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## Chris Sununu explains going from 'pretty close' to 'no' on New Hampshire Senate bid

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New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu was on the verge of running for Senate and delivering the Republican Party its biggest recruiting coup of 2022. Then he talked it over with Republican senators.

“I was pretty close,” Sununu told the *Washington Examiner* this month during an interview. “I wasn't ready to make an announcement, but I was like, 'OK, this makes sense. I think I could be a voice nationally.’” Everything changed after the governor consulted with Republican senators about the aspects of serving on Capitol Hill and what to expect for at least the first two years on the job. Sununu did not like what he heard.

“They were all, for the most part, content with the speed at which they weren't doing anything. It was very clear that we just have to hold the line for two years. OK, so I'm just going to be a roadblock for two years. That's not what I do,” Sununu said.

The governor said the message from virtually every GOP senator he chatted with — and he chatted with most of them — was that they plan to do little more with the majority they are fighting to win this November than obstruct President Joe Biden until, “hopefully,” 2024 ushers a Republican into the White House. “It bothered me that they were OK with that,” Sununu said.

More than that, Sununu was “bothered” by Republicans' seeming inability to answer this question: “I said, ‘OK, so if we're going to get stuff done if we win the White House back, why didn't you do it in 2017 and 2018?’” How did the Republicans Sununu spoke with answer his challenge? “Crickets. Yeah, crickets,” the governor said. “They had no answer.”

Sununu opted to seek a fourth, two-year term in the governor's mansion instead after initially planning to call it quits one way or the other.

In Washington, Republican leaders were disappointed. They took issue with how Sununu informed them, too, in that he did not call them in advance to give them a heads-up. Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, the National Republican Senatorial Committee chairman, and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky found out just like everyone else: during a news conference revealing his plans.

Sununu said they needn't worry. Sen. Maggie Hassan is "so disliked," he claimed, that the Republicans who have emerged as front-runners to challenge the incumbent Democrat, Chuck Morse and Kevin Smith, are likely to beat her. "I don't need to be the 51st vote anymore. I think we're going to win 52 or 53 seats," the governor said, confidently. "So in that respect, it's not just all on my shoulders."

Meanwhile, Sununu bristled at the notion of top Senate Republicans complaining about being left out of the loop regarding his decision to take a pass on federal office. "I don't work for them. I work for my citizens," he said. "I think it would've been insulting to tell people in Washington what I was doing before I gave the respect of my citizens who have hired me to do the job."

Sununu, 47, is the son of John H. Sununu, a former New Hampshire governor and the former chief of staff to President George H.W. Bush. His brother, John E. Sununu, previously represented New Hampshire in the House and the Senate. The governor traveled to Washington this month to accept an award from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, for being ranked No. 1 on its freedom index on issues such as government regulations, economic policy, and marriage.

Sununu gushed that manufacturers and other businesses are rushing to set up shop in New Hampshire. Most of the large companies are setting up shop in the southern end of the state, taking advantage of its proximity to Boston and other major northeastern hubs. But the governor said that even long-stagnant rural communities in northern New Hampshire, the "north country," also are experiencing growth. Sununu credited the turnaround to aggressive tax cuts and deregulation.

But Sununu grew more animated when discussing a program he enacted to provide \$5,000 education vouchers to parents of schoolchildren who earn at or below 300% of the federal poverty level — just under \$80,000 for a family of four. Parents are permitted to spend the voucher on private parochial schools and private tutoring, among other education services.

"As long as it's within the 603, your \$5,000 is yours to spend as you like," Sununu said, referencing New Hampshire's area code.

The Democrats believe Sununu is vulnerable, claiming he has mismanaged the coronavirus pandemic while pointing to his support for state curbs on abortion and his battles with the teachers union. But there was a reason Republicans in Washington worked so hard to convince the governor to run for Senate.

He is fairly popular and the opposite of polarizing. Sununu enjoys the support of swing voters, a key constituency in the Granite State. In 2020, Biden beat former President Donald Trump in New Hampshire 53% to 45%, and Sununu crushed his Democratic challenger 65% to 33%. Crucially, the governor has avoided the trap that has tripped so many other Republicans across the country: Trump.

Asked to comment on Trump's persistent stolen election claims, Sununu found a way to disagree with the former president without making his disagreement personal.

“It's problematic for Republicans when any Republican harps on what might have happened in 2020 or harps on what could be in 2024. If you focus on 2020 or you focus on '24, you're going to miss '22,” Sununu said. “You're not earning a single new independent voter or new voter at all by talking about the elections of 2020. And right now, you can't govern if you don't win.”

So, what's next for Sununu if he wins reelection this fall and secures the right to govern for another two years? At that point, the 82nd governor of New Hampshire might be open to talking about the 2024 elections and who should be elected the 47th president — and he might be willing to entertain himself as a part of that conversation.

“People have asked me about it, so I've had people engage with conversations with me about it,” Sununu said. “But I still have to win, become governor again in 2022, and I suppose everything's on the table after that, but nothing I'm thinking about right now.”