

## What Factors Led to Senator Susan Collins Winning Re-Election in the State of Maine?

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The 2020 Senate campaign in Maine was followed by the whole country very closely because of Susan Collins' recent vote to approve Justice Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, a move that rallied liberals against her. She is the last remaining Republican Senator from New England and because of the controversial nature of this vote, many saw it as their opportunity to unseat Collins and replace her valuable Senate seat with a Democrat, thus bringing that party closer to a majority. The race garnered so much attention that it broke campaign contribution records in the state, and before the Democratic nominee was even announced, people all across the country had raised four-million dollars for Collins' eventual challenger in the weeks following her vote for Kavanaugh.<sup>1</sup> Going into the election, people thought Sara Gideon, the Democratic candidate, was going to unseat incumbent Susan Collins. Polls were looking fairly good for Gideon with FiveThirtyEight, a statistics website run by American statistician Nate Silver, putting her chances of winning at 59 percent. This made outside onlookers believe that Democrats in Maine were going to vote strongly for Gideon.<sup>2</sup> But as the results came back, it turned out pollsters had undersampled working class voters in rural Maine, giving Democrats the mirage of an easy victory. Gideon conceded mid morning on November 4th after Collins reached fifty-one percent of the total vote share.<sup>3</sup> This outcome shocked the liberal side of the country who had hoped that a victory in Maine would lead to them gaining a majority in the Senate. However, the people in Maine did not listen to the desires and money of the rest of the country, and they re-elected Susan Collins. Some say that she won the race because of the demographics in Maine and the fact that she has held the seat for so many years. However, Susan Collins actually won re-election in Maine because of the independence of Mainers, Sara Gideon's missteps, and because her characteristics align with many Mainers' descriptions of a perfect politician.

Joe Biden won the popular vote in the state of Maine with fifty-three percent of the vote, but Susan Collins won fifty-one percent of the votes for the Senate. Some explain this split-ticket voting with reference to Collins' long tenure. Susan Collins was a longtime incumbent and the demographics in Maine simply favored her over Gideon. It is extremely difficult to unseat an incumbent. According to a graphic from Open Secrets, a research group that tracks money in U.S. politics, eighty percent or more of the Senators up for re-election every two years have gotten re-elected since 1988.<sup>4</sup> The power of name recognition and the mark of 'INC' next to a candidate's name is very important. Plenty of people go to the polls every year not having done research on down ballot races so seeing that 'INC' symbol is sometimes enough to get someone to vote for you. Along with this, Susan Collins has a history with the state of Maine that can not be bought in an election: it has to be earned over time. This history cannot be undone by a couple

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<sup>1</sup> Joan E. Greve, "Could Susan," The Guardian.

<sup>2</sup> Nate Silver, "Maine : Latest," FiveThirtyEight.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Piper and Michael Shepard, "Susan Collins," Bangor Daily News.

<sup>4</sup> "Re-election Rates," Open Secrets.

of votes that people don't agree with after a candidate has done a fairly good job in office, bringing in billions of dollars in federal money, for twenty-three years.

It can also be argued that Biden won in Maine because so many people were anti-Trump. Otherwise, the demographic information would suggest that Maine would favor the Republican candidate for President. This assertion is based on a comparison of data from the US Census Bureau and a Gallup Poll discussing the makeup of each of the political parties. Sixty percent of the United States and ninety-three percent of Mainers identify as white with no hispanic origin. Mainers have a five percent higher likelihood of graduating from high school and a slightly lower likelihood of having a bachelor's degree than the rest of the country. Furthermore, just over twenty-one percent of Mainers are over the age of sixty-five compared to sixteen and a half percent across the rest of the country.<sup>5</sup> When coupled with Gallup information about how different demographics traditionally vote in elections, it can be seen why the Mainers voted to keep a Republican in office. This information is very useful when determining the political demographics of a region. Seventy-three percent of white people across the country identify as either Republican or Independent, two groups Collins does very well with because of her moderate Republican voting background.<sup>6</sup> Republicans also tend to do well with older people and non-college educated whites, two groups Maine has an abundance of. So, based purely on this demographic information and the fact that she is a long term incumbent, it looks like Collins easily had the advantage to win re-election to her Senate seat.

