

Connecticut: Election-Year Politics, the Economic Forecast & Policy Challenges

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With the looming election in November 2014, Connecticut is dominated by election-year politics. Democrats have a solid hold on the state's chief executive office, the state legislature, the United States Senate, and all five of the state's congressional districts. Despite Democratic dominance, the race for the next governor and for the Fifth Congressional District will likely be competitive and closely watched races. The state of the economy is key in the race for governor, and issues regarding the policy positions of Representative Elizabeth Esty will dominate the race in the Fifth District. Gone are the days of Linda McMahon's extravagant campaign spending for a senate seat, but the two competitive races in the state will nevertheless likely result in expenditure of substantial sums.

In addition to the election, there are several policies that captivate Connecticut residents. Ongoing conversations and proposals about school safety and gun control have continued since the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. The implementation of the state's medical marijuana law, regional challenges in terms of energy prices, and enrollment in the state's medical exchange are currently the most important issues in the state.

Election-Year Politics

The Gubernatorial Race

This year's gubernatorial race is considered to be one of the top 15 races to watch nationally by the *Washington Post*. The Democratic incumbent, Governor Dannel P. Malloy, has yet to officially announce his candidacy but is widely expected to seek reelection. On the Republican

side, six candidates have expressed interest in running for governor, but only five have formally announced their candidacy. These candidates include Greenwich businessman Tom Foley, Danbury Mayor Mark Boughton, State Senate Minority Leader John P. McKinney, Shelton Mayor Mark Lauretti, and former West Hartford town council member Joseph Visconti (Pazniokas 2014a.). State Senator Toni Boucher created an exploratory committee in August, but has yet to formally announce her candidacy (Pazniokas 2014b).

For lieutenant governor, Democratic incumbent Nancy Wyman is also expected to seek reelection. On the Republican side, candidates for lieutenant governor include State Representative Penny Bacchiochi of Stafford Springs, former US Comptroller General David Walker (Stuart 2014), and former part-time Groton mayor Heather Bond Somers, who announced her candidacy as Mark Boughton's running mate (Pazniokas 2014b).

The main Republican contenders in the governor's race are likely to be Tom Foley, John McKinney, and Mark Boughton mainly because of their fundraising advantage and statewide name recognition. In 2010, Tom Foley and running mate Mark Boughton narrowly lost the governor's race by less than 1% to then-Mayor of Stamford Dannel P. Malloy and his running mate Nancy Wyman. John McKinney was in the spotlight after the devastating shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, which is located within his legislative district. As of December 31, John McKinney led fundraising efforts with \$134,167, with Tom Foley close behind with \$131,827, followed by Mark Boughton with \$53,614. In his previous attempt, Tom Foley spent close to \$11 million of his own money on his campaign, but has not yet decided whether or not he will participate in the public financing system this time around (De Avila 2014).

Although the election is still months away, the 2014 gubernatorial race has already seen its share of controversy. Days after announcing his exploratory committee, Tom Foley appeared on WFSB's *Face the State* and alleged that the Malloy administration has acted improperly in four specific instances. Citing anonymous sources, Foley claimed that Malloy did consulting work for Daniel Esty while running for governor in 2010 and as a result named Esty Commissioner of Energy and Environmental Protection in 2011 (Phaneuf 2013). He also alleged that an unnamed administration official pressured the UConn Foundation into paying for the governor's trip to an economics forum in Switzerland, that municipal leaders think their chances of obtaining state aid are helped if they hire a law firm that once employed the governor's former general counsel, and that it was inappropriate for the state's health care exchange to award a marketing contract to a communications firm that employs a former top adviser to the governor. The Malloy administration quickly denied these allegations (Phaneuf 2013). The press criticized Foley's use of anonymous sources because journalists "should use every possible avenue to confirm and attribute information before relying on unnamed sources" (Phaneuf 2013). Foley defended his accusations by stating that the use of anonymous sources follows a traditional journalistic standard, but admitted that he did not try to find sources that he could cite publicly because he is "not a journalist" (Phaneuf 2013).

In November, Foley rolled out the first television commercial of the 2014 gubernatorial race exclusively in New York City. The ad appeals to New Yorkers who may be considering fleeing the city after the election of a new liberal mayor by suggesting that Connecticut may soon have a new Republican governor. Also, in a move criticized by some as an election-year stunt, Governor Malloy announced \$155 million in tax relief in the form of tax refund checks of \$55 for single filers and \$110 to couples (Phaneuf and Pazniokas 2014).

Congressional Elections

With Connecticut's US Senate delegation free from an election in 2014, only the state's five Democratic House members face the voters in November. The competition for Connecticut's Fifth District is the only race heating up as of February. Congresswoman Elizabeth Esty was elected in 2012 to the open seat formerly held by US Senator Chris Murphy. Esty won in a close race with a Republican state senator. As discussed in the 2012 report, Esty won with only 51.3% of the vote. Esty previously represented the state legislative district where the Cheshire murders occurred. Her strong anti-death penalty position in the General Assembly cost her that seat. She won a congressional seat in the only Connecticut district that leans Republican. Largely through the support of EMILY's List and others, Esty won the seat by a slim margin. The Fifth District lies in the northwestern part of the state and includes Newtown. Esty was again faced with tragedy in her district after the Newtown shootings.

