



## The Republican Who's Thriving Despite Calling Trump 'F-king Crazy'

Kara Voght

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ALTON, N.H. — On a sparkling September Friday, seven weeks out from election day, New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu is on the trail — literally. We're shuffling our way down the slope of Mount Major when a retired couple stops him to chat. The governor greets them playfully. "You! I know you — no, just kidding, I'm Chris," Sununu teases as he extends a hand.

Clad in trail sneakers, gray cargo pants, and a steel-blue button-down cut from moisture-wicking cloth, his sandy gray hair matted to his head, Sununu has the overall aesthetic of a Granite State mascot, if that mascot were a middle-aged dad. "I'm obsessed with this place," Sununu says of New Hampshire. That morning, he'd debuted a song on local radio, written to the tune of Johnny Cash's "I've Been Everywhere," that listed towns in the state. This home-state obsession is why Washington Republicans were so eager to recruit the three-term governor to run for Senate against Democratic incumbent Maggie Hassan. It's also chief among the reasons why he demurred.

The couple on Mount Major, recent transplants from Minnesota, offers high praise of their new home. They'd moved east to be closer to adult children in New York and New Jersey — "we didn't want to live in either of *those places*," the wife says. Sununu is selling her on the state's new tax exemptions for retirees when she turns the conversation to the man who three days earlier won the GOP Senate nomination Sununu had passed up: retired Army general Don Bolduc, a MAGA-style Republican who is everything Sununu is not. Bolduc falsely claimed Donald Trump won the 2020 election, called to abolish the FBI in the wake of the search of the former president's home, implied that masks may actually cause the coronavirus, and voiced conspiracy theories about Covid vaccines. "The only chip that's going in me is a Dorito," Bolduc has vowed.

To Sununu, who took Covid more seriously than most of his GOP peers and knows Biden won fair and square, Bolduc amounted to a "conspiracy theory extremist" and "not a serious candidate," he said on a local radio show ahead of the primary. (Bolduc responded in kind, deeming Sununu a "communist sympathizer" whose family "supports terrorism.") But by the Thursday after the primary, Bolduc retreated from some of his more outlandish statements, admitting on Fox News that "the election was not stolen." At the GOP unity breakfast later that

morning, Sununu gave Bolduc a hug. (“I’m not gonna speak on why Don changed his tune, but he understands it wasn’t stolen, and that’s great,” Sununu told me later that Friday.)

Now, as the retired couple listens, Sununu’s trying to sell them on the candidate he’d once spurned. “You know — he’s an interesting cat,” he says. “Give him 60 days. We’ll see if he can grow on us a little bit.” For the hikers, it’s an emphatic “no.” Sununu chuckles. “Well, at least I tried.”

Sununu occupies a rare corner of the modern Republican Party: He’s a hardcore libertarian who has eschewed most of his party’s culture wars and, occasionally, Donald Trump — all the while avoiding the RINO label that plagues others who dare to do so. He often finds himself ranked near the top of “Most Popular Governors” lists and election watchers have deemed his chances of winning a fourth term as almost certain. Sununu looks like he’s cracked the code on how to be in Trump’s Republican Party without being a Trump Republican. His endorsement of Bolduc and other MAGA candidates, however, throws that independent streak into question. How deftly he’s been able to traverse the chasm that’s swallowed other conservative lawmakers who refused to bend a knee to the former president has raised Sununu’s prospects beyond New Hampshire. The question at the center of his political trajectory is whether he can hold his purchase.

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I had proposed the hike; Sununu, who’d completed the Appalachian Trail in his youth, had selected Mount Major and the steep route up the side of the mountain for our ascent. An hour earlier, we were scrambling over a stretch of boulders on our climb upward when I asked Sununu if he had any regrets about passing up the Senate race.

“Oh *dear God* no — are you kidding me?” Sununu huffs as we climb. “I thank my lucky stars every day that I didn’t get conned into that nonsense.”

Disdain for “that nonsense” — known to James Buchanan as the world’s greatest deliberative body — had been near the top of the list. “The U.S. Senate is the B team, compared to governors,” Sununu said. “Can you honestly tell me if we got rid of every U.S. senator and replaced them with 100 randomly chosen, employed American adults that it would get worse?” Disdain for Washington was a close second. “It’s just a bubble, and you’re talking to your own echo chambers, convincing yourself of this non-reality,” Sununu says.

Among those stuck in the “non-reality”: Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.) and his 15-week abortion ban (“Lindsey, Lindsey, Lindsey — God, he’s so disconnected”), as well as Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) and his attempt at a 2022 agenda for Senate candidates (“The one with the tax hikes in it? That’s not gonna fly.”). I counter that Scott at least *attempted* to chart a vision, something Sununu had accused Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) of failing to do — let’s give him an at bat? “Sure, I’ll give him an at bat,” Sununu concedes. “Unfortunately, he got hit by a pitch.”

