

# Craig poll claims Warmington win would drag down Democrats

By Kevin Landrigan  
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State House Dome  
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THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT SHOTS were fired this week in the Democratic contest for New Hampshire governor.

A poll commissioned for former Manchester Mayor **Joyce Craig's** campaign concludes the race is winnable by Democrats.

Nominating Craig's primary opponent, Executive Councilor **Cinde Warmington** of Concord, however, could lead to big down-ballot losses this November, the Craig poll asserted.

The Sunday News obtained a memo on the poll, conducted by Impact Research in December, which concluded that GOP front-runner and former U.S. Sen. **Kelly Ayotte** of Nashua led Craig, 49% to 42%.

Ayotte led Warmington in the same poll, 51% to 38%.

Craig Campaign Manager **Craig Brown's** memo said Warmington loses by 22 points (53% to 31%) after likely voters are told that in 2002 Warmington, a health care lawyer, was a lobbyist for Purdue Pharma and testified against restrictions on prescribing OxyContin, one of the painkillers that contributed to the opioid epidemic.

Warmington also received campaign contributions from the former owners of a pain clinic, including \$20,000 in her most recent report.

"It is clear that voters will hold an extremely negative view of Warmington once they learn this information and her positive message will not inoculate her," the memo said.

The pollsters found Ayotte's lead over Craig was driven by her much higher name recognition.

"This will be a tough race, but Joyce puts Democrats in the best position

to flip the governor's office in 2024," the memo said.

**Philip Stein**, Warmington's campaign manager, fired back that it's Craig who would be much easier for Republicans to run against because of her failed three-term record running the state's largest city.

"It's disappointing that after her record was squarely rejected by voters in Manchester last year, which cost Democrats the mayor's office and the board of aldermen for the first time in decades, Joyce Craig recognizes the only way for her to win this primary is by attacking her fellow Democrat with a deliberately deceptive poll," Stein said.

"The truth is that Republicans have said they 'hope (Joyce Craig) is the nominee' because they already have a winning playbook against her and independent polling showing she is the most unpopular New Hampshire Democratic gubernatorial candidate going back more than 20 years."

The Warmington campaign linked to an attack by Manchester Mayor **Jay Ruais'** campaign against Craig on her record of dealing with homelessness in the city.

Ayotte campaign spokesman **John Corbett** mocked the poll's conclusions.

"Poor Joyce Craig can't even beat Kelly in her made-up fairytale poll. Kelly looks forward to wiping the floor with whichever Democrat makes it out of this competitive

primary," Corbett said in a statement.

## House Dem jumps ship

State Rep. **Matthew Coker** of Meredith became the first Democrat since the 2022 election to jump ship and join the Republican Party.

The move grows the GOP majority to 201 Republicans to 194 Democrats, with three independents and two vacancies.

"His commitment to his principles and tireless advocacy for the values that matter most to his Meredith constituents makes him an invaluable addition to our team," said House Majority Leader **Jason Osborne**, R-Auburn.

Coker, an airline pilot and 10-year union member, serves on the House Transportation Committee.

As we have reported previously, Coker was not a consistently reliable vote in the Democratic caucus.

Last month, he was the only Democrat to oppose a gender-affirming care bill (HB 368) sought by the LGBTQ+ community. The bill failed to pass, 186-188.

Last spring, Coker was the only House Democrat to oppose legislation that would have expanded net-metering projects, in which power sources like household solar panels are credited for energy they contribute to the grid, from one megawatt to five megawatts.

Coker also worked with the leadership team of House Speaker **Sherman Packard**, R-Londonderry, to fashion a parental rights bill that would be acceptable to him; the House narrowly killed it last spring.

In his own committee, Coker broke ranks with all other Democrats last fall to oppose legislation to grant temporary driver licenses to those seeking asylum.

In 2022, Coker finished

second in the race for his town's two seats, edging out Democrat **Sandra Mucci** by 35 votes.

## Cracks in grant expansion

Ten House Republicans voted against expanding taxpayer-funded education grants to nine categories that ranged from having concerns about contracting the common cold and COVID-19 to being an LGBTQ+ student (HB 1561).

The bill to expand Education Freedom Account eligibility failed, 197-185, despite the sponsorship of House Majority Leader **Joe Sweeney**, R-Salem, and Majority Leader **Jason Osborne**, R-Auburn, who had signed onto it.

The defectors included Rep. **Aidan Ankarberg**, R-Rochester, who criticized the House GOP leadership in 2023 when he resigned as a deputy majority whip.

After a lunch break, the House GOP rallied to pass, 190-189, a bill (HB 1665) to raise the income eligibility cap from 350% (\$105,000 for family of four) to 500% (\$150,000) of the federal poverty level.

Only four House Republicans opposed that one, and Rep. **Bruce Tatro**, D-Swanzeey, was the only Democrat to back it, providing the margin of victory to send the bill on to the State Senate.

