

# A Different Shift in Connecticut

On sick leave, immigration, marijuana and other issues, lawmakers in Connecticut end their most activist session in years.

BY PETER APPLEBOME

In a year when conservative politics have dominated even traditionally Democratic states like New Jersey and New York, Connecticut is closing out its most activist, liberal legislative session in memory.

Lawmakers over the last several weeks have enacted the largest tax increase in Connecticut history and approved the nation's first law to mandate paid sick leave for some workers. They voted to extend protections for transgender people, charge in-state college tuition rates to illegal immigrants, extend an early-release program for prisoners and decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana.

As legislators wrap up the first session in 20 years with a Democratic governor, who is working with two chambers in the legislature under Democratic control, it is clear that either they did not receive or they decided to tear up the antitax, budget-slashing, confront-the-unions script that has characterized state legislative sessions elsewhere.

Governor Dannel P. Malloy and legislative Democrats characterized the session as one in which tough and balanced decisions were made on fiscal and job-creation issues, while social issues that had lingered for many years also were addressed. Republicans say the last five months of lawmaking have been a liberal joy ride and a capitulation to the state's powerful unions.

The session provides a glimpse into the politics of a state that largely avoided the Republican tide that swept the country last year. And the way that voters respond could say a lot, not

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just about Connecticut's future, but also about national politics as the fevers of the 2010 elections begin to cool.

The Senate president, Donald E. Williams Jr., a Democrat from Brooklyn, Conn., said the legislation passed on social issues was forward-looking and relatively modest, and he insisted Connecticut had made difficult but smart economic choices that would benefit the state over

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CONNECTICUT SENATE PRESIDENT

the long run.

"We're not interested in burning the bridges leading to our economic future," Williams said in an interview. "Governor Malloy and the Democratic legislature have decided to dig in and not do what other states are doing: using a flame-thrower when it comes to municipal aid, state support for education, state support for pathways that lead to opportunity."

But Republicans, for the most part, have been sharply critical.

"Their solution is to tax the wealthy in Fairfield County, redistribute income and hope people in Greenwich and Darien don't move to Florida," said Christopher Healy, the state Republican Party chairman.

An editorial in The Republican-American

of Waterbury, considered the state's most conservative daily newspaper, was more blunt: "It now is fair to say the state of Connecticut has left the gravitational pull of planet Earth. Just when you thought state government's policies couldn't get any more absurd, they move to a new level of, well, absurdity."



SENATOR  
DONALD E.  
WILLIAMS JR  
CONNECTICUT

The session has run on two parallel tracks—social and economic—with the end result still unclear.

On finances, the legislature adopted a \$40.1 billion budget that relies on \$1.4 billion in tax increases, about \$800 million in cuts and a projected \$1.6 billion in union concessions on pay and benefits over two years. The concessions were subject to ratification by state employee unions by June 24. Reaction from union members so far has been wildly mixed, and a failure to approve the givebacks would leave the budget in tatters.

Republicans, who question the accuracy of the budget numbers, say that, under one-party rule, Democrats seem oblivious to the economic forces buffeting states around the nation.

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The social and public policy agenda has been a grab bag of liberal issues, many of them stagnant in the pipeline for years either because of division in the Democratic ranks or because of threats of vetoes by Republican governors.

The most conspicuous Democratic victory was the passage of a bill that will make Connecticut the nation's first state to require employers to provide paid sick days to workers. It applies only to businesses in service industries with 50 or more employees, and exempts nationally chartered nonprofit organizations, day laborers, independent contractors and temporary workers, providing the benefit to an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 workers, including waiters and nursing home aides. The bill was significantly watered down, but its passage was hailed by worker advocates as a landmark effort that would add momentum to similar measures proposed in other cities and states.

Some of the bills, like the protections for transgender people and the decriminalization of

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marijuana in small quantities, are forms of legislation already enacted in other states. Malloy said the marijuana measure simply put Connecticut in line with the laws in neighboring New York and Massachusetts, and would make it one of 13 states with such statutes.

“Final approval of this legislation accepts the reality that the current law does more harm than good—both in the impact it has on people’s lives and the burden it places on police, prosecutors and probation officers of the criminal justice system,” the governor said in a statement.

Still, Republicans said the cumulative impact of the session constituted the kind of social engineering that had gotten Democrats in trouble in the past.

Healy said, “What the Democrats in Hartford are doing is very similar to what the Democrats in Washington did in 2009, which was to pass a radical agenda without any Republican support.”

Some politicians suggest that Malloy, who was elected governor last fall, had decided to tackle the most controversial budgetary and policy issues early in his term, with the hope that an improved economy would take the edge off any early-term grievances. And Thomas D’Amore, an independent political consultant who was chief of staff for Governor Lowell P. Weicker Jr., an independent, in 1990, said that for all the partisan atmospherics, the session and Malloy’s approach stood out primarily because of the contrast with other states.

“If you get beyond the headlines and look at the details, most of what you’ll find is pretty moderate and full of compromises,” D’Amore said. “I think at the end of the day, voters understand common sense and respect the argument that it was necessary to share the pain. But if things don’t turn around, then the outcome is going to be beyond the control of this governor.”