Sununu, who is 47, delivers these criticisms with an ebullience that nearly undermines the insult. The self-described “joyful warrior” who “likes to wink and smile at people” speaks with a

buoyant New Hampshire accent. The overall effect is part eagerness, of part wry sarcasm. He's the sort of person who can call Trump "fucking crazy" at a white-tie dinner in Washington one night, assure people it was only part of a roast the following day, and leave you uncertain of exactly where the truth lies. "He doesn't take himself too seriously, but he's very firm in his beliefs," says Marga Patterson, who anchors a morning radio show Sununu occasionally guest hosts.

The governor is the seventh of eight children and was in high school when his family dragged him along on the move to Washington, when his father, New Hampshire Governor John T. Sununu, took a job as George H.W. Bush's first chief of staff. His adolescent protests then echoed his rejection of the Beltway now: "No, I'm not going — I don't care what you say, I'm not doing this," he recalls telling them. He came back north to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, did a stint as a hazardous waste engineer in San Francisco, then came back east to take up the family businesses: First, managing their ski resort in Waterville Valley, and, later, running for office. (Chris' older brother, John Jr., served one term as a U.S. senator.)

As we near the summit, the sharp slopes and dense forest, revealing just the earliest tinge of autumn foliage, give way to a flat trail and sweeping views of Lake Winnepesaukee. It's at that point Sununu admits there was a moment, at the end of his extended Senate tease, when he nearly stomachached the thought of going to Washington after all. The idea of being the "51st senator" appealed to him — of joining a narrow Senate Republican majority and holding forth as the GOP's answer to Joe Manchin. "There was a lot of talk of that," Sununu recalls. "I had U.S. senators saying, 'I wish I could rock that boat, but that time has passed for me.'"

Indeed, Sununu is an ideological oddity among national Republicans with all the markings of caucus wrecker. The self-described "rational conservative" takes a "Live Free or Die" attitude to politics: "Low taxes, limited government, local control, and individual liberty," he explains. Even so, he bucks fellow libertarians with his opposition marijuana legalization; he cites unsettled data on whether making the drug accessible improves or worsens the opioid crisis, which has hit New Hampshire particularly hard. "I'm pro-choice," he says, criticizing his state's 24-week abortion ban for not including exceptions for rape and incest. As for the GOP's embrace of "parents' rights," Sununu likes it — "but you know, kids matter, too, and that's inherently the balance."

"The concept of a big government Republican — which I hate — telling a town, 'Well, you didn't do it the way I wanted you to do it, so I'm going to pass a state law that takes away your ability to make that choice' — *that's* cancel culture," Sununu explains. It sounds a lot like a sideways critique of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who has built his national brand on the very action he claims to dislike. Sununu only praises the governor by name — save for the Martha's Vineyard stunt, which he described as a poor use of taxpayer's money. (He later endorsed DeSantis' tactic on local news, saying that "anything we can do to bring national awareness to [immigration] has to be done.")

To critics, Sununu's account of his politics don't hold water next to his record. Sununu, after all, signed that abortion ban into law as part of the state budget last year. Though he refers to his

views as “pro-choice” in conversation with me, he boasted that he had “done more on the ‘pro-life’ issue than anyone” on a conservative podcast last year. Half of the governor’s diversity and inclusion council resigned when, as part of that state budget, Sununu enacted a bill that curbed what could be taught about racism and sexism in New Hampshire schools. Tom Sherman, the Democratic state senator running against Sununu, burst into laughter when I relayed Sununu had described himself as a “hydro guy” and “wind guy.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said, noting vetoes Sununu issued on bills that would have decreased reliance on fossil fuels. “The top issues are freedom of choice and energy costs, and he’s trying to rewrite history on both.” (A spokesperson for the governor disputes this characterization, citing letters the governor wrote in support of rolling back some of the state’s abortion restrictions and support for various renewable energy projects.)

Sununu’s stances don’t necessarily make him an outlier in the Trump-era GOP. But the way he talks about politics — and his hesitance to engage in hyperbolic partisanship or embrace conspiracy theories does.

“I don’t consider myself a moderate, actually,” he tells me. “I’m just not an extremist.”

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After the hike, we swing by the local sheriff’s office for a costume change. When Sununu emerges, he’s traded his gray cargos for gray chinos, and his blue hiking button-down for a cotton one of the same color. There are two pieces of official business on the agenda: a stop by a rehabilitation center to discuss its post-Covid recovery and a party to celebrate the one-year anniversary of an opioid recovery center. In between stops, we race along New Hampshire’s highways from the back of the governor’s black Suburban, where I keep turning the conversation back to this question of political extremism.

