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Why New Hampshire's Gauntlet Still Matters Most: Albert R. Hunt

By Albert R. Hunt - Jan 8, 2012

If the first presidential primary were held in California or [Texas](#), the likes of Tom Rath or Clairra Monier wouldn't exist.

Rath is the head of Mitt Romney's campaign in New Hampshire; Monier is the co-chair of [Rick Santorum](#)'s quest in the state. Between them, they've been through a century of presidential primary politics and exemplify the exuberance and grassroots reality of this contest, which turns 60 this year.

Rather than television studios or props for expensive commercials or lavish fundraising events, retail politics rule in New Hampshire. Men and women who aspire to the most powerful position in the world go to town halls, early breakfasts, barber shops, bars. They meet one on one with voters who express their concerns and hopes for America, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes eloquently.

These experiences offer a better political laboratory than the Iowa caucuses. [New Hampshire](#) is more participatory and there's a longer tradition of voters taking their responsibilities seriously.

Rath is a puckish 65-year-old whose cherubic smile masks a sharp political mind. His first New Hampshire political campaign was in 1964, when as a Dartmouth College freshman, he helped run Grafton County for [Nelson Rockefeller](#). After each visit the candidate would give him \$20 for beer money.

Indispensable Republican

He later went on to be New Hampshire attorney general in the early 1980s. Since then he has been central to every Republican campaign. He's friendly and knows everyone, from former Supreme Court Justice David Souter to waitresses.

Although he's backed losers, no serious Republican presidential hopeful comes through New Hampshire without stopping by Rath's Concord office.

He revels in these experiences. In 1988, after [Bob Dole](#) won the Iowa caucuses, Rath urged him to shock the political world by picking Tennessee Governor [Lamar Alexander](#) as his running mate, figuring the news would dominate the last week of the New Hampshire contest and assure Dole's victory.

The candidate refused, and George H.W. Bush went on the attack, winning the primary and the nomination. (In the small world of New Hampshire politics, Rath made this pitch from the home of then-Governor John H. Sununu, the most prominent Bush- backer.)

He makes a persuasive case for the thousands of miles these candidates travel through the hamlets of this small state.

“As flawed and difficult and frustrating as this process may be, it would be much more so and less human if you didn’t have real people sitting across the table and telling candidates how they live,” he says. “It makes the winner a better president.”

Monier is equally effusive and upbeat, and has been at it even longer. She started in 1960, as a college student for [John F. Kennedy](#). She turned Republican, and with her husband, now deceased, became a force for [Ronald Reagan](#). She vividly remembers the famous debate in Nashua in 1980 when candidate Reagan, on the political ropes, took over by telling the editor of the local newspaper, “I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green.”

“We were down to our last few bucks,” Monier recalls. They decided to spend that money on the Nashua debate.

In 2008, she backed Romney, who she still likes, but says she’s having much more fun in the uphill Santorum campaign.

‘Blue Suits’

“The blue suits run the Romney campaign,” she says. “I like being with an underdog.”

Win or lose, she also believes that New Hampshire is vital to U.S. democracy and worries that too much emphasis has been placed on the plethora of debates in the current cycle.

“Debates test a candidate in one way, but it’s even more important for them to meet ordinary people who are not scripted, who say what they think rather than what you want them to think,” she says. “This is a form of campaigning I hope we never lose.”

It was on display this week. [Jon Huntsman](#)’s town hall in Peterborough, a Newt Gingrich session in Laconia, and Santorum’s appearance at the Queen City Rotary Club breakfast all featured a packed and engaged audience full of questions, most well- informed.

Romney, the frontrunner, held a rally early on Jan. 7 in Derry that was all speeches, and no questions. “This is bad; he’s acting like it’s an entitlement,” complained Joan Rogers, a retired homemaker from Plaistow who came with a question.

It’s an electorate that often creates surprises, from bringing down President [Lyndon Johnson](#) with a sizeable protest vote in 1968 to [John McCain](#)’s victories in 2000 and 2008. After winning the [Iowa](#) caucuses four years ago, [Barack Obama](#) was supposed to overwhelm [Hillary Clinton](#) in New Hampshire; she beat him.

It's likely that the outcome Jan. 10 will be determinative in several ways:

-- The candidacies of Huntsman, who's staked everything on New Hampshire, and perhaps Santorum, hang in the balance. The former Utah governor needs a solid second- or third-place showing to credibly continue; the ex-Pennsylvania senator needs to show that his stunning second-place finish in Iowa wasn't a fluke by finishing in the top three in the Granite State.

-- The vote captured by the libertarian maverick [Ron Paul](#) will be revealing. If, as in Iowa, he doubles his showing in 2008 (8 percent of the vote), that can probably be a predictor of better performances in subsequent contests.

-- Romney is expected to win easily, with 40 percent of the vote, or more. If he falls short of that, it's a further warning sign of a weak front-runner; President [George H.W. Bush](#), while fending off the primary challenge in 1992, won so unimpressively that it was a harbinger of his later failings.

There may not be any better place for these challenges to play out than in New Hampshire, long America's political early testing ground.

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