

## The Other Presidential Primary

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It's the forgotten primary, and perhaps understandably so. While Democrats bludgeon each other, Bill Weld is pushing a giant boulder up a mountain in the Granite State as he tries to win the Republican presidential nomination.

The former Massachusetts governor has practically lived in New Hampshire for much of the past year. The state is part of the Boston media market, with plenty of voters who remember him from more than two decades ago, when he became a bona fide conservative success story in a state not known for them.

"I am an economic conservative, which at least used to be associated with the Republican party and should still be," Weld tells *TAC*. "I was ranked the most fiscally conservative governor in the United States by the Wall Street Journal and the Cato Institute. The state was in a big hole when I took over from Governor [Michael] Dukakis."

When Weld came into office, Massachusetts had a 9.1 percent unemployment rate, a \$1.3 billion budget shortfall, and the nickname "Taxachusetts." Weld says he went to the business community in the state to find out what was keeping them from hiring. He said he "scratched those itches" by cutting taxes 21 times and rolling back regulations. He won reelection resoundingly in 1994 with what was basically a "morning in Massachusetts" message.

The libertarian [Cato Institute](#) report card on governors in 1992 gave him an A, and a B in 1994 and 1996. For some [perspective](#), the current Republican governor of Massachusetts, Charlie Baker, got a D for fiscal policy from Cato in 2018, indicating that Weld wasn't just a run-of-the-mill socially liberal Republican up north.

Last night, in his first ballot test since impeachment, President Trump won 97 percent of the Republican vote in the Iowa caucuses. His main rival there was former one-term Illinois congressman Joe Walsh. It seemed like a major victory for the president, but Weld only spent nominal time campaigning in Iowa, so the chances of his making a dent in New Hampshire are somewhat higher.

"I worked for Ronald Reagan and remember him fondly," says Weld, whom Reagan appointed U.S. attorney in Massachusetts. "He made you feel good about America. Mr. Trump does not set about to make you feel good about America."

That said, despite being the Libertarian Party's vice presidential nominee in 2016, Weld has said he would [keep](#) Obamacare and supports fees on carbon emissions. His libertarianism derives from his being very pro-choice on abortion and favoring drug decriminalization.

“If all goes well, we will over-perform in New Hampshire, then win a few states on Super Tuesday,” Weld said in late January after finishing his fifth of 12 campaign events for the day in New Hampshire.

Weld said his campaign is aiming for potential victories in his home state of Massachusetts and neighboring Vermont, as well as Utah and maybe even California. Most states aren’t winner-take-all, so it’s in the realm of possibility that he could win delegates. Weld hopes to net at least six states, which would guarantee him a speaking spot at the Republican National Convention. He’s also shooting for the almost two dozen states that have open primaries, where independents and Democrats can vote.

He’s on the ballot in about 20 states now and expects to be on most state ballots by the end of February, except for the nine states where state Republican parties have canceled primaries.

“I hope to win in crossover states, where independents and some Democrats can vote,” Weld says. “My appeal to Democrats has been to vote against Trump twice rather than just throw a dart into the crowded Democratic field.”

Weld has repeatedly said that his goal is to do well enough in New Hampshire, which has an open primary, to ensure Trump’s eventual defeat in November. He wants to—oddly enough—follow the Pat Buchanan model. Buchanan got 38 percent of the vote against President George H.W. Bush in New Hampshire in 1992, and Bush went on to lose to Bill Clinton.

Presidents Jimmy Carter in 1980, Gerald Ford in 1976, Lyndon Johnson in 1968, and Harry Truman in 1952 all had opponents who carried 40 percent or more in the New Hampshire primary, before either losing in November or—in the case of Truman and Johnson—just dropping out.

However, polls show Weld is hardly making the big impact in New Hampshire that he hopes for. A December WBUR survey found that just 9 percent of likely Republican primary voters planned on backing him. That number had growth potential. But a January CNN poll lowered his share to just 4 percent.

Another precedent that neither Weld nor the media has talked about is a more recent one—the 2012 Democratic primary. President Obama had no *credible* Democratic challenger when he ran for re-election. Yet in West Virginia, an inmate managed to win 41 percent in the state’s Democratic primary. In Kentucky, 42 percent of the state’s Democrats voted for “uncommitted” over Obama. In Arkansas, a Tennessee lawyer named John Wolfe polled 42 percent against Obama.

This garnered only nominal attention, as Obama had no chance of winning such states in the general election. Red state Democrats weren’t really voting for the prisoner, uncommitted, or the no-name; they were registering disapproval of Obama.

But it’s not hard to imagine certain die-hard blue states (perhaps in New England or on the left coast) simply registering dislike for Trump—particularly if a Democratic nominee is chosen quicker than expected and it’s an open primary. If Weld were to gain even 30 percent in even one blue state, MSNBC and CNN would likely explode with gleeful speculation over how this is the beginning of the end for Trump. It wouldn’t be true, but it would be a media bump that a

qualified Weld could capitalize on. Perhaps not enough to win six states, but enough for a bigger platform.

Weld has unleashed attacks on Trump as severely as any Democrat. Still, Trump has shown unusual Twitter discipline when it comes to not punching back. Weld says he understands that an attack from the president would elevate his candidacy.

“If I was advising Donald Trump, I would tell him don’t mention Bill Weld’s name,” Weld says. “The only thing he said about me is that he wouldn’t debate Bill Weld. He hasn’t said a word since. I would welcome him attacking me.”