Despite this evidence that the demographics in Maine and the fact that she was an incumbent could only lead to a win for Susan Collins, there is another side to this question. Some other factors should be considered: the demographics of neighboring states and the amount of money Gideon poured into her campaign. When the demographics of the State of Maine are compared with that of Vermont and New Hampshire, its neighboring states, the argument for Mainers clearly favoring Republicans is no longer as strong. Vermont and New Hampshire have very similar makeups to Maine, having very close to the same percentage of white people with no hispanic origin, people aged sixty-five and older, and nearly identical percentage for high school graduation rates. On the other hand, Maine does have a five points lower percentage of people with a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>7</sup> This data from the US Census Bureau, a reliable source when used along with other information to put it in context, shows that Vermont and New Hampshire have very similar demographics to the state of Maine, but between them they have three Democratic Senators and one Democratic Socialist Senator. So the demographics of the state of Maine cannot be the reason why Collins won re-election, nor can the fact that she was more recognizable as an incumbent. True, name recognition can win elections, usually giving the incumbent an advantage. But in this race, Sara Gideon spent so much money, nearly \$48 million according to Open Secrets, to make sure that everyone living in Maine knew her name.<sup>8</sup> This meant that every Mainer was inundated with campaign ads, flyers, and phone calls. The argument that people voted for Collins because they knew her name therefore becomes invalid.

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<sup>5</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Maine; United," United States Government.

<sup>6</sup> Newport, "Democrats Radically," Gallup.

<sup>7</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Maine; Vermont; NewHampshire; United States," United States Government.

<sup>8</sup> "Maine Senate," Open Secrets.

Everyone in Maine knew Sara Gideon's name too. While demographics and incumbency were not why Susan Collins won re-election, she did not just win by chance.

An important factor that led to Susan Collins' win is the degree of independence that the citizens of Maine have. In fact, reporter Nora Flaherty from Maine Public, the public broadcasting company that has the rights to PBS in the state, described Maine as "unusually independent" in their politics after observing the state as a newcomer. She had previously lived in Chicago, New York, and Boston: three cities that are reliably Democratic and where there is never really a question of how their votes will go.<sup>9</sup> This reliability is not the case when you live in Maine, a state that has split seats in the Senate, and in the last twenty-five years has had one Independent, one Republican, and two Democratic Governors. In order to understand this phenomenon as an outsider to the state, Flaherty interviewed Kenneth Palmer, a professor of political science at the University of Maine who has written several books on politics in the state, about why Mainers ticket-split so much with their voting record. As an expert, he believes it is because Mainers expect "for politics to serve them, not a political class or party machine." They like to think for themselves and decide what will be best for them individually without really taking into account which political parties the candidates represent. This ideology that is so present in the state perfectly explains why both Joe Biden and Susan Collins were able to be victorious: the majority of Mainers liked both Biden and Collins and are not as heavily influenced by the one-sidedness of party politics that enrapture most of the nation.

Ticket splitting has become so much of an anomaly in American politics that in Michigan, a measure just passed that allows voters to fill in either a Democratic or Republican bubble on their ballot and nothing else. This means that all of their votes will go to their party's candidates without them having to go and bubble in each candidate individually. A system like this would not work in Maine because of the independence in how their electorate votes, leading to ticket splitting at levels not seen in the rest of the country. This split ballot voting strongly favored Susan Collins and allowed her to win, which can be seen most clearly through the exit polls conducted by *The Washington Post*.<sup>10</sup> This data illustrates that Trump had an eighty-one point lead while Collins had a ninety point lead with Republicans, and Biden had a ninety point lead with Democrats, while Gideon only had a seventy point lead with the same group. There were Biden voters in Maine who voted for a Republican Senator, something that did not happen in most of the country. Voters in Maine are truly able to decide for themselves which candidates they want in office instead of voting along with a political party. In fact, according to the same exit poll conducted by *The Washington Post*, over forty-two percent of voters in the state (compared to twenty-six percent of voters nationally), label themselves Independent rather than Republican or Democrat. This autonomy was clearly a benefit for Collins because there were a subset of voters who turned out in November 2020 to vote Trump out of office but keep the Senate Republican causing her to win re-election. If Mainers were not the independent thinkers they are, which leads them to split tickets at a much higher rate than the national average, Susan Collins would not have won re-election.

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<sup>9</sup> Flaherty, "Why Is Maine," Maine Public.

<sup>10</sup> Weigel et al., "Exit Poll," The Washington Post.

