



What The War Within The GOP Means In Maine

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Given how often it has been left for dead, the Tea Party has had a pretty heady few months. Just when it seemed that long-serving solid Republican incumbents would avoid losing primary fights to Tea Party identified candidates, Mississippi Senator Thad Cochran was forced into a run-off he barely won, and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor surprisingly lost his primary by a large margin to a poorly funded college professor backed by grassroots Virginia Tea Partiers.

Similar dynamics are playing out in Maine, a state known not only for lobster but also, at least traditionally, for moderate Republicans. Moderate Republican Maine Senators Margaret Chase Smith, Bill Cohen, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins have established a long tradition of working with Democrats in their state and in Washington D.C.

But in the Obama era, things have changed even in Maine. Four years ago, in 2010, the far-right of the Maine Republican Party scored big when Paul LePage won the GOP gubernatorial nomination and then, as Republicans took both houses of the Maine Legislature, went on to win a plurality of votes in a multi-candidate race. Suddenly, Maine ended up with a very conservative, all-Republican state government, even as Maine Republicans fell into deep schisms between an older GOP establishment and libertarian and Tea Party factions. Indeed, the Maine Republican Party has been repeatedly roiled.

- In February 2012, moderate Republican Senator Olympia Snowe was booed at a Republican county gathering. Later that month, Snowe announced that she was fed up dealing with excessive partisanship and gridlock in Washington and would not run for another term.
- In Maine's 2012 presidential nominations process, supporters of libertarian Ron Paul called foul after conservative towns had their caucuses cancelled due to snow and establishment favorite Mitt Romney tallied the most support statewide. The result was a raucous state party convention in May at which Ron Paul's supporters prevailed by winning the largest number of delegates to represent Maine. When the credentials committee at the Republican National Convention stripped many of Paul's delegates of their seats, nearly all Paul delegates walked out.
- In November 2012, Republicans faced big defeats, as Mainers installed Democratic majorities in both the Maine House and Senate, endorsed same-sex marriage, elected moderate Independent Angus King to the U.S. Senate, and voted to re-elect President Barack Obama. Democrats held onto both of Maine's two U.S. House seats and Senator King soon announced that he would caucus with the Democrats in the U.S. Senate.

Governor LePage has remained in office since 2012, going on to issue a record number of vetoes, most of which have been upheld, because there are just enough like-minded conservative Republicans in the legislature to uphold them. Among the bills LePage vetoed were repeated efforts to expand Medicaid, including a proposal crafted by two moderate Republican legislators.

Moderate Republicans continue to face difficulties in Maine as of 2014. The same night that Eric Cantor lost in Virginia, Maine's Tea Party candidate won the marquee primary race for the Republican nomination in the open U.S. House seat to represent Maine's second Congressional district. Ultra-conservative nominee Bruce Poliquin signed Grover Norquist's no-tax pledge, calls for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, supports raising the retirement age for Social Security, and holds very conservative views on abortion, immigration, and gay rights. Aligned with the LePage wing of the Maine GOP, Poliquin is a wealthy investor who lost the Republican primary for governor in 2010 and served two years as Maine's Treasurer. He also ran for and lost the GOP nomination for U.S. Senate in 2012.

Tellingly, Poliquin's vanquished opponent, Kevin Raye, is a pro-choice Republican who was Olympia Snowe's Chief of Staff and, more recently, the President of the Maine Senate. Raye runs a small business and won the Republican nomination for the second Congressional district House races in 2002 and 2012.

Although Gov. LePage did not have to face any primary opponent for his re-election bid, the Poliquin-Raye fight has divided the Maine Republican Party. Rather than coming together after the nomination was decided, Kevin Raye did not attend the Republican unity rally and has not endorsed Bruce Poliquin for the November 2014 general election, where the opponent is a relatively centrist Democrat. After the bitter 2014 Republican primary fight, one of Raye's supporters declared that a number of state Republicans see harsh personal slams by Poliquin as "unforgivable." And some younger Maine Republicans won't vote for Poliquin because of his anti-gay stance.

Across the United States in the last few election cycles, some Tea Party candidates in other states turned out to be so extreme they lost general election contests other, more mainstream conservative Republican candidates would have likely won. It is perfectly possible that this will happen again in Maine in November 2014. As vanquished moderate primary candidate Kevin Raye put it on primary election day, Poliquin "certainly has sought to position himself to the far right. If he wins today, I expect he'd have a hard time in the general election."

That prospect did not seem to matter to a majority of Maine Republicans who went to the polls in the primary. Bruce Poliquin's win came after public polls showed him doing much worse than Kevin Raye in putative general election match-ups against the Democratic primary candidates than Kevin Raye. The first post-election poll showed Poliquin trailing Democratic nominee Emily Cain. Whatever actually happens some months from now, Maine's GOP will probably continue to face schisms between compromise-minded center-right Republicans, the traditional Maine "establishment," and libertarians and Tea Partiers positioned further to the right and much less open to governing across party lines. In Kevin Raye's words, Poliquin's win "says something about the direction of the Republican party" – not just across the United States, but also in Maine.