

Hassan, Lamontagne spar in 12th and final gubernatorial debate

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Democrat Maggie Hassan and Republican Ovide Lamontagne last night aired sharp policy differences – and found a few areas of agreement – during their 12th and final debate of the fall gubernatorial campaign.

During the hourlong televised debate, both candidates said they favor legalizing medical marijuana, want to repeal the state’s death penalty (though Lamontagne said he’d favor keeping capital punishment for the murder of a police officer) and oppose requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets.

But in a particularly pointed exchange, they clashed over education policy and the issue of public kindergarten.

Lamontagne, the former chairman of the state Board of Education, has long opposed mandatory kindergarten, saying the decision whether to offer and fund it should be made at the local level. Still, last night he said he doesn’t want to repeal the state law passed in 2007 that required school districts to offer public kindergarten.

“I support kindergarten,” Lamontagne said. “I would not support repealing the law that was passed, and I commend the Legislature for enacting that law.”

Hassan said Lamontagne’s statement was disingenuous.

“With respect,” she said, “Ovide this summer said that he thought it was a mistake for the state to ensure or require that kindergarten be established in every community because, he said, if the state could do that, what would the state do next? So, are you now reversing your position, Mr. Lamontagne, about whether or not it’s appropriate to have a statewide requirement that all communities support kindergarten?”

Lamontagne shot back: “Sen. Hassan, again, you’re misrepresenting my record and what I stand for. I did not say that we should reverse course here. . . . I support the law currently that requires our students to attend kindergarten in New Hampshire, and I would not sign a bill to reverse that.”

Last night’s debate at St. Anselm College in Manchester was broadcast live on WMUR and came five days before Tuesday’s election to replace Gov. John Lynch, a Hopkinton Democrat who last year announced he wouldn’t seek a fifth two-year term.

Lamontagne, a Manchester attorney, and Hassan, a lawyer and former state senator from Exeter, have fought a tough campaign since the Sept. 11 primary, and opinion polls have showed a close race. A survey released yesterday showed Hassan leading Lamontagne among likely voters, 49 percent to 44 percent, with 6 percent undecided. That poll by Marist College, sponsored by The Wall Street Journal and NBC News, was taken Sunday and Monday and had a margin of error of 3.1 percent.

Lamontagne and Hassan clashed last night on fiscal policy, too. Hassan touted her work on the state budget passed in 2009, when she was the Senate majority leader, as proof that she could balance the budget as governor.

“Of the two candidates on this stage, I’m the only one who has balanced a state budget,” Hassan said. “We did it with cutting spending and we created a surplus. It’s the budget I worked on with Gov. Lynch. We worked together to make tough choices, and we actually – according to independent fact-checkers – reduced state spending in the general fund, the part of the budget that is funded with state revenues.”

But Lamontagne said the 2009 budget raised taxes and relied on borrowed money and accounting tricks, like moving the state Liquor Commission out of the general fund. That, he said, created the appearance of a balanced budget and reduced spending, but in fact left an \$800 million structural deficit for the next state budget.

He called it “a budget that was a failed budget, and it was called that by every paper in the state. . . . My budgeting will be true, honest and transparent, not the kind of budgeting that Sen. Hassan did in 2009.”

The candidates split on gay marriage, with Hassan saying she supports the 2009 law that legalized same-sex marriages and Lamontagne saying he would sign legislation to repeal gay marriage if that bill respected existing marriages and provided for civil unions.

Lamontagne said he would sign right-to-work legislation into law, while Hassan said she opposes such a bill. Hassan said she opposes the teaching of creationism in public schools, while Lamontagne said that decision should be up to local school districts. Lamontagne said he would oppose a law to require seat-belt use by adults, while Hassan said, “as a matter of public safety, it is worth considering.”

Both candidates support loosening New Hampshire's gaming laws to allow a single casino, though they differ on some of the details, including location – Lamontagne wants the casino to be built at Salem's Rockingham Park, while Hassan favors an open bid process.

But both Hassan and Lamontagne said last night that they've never visited a casino.

"We live boring lives, what can I say?" Lamontagne said.

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