Another factor in Collins' re-election was the mistakes of her opponent. Sara Gideon took the wrong approach with her campaign by focusing on the broad national picture. As has already been established, Mainers like to vote for what they think will be best for Maine rather than how their decisions will fit the national or a political party's agenda. Despite this, Gideon centralized the message that her campaign was about taking power away from Mitch McConnell and the Republicans in Washington rather than everything she would do for Maine: a grave mistake. Freelance Democratic journalist Robert Messenger, who lives in Maine, got to the heart of this issue with his opinion piece in *The New York Times*. He described how a car with "out-of-state plates" came up to his house to canvas for Sara Gideon.<sup>11</sup> It really did not sit well with him, a Democrat, nor would it for the majority of the state. This Senate election was their decision, not the decision of people from Boston who came to Maine for the day to try and influence their politics. The independence of Mainers from the rest of the country's political system is something Gideon should have taken into account before she decided the tone of her campaign. Messenger went on to bemoan the notion that Gideon's campaign was "asking [him] to vote against Ms. Collins rather than for Ms. Gideon," which is another problem. In a state where people like their politics to serve them, the focus of a campaign must be how the candidate will serve their constituents, not the faults and grievances they have with the other candidate. This nationalized approach hurt Sara Gideon's chances of winning the Senate Seat in Maine because of just how localized politics are in the state.

Sara Gideon also went wrong with her advertising. She raised so much money and spent a large percentage of it on advertising. This massive amount of money flooded a media market that is relatively inexpensive, so voters across the state were inundated with material from both candidates (though slightly more material from Gideon), and they absolutely hated it, according to a local writer for *The New York Times*.<sup>12</sup> It can be tiresome receiving unwanted mail for just a couple weeks leading up to an election, and Mainers were flooded with material from early September. By the end of it, they were frustrated with both candidates making them less likely overall to vote for Sara Gideon because she was the worst offender. Campaigns have to know the limits for what will be effective in getting their name and messaging across, and not forcing it down people's throats. Gideon's advertising also came across poorly. Andrew Kennedy, the owner of his own communications firm that specializes in mail materials for down ballot elections, spent this election season in Maine and gave some insight to our class about the impression her campaign advertisements gave. He described them as "gratuitous" and lacking "gravitas."<sup>13</sup> As someone who specializes in campaign messaging it is important that Kennedy noticed and was able to analyze why Gideon's advertisements were not as effective as they could have been. When a candidate comes across the wrong way in an interaction you have with them, either on TV or in person, it will drastically affect the likelihood that a voter will support that candidate. So, the combination of ineffective television advertisements and the onslaught of largely unwanted mail materials led to some negative perceptions of Sara Gideon, which further reduced her chances of winning the Senate seat.

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<sup>11</sup> Messenger, "Susan Collins," *The New York Times*.

<sup>12</sup> Barry, "Democrats Went," *The New York Times*.

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, "Political Consulting."

There was also a large subset of people in Maine who voted for Susan Collins because they like her and her history with the state despite the recent trajectory of the Republican party and her more recent votes against impeachment and in favor of confirming Justice Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. This is why, when she ran for re-election in 2014, she received sixty-seven percent of the vote. According to an exit poll from CBS news, she received almost forty percent of the Democratic vote, almost seventy percent of the independent vote, and ninety-seven percent of the Republican vote.<sup>14</sup> This data shows how Susan Collins has historically had the ability to rally the vast majority of her state behind her: a skill that does not just go away. She has represented Maine in the Senate for twenty three years building up a relationship with her constituents that will “last after Trump” according to the majority of people Ellen Barry, a reporter for the *The New York Times*, talked to following the election.<sup>15</sup> There is such a strong foundation that has been built that it would take more than a couple of votes they disagreed with over the last few years--approving Justice Kavanaugh and voting against impeachment--to want to replace her. An article in the *Bangor Daily News* describes how several people they talked to following the election voted for Collins both because she personally helped them and her “deep connections to the state.”<sup>16</sup> So many value the history they have with Collins that they simply do not have with Gideon. In this history, Collins has brought back billions in federal money to her state which has directly helped people. For example, she has brought in more than 721 million dollars for transportation improvements in the state just since 2009.<sup>17</sup> This amount of money is just one aspect of the vast impact she has had in improving so many Mainers' lives. They want her back in the Senate to secure more federal funding to be able to continue helping them and help others. This history of economic success and likability from a large subset of all political demographics in the state leads to a repore Susan Collins has with her constituents that Sara Gideon lacks leading to the Senator’s victory in the state.

