshire, while its voters and their views continue to have disproportionate visibility every four years, their larger political philosophy of strong libertarianism continues to be generally outside the mainstream. Those conservatives who have hoped New Hampshire could push the nation rightward have thus far been disappointed, as have those Vermonters who have hoped their leftward views could capture the country. So it leaves both states in an enviable but limited position of activist policy innovation from relatively stable leaders who have a voice, but one that does not command, but only suggests, a direction for the country as a whole.