Congresswoman Esty now faces scrutiny from the powerful gun lobby. Her pro gun control position was amplified in the post-Sandy Hook devastation. For this reason, and because her positions tend to be less conservative than many in her district, she is a vulnerable incumbent. At the same time, her position on gun control resonates with many in the state, particularly those who were touched directly by the Newtown shootings. Esty walks a fine line in her Republican-leaning district. She has been carefully watched through the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. She has joined some Republicans in the House who oppose parts of Obamacare. However, she maintains her overall commitment to the bill and has stated that she wants the best healthcare options for the people of Connecticut (Radelat 2014). Her main opponent in the 2014 election is Republican Mark Greenberg, a successful businessman and entrepreneur. Greenberg

has been especially critical of Esty's position on Obamacare. Dr. William Petit, the only surviving victim from the Cheshire home invasion, recently declined to challenge Esty despite recruitment efforts by the Republican establishment (Pazniokas 2014d). Given his name recognition and the sympathy he engenders in the state, Petit could have been a formidable Republican challenger to Esty.

The Economy

Election-year politics overshadow economic projections for the state. In Governor Malloy's State of the State speech he emphasized the \$506 million budget surplus for fiscal year 2013. The surplus is in contrast to the \$3.7 billion budget deficit for fiscal years 2011-2012 that Malloy inherited from Governor Rell (Phaneuf 2014a). Much of the surplus stems from the unexpected strength of the stock market and the taxes paid by wealthy Connecticut residents on investment income. Malloy's speech highlighted a possible election-year tax credit for Connecticut middle class residents (\$55 or \$100 refunds), increased investments in state colleges and universities, more money for preschool and job training programs, and increased support for school security (Keating and Wilson 2014). The Republican minority in the General Assembly is not impressed with the 2013 surplus because of the projected \$1 billion deficit looming in fiscal year 2015. McKinney has alleged that Malloy used borrowing and fiscal gimmicks to create a surplus (Phaneuf 2014b). Other critics claim the Governor is misrepresenting the long-term fiscal situation in the state in order to win reelection. Some have pointed to a broader range of issues when arguing that the state is in rough fiscal shape, including unfunded state employee pension obligations and future bond payments.

Leading Policies

Gun Control, School Security, and Mental Healthcare Access

On December 14, 2012, the lives of Connecticut residents changed forever when a mentally disturbed 20-year-old killed his mother and later forced his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School, where he killed 20 children and 6 educators before taking his own life. The police investigation found that at home the perpetrator had unrestricted access to a variety of firearms that were legally purchased by his mother and that the family did not seem to have access to adequate mental health services (*Hartford Courant* 2013). This tragedy brought to light major deficiencies in current Connecticut statutes governing access to guns, policies relating to school security, and the availability of mental health resources. In the wake of this tragedy citizens, legislators, and the governor began calling for stricter gun control measures, increased school security, and more funding for mental health resources.

In the weeks following this tragedy, both the General Assembly and Governor Malloy created task forces to study these issues, which resulted in the passage of an omnibus bill that addressed these three major issues. This legislation allocated more funding for school security and mental health services and contained some of the most restrictive gun control policies in the United States. The gun control policies included an expansion of the assault weapons ban, a ban on the future sale or purchase of large capacity magazines that hold more than 10 rounds of ammunition, and the establishment of a deadly weapon offender registry (Connecticut General Assembly 2013). The main advocates of this legislation were the families of the victims of this senseless tragedy and Governor Malloy. The main opponents of this legislation were gun enthusiasts and members of pro gun interest groups who argued that these gun control measures constitute burdensome restrictions on law-abiding gun owners and an increased cost to the state. The legislation was taken up by the legislature on April 3, 2013 and was signed into law by the governor the next day.

Despite losing the legislative battle, pro gun rights groups vowed to challenge the new gun control legislation through a series of lawsuits in the courts. In December 2013, US District Court Judge Janet C. Hall dismissed a lawsuit filed by the National Shooting Sports Foundation concluding that the trade organization lacked sufficient standing to sue (*CT News Junkie Staff* 2013). On January 30, 2014, Senior US District Judge Alfred V. Covello dismissed a similar lawsuit that challenged the gun control legislation on constitutional grounds. The ruling affirmed the constitutionality of the legislation by citing that it is substantially related to the government interest of public safety. While gun control supporters praised this decision, gun owners promised to appeal (Pazniokas 2014c).

New England Regional Policy Updates

Natural Gas

Given the ongoing concern about energy prices, Connecticut and other New England states are collaborating to find ways to address energy prices. Natural gas is a particular concern because it is difficult to deliver to New England states. Six New England governors are exploring ways to create new natural gas pipelines and expand existing lines. This issue is garnering regional and national attention (Dowling 2014).

Marijuana

Connecticut joined other New England states in 2012 with the legalization of medical marijuana. The state has now appropriated licenses to four marijuana growers and licenses for sellers are expected later this spring (Weir 2014). The New England region is viewed as the most progressive in terms of medical marijuana laws. Several websites highlight the regional laws

and options for marijuana use (<http://newenglanddispensaries.com>). Like casinos, this could be a new source of economic competition in the region. It has also generated increasing attention from those who fear that the drug could fall into the wrong hands and lead to abuse by children, and/or concerns that the lack of FDA regulation for physicians makes prescribing the drug risky (Weir 2014).

Health Exchange

From the time when there were preliminary discussions of the Affordable Care Act, Connecticut was a supportive ally of President Obama's vision. Unlike many other states, Connecticut developed a health care exchange early and as of February 2014, the enrollment has exceeded expectations (Sturdevant 2014). Although not flawless, the rollout in Connecticut has gone much better than in many other states.

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