Susan Collins has also branded herself as a moderate Republican who is able to operate somewhat independently of the Republican party: gaining her more support from a State that likes independent politicians. In fact, some notable occasions where Collins voted against her party were on passing the Affordable Care Act, voting not to approve Justice Amy Coney Barret to the Supreme Court, and her repeated votes in favor of abortion rights. With these votes, Collins shows her constituents that she will fight for what they want, despite the agenda of her party. The people of Maine, because they are so independent and tend to stay away from political parties, really appreciate this sentiment from their representative. They respect that she is able to sometimes operate between the party lines of the Senate, a skill that has garnered her Democratic support in the past. Mainers really appreciate even this limited amount of fluidity because it is nearly extinct in the Senate. In fact, Collins has been repeatedly ranked the most bi-partisan senator even though she has worked with the Republican party more than ninety percent of the time over the past two years, which is much more single party voting than she did previously.<sup>18</sup> Mainers like the idea of a bi-partisan government, and Democrats in the past “took pride” in voting for all Democratic candidates except for Susan Collins because they like her moderate

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<sup>14</sup> "Maine : Exit," CBS News.

<sup>15</sup> Barry, "Democrats Went," The New York Times.

<sup>16</sup> Piper and Shepard, "Susan Collins," Bangor Daily News.

<sup>17</sup> "Senator Collins," Susan Collins United States Senator for Maine.

<sup>18</sup> Google News Initiative, "Votes Against," ProPublica.

stance.<sup>19</sup> Collins still brands herself as a bi-partisan moderate Republican, even though she has steadily voted more and more in line with the Republican party over her career. How a candidate is perceived by the public is extremely important in any election. So when politically independent Maine had a choice between a candidate who branded themselves strongly with a specific political party and a candidate who has branded themselves as the best senator at working across party lines, they chose the candidate who branded themselves as more independent: Susan Collins.

There were a lot of people who voted for Susan Collins because of her past history with the state, her moderate image, and because she was a Republican running in a down ballot race under President Donald Trump. There were many voters in Maine who chose Biden and Collins as shown through the results and exit polls. This split ticket voting may have benefited Collins because there were a vast number of people who wanted President Trump out of office but did not want Biden to be able to pass everything he would be able to do if the Senate had a Democratic Majority. The Green New Deal terrifies a lot of people because they fear for its effects on the economy and the loss of jobs in the fossil fuel industry. These were the set of people who listened to the liberal rallying cry of ‘anyone but Trump’ in 2020 but were not necessarily happy about Biden being the next president. So, they did what they could to ensure a check on his power. The modern phenomenon of ticket splitting was studied by political scientists Barry Burden and David Kimball, who found that the most common cause for ticket splitting in recent elections has been to “consciously [...] produce divided government,” ending up with “moderate policies favoring the median voter.”<sup>20</sup> These results explain an important factor in Collins’ victory; she was the person in the right place to make people feel okay about voting for Biden when they normally wouldn’t support a candidate with his more progressive policies. They don’t want Biden to be able to accomplish a lot, but they wanted to get President Trump out of office and Collins aided in their ability to accomplish this goal.

Susan Collins won re-election to her Senate seat because of the independence of Mainers, Sara Gideon’s mistakes, and the fact that she was the right candidate at the right time for the state. The outcome of this election will have a vast impact on the makeup of the Senate over the next two years. If Gideon had won, the Democrats would have a true majority in the Senate, and not have to rely on Kamala Harris to cast the tiebreaking vote for a 50-50 split Senate as she does now. The outcome of the Senate directly impacts what Joe Biden is able to accomplish during his presidency. If it had been under solid Democratic control, Senate Democrats could afford to lose one of the key votes from more moderate senators such as Kristien Sinema and Joe Manchin and still pass more progressive legislation. The tight 50-50 margin in the Senate has begun to show tensions among Democrats with Biden's infrastructure bill and will continue to play out for the next year of this Congress.

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<sup>19</sup> Cauterucci, "How Maine," Slate.

<sup>20</sup> Burden and Kimbal, "A New Approach,"

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