Sununu has fielded his fair share of it. Protesters — “these real anti-government extremists,” he said — gathered outside his home for much of the pandemic — every Sunday afternoon, upwards of a hundred people, “yelling horrible things at my house and my kids and me,” he recalled. The Free Staters, a movement that once sought to make New Hampshire a libertarian utopia, have lately given him a headache. “I’ve literally had people in my office tell me that they love this country so much, they’re going to propose a bill just to secede from the union,” he says. “And I went, ‘Look, man, I don’t know what to say. But logic has left the building.’”

To hear Sununu tell it, both parties have retreated to their extremist corners. “We’ve just handed our microphones to these fools, if I may.” He struggles to tolerate the fringe candidates who won Republican nominations, such as Pennsylvania GOP gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano, who “says some things” Sununu “vehemently disagree[s] with.” Does that apply in New Hampshire? “I think we’re a lot more fortunate than other states are,” he says, without addressing Bolduc’s contributions to the canon.

Sununu flirted with election conspiracies after his first gubernatorial victory in 2016. He questioned New Hampshire’s run of Democratic governors by raising the possibility voters had been bussed in from neighboring Massachusetts. “I don’t want to use ‘rigged’ — that’s the word

you're not supposed to use anymore," he told conservative radio host Howie Carr. Even so, Sununu never considered the possibility that the 2020 election was rigged. "It obviously wasn't," he says.

Sununu's attitude has earned him some enemies among Trump loyalists, such as Mike Lindell, the MyPillow CEO who has bankrolled several efforts to undermine the 2020 election. After Sununu appeared on TV and criticized Lindell — no one "is really concerned about the conspiracy rantings of an infomercial guy," he said — Lindell sent the governor a set of sheets and pillows and a handwritten note telling Sununu he'll need "a good night's sleep after I tell...the people of New Hampshire the election was stolen from Donald J. Trump!" ("He signed it 'Blessings, Mike Lindell,'" Sununu recalls through laughter.) Corey Lewandowski, a New Hampshire native and Trump's former campaign manager, searched high and low to find someone to run against Sununu over his disloyalty to the Big Lie. He couldn't find a single worthwhile contender.

Yet, somehow this has not tainted Sununu's relationship with Trump, at least in the governor's eyes. "There's a lot of outside speculation about our relationship," Sununu admits. When Trump called New Hampshire a "drug-infested den" in a conversation with the president of Mexico in 2017, Sununu hit back with a statement that called the president "wrong." There was a swirl of speculation around the then-president's aborted rally in New Hampshire in July 2020; Sununu said he wouldn't attend, citing concerns about the coronavirus. Eyebrows raised this past April when Sununu called Trump "fucking crazy" at the Gridiron Dinner, an annual gathering of the Beltway's who's who. "It was a roast," Sununu said, both in the aftermath at the time and to me. (Sununu paid \$15,000 to C. Landon Parvin, a political speechwriter famous for his dinner routines. A Sununu spokesperson says he wrote his own Gridiron speech," but Landon provided assistance given his experience with the event.")

When it comes to Trump, "I don't make it personal," Sununu says. "I don't go out of my way to be the first out of the gate to say he did something wrong. And when he does good things, I give him credit." They most recently spoke in early September — their first phone call in a year and a half — when Trump called to thank Sununu for comments he'd made on CNN about the FBI raid at Mar-a-Lago — not exactly *defending* the former president, but excoriating Washington for how it played out. ("I think I might have called them 'morons.' I probably shouldn't have done that — you know, the FBI and Garland and Biden," Sununu reflects.) Trump asked Sununu who he should endorse in the Senate race, Sununu suggested his pick, state lawmaker Chuck Morse. "We all thought he was gonna come in for Chuck," Sununu recalls. "He kind of had cold feet in the end, but he probably would have been a difference maker." Overall, "we had an awesome conversation," in Sununu's assessment.

There's a certain fate that typically awaits Republicans like Sununu who have refused to go along with Big Lie. Rep. Peter Meijer (R-Mich.) voted to impeach Trump for inciting the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. He lost his primary in a swingy suburban district to a candidate who has cast doubt on women's intellect. Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.) has voiced her opposition to Trump over the insurrection — a decision for which she was stripped of her House leadership title, censured by the GOP, and also lost her primary. And yet, Sununu doesn't cast himself in

quite the same universe as the Cheneys and Meijers. He condemns Jan. 6, but also says the House panel investigating it is too political. I ask how he felt watching Cheney lose. “I didn’t care,” he says. “I don’t think she handled it very well. Every time she would do something on the news, ‘Oh, what a coincidence, she’s raising money off of it!’”

