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## Sununu: ‘Everything is on the table’ for 2024

*The New Hampshire governor touted his libertarian governing record, drawing contrasts with the more aggressively conservative approaches of other GOP governors.*

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Fresh off announcing that he wouldn't be running for the Senate, New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu nonetheless made a trek to Washington last week. His mission: to receive the Cato Institute's award naming New Hampshire as the freest state in the country, based on their latest ranking of the economic and personal freedoms in all 50 states. There was a political subtext, too: His state inched past Gov. Ron DeSantis's Florida to win the libertarian think tank's honor, underscoring a divide within the Republican Party over the best way to represent conservatism—and perhaps previewing a future presidential-primary clash.

DeSantis is a fan of using the power of government to achieve conservative ends. His anti-mask mandates, allowing parents to choose whether to let their kids wear masks in school, left no room for individual Florida counties to decide the best course of action in their respective jurisdictions. He signed legislation into law in November to prohibit private Florida companies from requiring vaccination as a condition of employment. That aggressive approach is finding a home elsewhere, most notably in Virginia, where newly inaugurated Gov. Glenn Youngkin issued an executive order on his first day in office requiring all counties to give students the option not to wear a mask in school. Youngkin also rescinded his state's vaccine mandate for state employees upon taking office.

Sununu, on the other hand, has chosen a classically conservative path: Let local governments, individual businesses, and school districts choose the best path for themselves. Most of the state's public schools still have mask requirements in place, for example, but they're each free to make their own policies.

“When you tell people they must [do something], right there you've broken the third rail. It's now big government intervening. There are a lot of things I want businesses to do, but that doesn't mean I pass a law and force them to do it. It's reactionary,” Sununu told *National Journal*. “I don't believe in government-driven vaccine mandates, but businesses have already had the right to impose a vaccine requirement for their employers way before we even heard the word COVID.”

Sununu added: “That opens a Pandora's box, setting a precedent for government control of businesses. And I'm fundamentally against that.”

It's a little bit easier for Sununu to burnish his small-government profile since New Hampshire government is so localized. The small state's 221 towns and 13 cities are responsible for most public services, in contrast to many other states which centralize control at the county level. Virginia's Fairfax County, for instance, has about 1.1 million residents—close to the same population as New Hampshire itself—with the county bureaucracy making decisions for all constituents in the jurisdiction.

Sununu's more restrained version of conservatism plays well back home, even if it doesn't garner him the same national attention as more outspoken GOP governors. His approval rating is at 52 percent, according to a December WMUR poll, with 86 percent of New Hampshire Republicans viewing the governor favorably. He won a third term in 2020 with 65 percent of the vote, leading Republicans to flip both state legislative chambers. While he passed up a run for the Senate, Sununu isn't ruling out a 2024 presidential campaign.

"Everything is on the table," Sununu said. "I have to get reelected in 2022. After that, we'll see what comes." Asked if he was more popular than former President Trump in his state, Sununu made a national pitch for his New Hampshire record: "They should love the fact that I'm the most fiscally responsible governor in the country. I've led the turnaround to now being the freest state in the country. And frankly, when it comes to COVID, we're one of the best-managed states in the country."

Sununu's record made him one of the most coveted Senate recruits in the country last year, yet he told *National Journal* he was never that interested in serving as one of 100 senators in a legislature, preferring to make big-picture executive decisions as governor—especially during a pandemic that's still raging in his home state. He added that he was disappointed that none of the many Republican senators he talked to—including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and National Republican Senatorial Committee Chairman Rick Scott—were committed to balancing the budget and restraining entitlement spending.

"I won't call out any of them individually other than to say collectively that I didn't get a sense that my priorities were aligned with their priorities," Sununu said. "What does Congress fundamentally do? They vote for funding up or down and then they're done. There's no innovation. There's no interaction. There's nothing. So yeah, that's not very fulfilling for me."

Sununu added: "It's hard on family with irrational scrutiny. Being scrutinized is fine, but the irrational anxiety of what's out there on both sides can be gut-wrenching. If I'm going to go through all that, I'm damn well going to get something done for my citizens."

Sununu said he plans to run for a fourth term in New Hampshire, where governors serve two-year terms. His reelection pitch? "If you just talk to your own base, you're not going to win. I try to talk about constituent customer service. People want someone with a good background that treats people as individuals. That's what we've tried to do in New Hampshire. And it's what the country needs as well."