## House ranks drop by 1

Two-term State Rep. **Dan Hynes**, I-Bedford, resigned from the House last Friday, reportedly because he's moving out of the district.

Twice elected as a Republican, Hynes left the GOP in 2023 and became one of its three independents. He served on the House Ways and Means Committee.

Bedford town officials must request a special election to fill the seat but at this stage, that's unlikely. Because if there's a primary, the seat could not be filled until the 2024 was nearly over.

In addition, the candidate filing season to fill the seat permanently would take place around the same time as a special election.

The last votes Hynes took as a member Thursday were in support of education grants. He didn't return after lunch, so he missed the final one that passed by a single vote.

## Bill on prior authorization

State Sen. **Denise Ricciardi**, R-Bedford, had reason to celebrate after she secured stakeholder approval for her bill to streamline the process for patients and providers needing prior authorization before a medical procedure (SB 561).

Representatives of insurance carriers, hospitals, doctors and Insurance Commissioner **D.J. Betten-court** embraced a complete rewrite of the bill after Ricciardi led several months of private negotiations.

"Too many Granite Staters are left in limbo, waiting for approval from their insurance company to move forward with important medical care," Ricciardi said.

"This bill enacts a reasonable timeline for carriers to make a prior authorization determination in line with federal timeline regulations."

Under the compromise, those seeking prior authorization for "urgent care would get an answer within 72 hours unless the carrier asks for "additional information."

Those with non-urgent health care procedures would get an answer within seven days if the request is made electronically and 14 days if it's made in writing.

## Final state of the state

Gov. **Chris Sununu** will give his eighth and last state of the state address to a joint session of the Legislature Thursday.

If past is prologue, this speech will not be long and focus more on his vision for the future and the state's branding than a laundry list of agenda items he wants to accomplish during his final nine-plus months in office.

House and Senate lawmakers have a full plate once Sununu finishes his speech. The House will debate whether to apply obscenity laws to K-12 public schools (HB 1419) and two other education grant bills. The Senate has several abortion rights, gun control and bail reform measures on its docket.

## Support for competency study

At the behest of mental health advocates, House Children and Family Law Committee **Mark Pearson**, R-Hampstead, proposed creating a commission (HB 1020) to study how the state should reform its mental competency laws.

Once someone is declared mentally incompetent, they can petition to have that status removed after a year.

But only 44% of individuals pursue that in New Hampshire, about half the national average.

Stakeholders have spent the past few years studying the matter, but **Holly Stevens** with the National Alliance on Mental Illness New Hampshire believes a commission could move parties toward consensus.

Rep. **Marjorie Smith**, D-Durham, said giving this charge to existing committees could move the issue along even quicker.

## Coyote hunting bill back

State Rep. **Ellen Read**, D-Newmarket, said it's time for the Legislature to outlaw coyote hunting during the season pups are reared.

Read's amended bill (HB

1100) would outlaw hunting from April 1 to Aug. 31 every year while giving the Fish and Game Department the authority to move those dates up or back depending on each individual season.

Read said research shows killing coyote mothers actually increases the numbers that are reproduced as more coyotes bear pups in response to a killing.

"Pups end up becoming the nuisance coyotes that engage in conflict with the public," Read said.

**Dan Bergeron**, chief of the Fish and Game's wildlife division, opposed the bill. He said that over the past 30 years the state's coyote population has remained stable.

The House Fish and Game and Marine Resources Committee voted, 14-5, to recommend killing the bill. Opponents included House Speaker Emeritus **Steve Shurtleff**, D-Penacook, and Committee Vice Chair **Jeff Goley**, D-Manchester.

The Senate is likely next week to kill a bill (SB 346) that would ban the use of dogs while hunting for coyotes.

## Anti-boycott bill advances

The state Senate followed Sununu's lead in passing legislation to outlaw boycotts of Israel in state investments and purchasing (SB 439).

"New Hampshire and Israel have been partners for decades, with extensive cultural, academic, and economic ties. Discriminatory boycotts, such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, are rooted in antisemitism," Senate President **Jeb Bradley** said.

Last year, Sununu signed an executive order on the same issue.

## Sullivan County support

All three Sullivan County commissioners and County Attorney **Marc Hathaway** have endorsed Ayotte's campaign.

"Kelly Ayotte has always fought for us — I know that as governor, she'll ensure that New Hampshire remains safe, prosperous and free," said Commissioner and former state Rep. **Joe Osgood**, R-Claremont.

## Morse still pushing Trump

Last week, Republican candidate for governor **Chuck Morse** hosted a phone bank in Atkinson seeking financial support for former President **Donald Trump's** campaign in South Carolina.

Morse endorsed Trump a few months ago. Ayotte took no position in that race and following Trump's win hasn't commented on whether he should be the nominee.

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