The more you listen to Sununu, the more you begin to see how he manages to stay out of the base’s crosshairs. He gets cynical when he sees anti-Trumpers get too brash. He skirts the thorny issues by bringing it back to New Hampshire’s idiosyncrasies, as he did when we discussed abortion: — “pre-*Dobbs*, post-*Dobbs*, it’s exactly the same here,” he said. He accuses Democrats on focusing on these issues because inflation remains high — what else are they going to run on? He rejects that voters will even care about the slimier topics, like election conspiracies, when they’re paying too much for groceries and gas.

“I never got into this for the social stuff,” Sununu tells me. I sense my endless questions about the culture war and conspiracies tire him. “You’ve never going to end the culture war,” he says. Instead, he believes, “we can get past it as a key priority of an issue.” Call it Sununu’s “one person” theory: The “right leadership,” with the “right attitude and approach,” can bring moderation back into the mainstream. “I think there’s leadership that can come that is positive, inspirational, that galvanizes people and says, ‘Look, I’m not saying your social and culture issues aren’t important, but the priorities of the average family are here.’ If you do those priorities, then you can have those harder conversations about the cultural stuff, and people will let you have that conversation with the right attitude.”

“But you’ve got to get people to calm their energy down a little bit,” he adds. “You do that by showing success, that Washington isn’t broken.”

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Some Republicans across the country certainly believe he’s cracked some code. He took a trip out to California to talk to Republicans tired of losing in their deep-blue state. He’s gone to D.C. a few times to speak at the CATO Institute, the conservative think tank, to talk about his response to Covid. Most notably, he traveled to Iowa this summer to speak at a conference for Gen Z Republicans. “I need them to believe that being part of our bench is important, and it’s not all about extremism and rhetoric,” he says.

He tells me this at the Red Arrow Diner in Manchester, over coffee and an overflowing mug of maple-cured bacon, a Red Arrow specialty. Sununu sits across from me with a stack of birthday cards he signs for anyone who requests them, a pandemic-era practice he started when he “canceled every kid’s birthday party” and kept going long after. The 24-hour pit stop is legendary as host to presidential hopefuls, presenting as good a moment as any to broach the obvious: Is he running for president? “I don’t know what I’m going to do,” he says. “A lot of people have come to ask me to think about running.” He says he can do the job — “of course I could, that’s not even a question,” he continues. “I think a lot of governors could.” But for now, “I have no idea. I haven’t even thought about it. But it’s nice to be asked. I’m flattered.”

By his own admission, "if Republicans do not close the deal in November, what's the point of worrying about '24?" And in order to do that, they have to stop talking about 2020. The biggest risk it poses to his party, Sununu says, is "if our party keeps harping on it as an issue that's going to be pivotal to winning in November." As far as a lingering influence, Sununu says with confidence, "I don't believe it's permanent." To Sununu, continued litigation of the 2020 election is an issue of the day, something that will fade with time. "The further we get away from that, the further we get away from that," he says. "It's not an issue of tomorrow." He blames, in part, "the liberal media" for continuing to talk about it. "It riles up the extremists on the right and it makes us, the party, look extreme."

He returns to defending Bolduc. "Get to know him, he's a war hero," he tells me. "During a primary, do we say things and get emotional? Yeah, of course. But those are primaries. Primaries are about party, that's fine. You hit a reset button in the general election, and you move forward." (In the days that followed our conversation, Bolduc appeared to backslide on his progress toward accepting the 2020 election outcome, telling a conservative podcaster that "the narrative that the election was stolen...does not fly up here in New Hampshire for whatever reason.")

That may be so. But if Sununu's wrong, laundering extremists through trusted conservatives like himself may carry deleterious effects. The party turned a blind eye, after all, as Trump hinted he wouldn't accept the outcome of the 2020 election. His making good on the promise led to an insurrection and an entire election with GOP candidates who have made his lies central to their platforms. The "reset" Sununu speaks of is one premised on the legitimacy of American democracy. You can be in Trump's Republican Party without being a Trump Republican, but what is the practical difference if your membership in that party empowers its most extreme elements? It's a question on which Sununu's political opponents are ready to pounce. "I'm not giving him credit for saying Biden is elected, between Bolduc and...others he's endorsed who believe that Trump is president." Ray Buckley, the chair of the New Hampshire Democratic Party, told me.

How can Sununu be sure he's doing the right thing? He can't. "If we truly believe this is the new state of affairs, well, pack it up, let's go home," he says. He repeats his point that "a lot of that party stuff of the day...falls to the background."

He pauses. "Hopefully," he adds. "Or not, and I'm dead wrong."