

NEWS > CONNECTICUT NEWS

Trump and campaign \$\$: Questions that hang over CT's GOP race for governor



Connecticut State Capitol,



By **DON STACOM** | dstacom@courant.com | Hartford Courant

PUBLISHED: November 29, 2025 at 5:00 AM EST

In 2018, numerous political observers suggested New Britain Mayor [Erin Stewart](#) could make the GOP's most fresh, innovative candidate for governor in decades — but only if she could get past the conservative-dominated process for getting on the ballot.

Many of them say 2026 could be similar.

While its far too early to choose favorites in [Connecticut's race for governor](#), observers agree that the current lineup of candidates — a liberal, a conservative, and two relative moderates — leaves voters with a wide range of options between now and Election Day 2026.

And in that way, the campaign is shaping up as unlike any in recent Connecticut history. So far the declared candidates are mostly younger than usual, and they've each got experience serving in elective offices.



New Britain Mayor Erin Stewart gets a photo with Mary Fay of West Hartford, after her announcement about exploring a run for governor during a press conference at the New Britain Town Hall on Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2025. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

Stewart recently became the third Millennial to enter the race, leaving [Gov. Ned Lamont](#), 71, as the sole representative of the Boomer generation that dominated gubernatorial elections for the past 20 years. Stewart, left-leaning [Democratic Rep. Josh Elliott](#) and right-wing [Republican Rep. Ryan Fazio](#) are all under 42.

Stewart was elected at 26 as New Britain's youngest mayor ever, which may have worked against her in 2018 when she staged an unsuccessful bid for the GOP nomination for governor. With 12 years as an urban mayor, she's no longer susceptible to criticism of being too junior and untested.

Nevertheless, she still carries a reputation that's simultaneously an advantage and liability: Moderate Republican.

Her supporters in 2018 — mostly concentrated around central Connecticut — were eager for her to be on the GOP ballot, confident she'd draw votes from women, young people, minorities and the poor.

Stewart didn't make it through the nominating convention that year, partly because she wasn't conservative enough for party leaders. They backed Mark Boughton instead, but he didn't last: The heavily conservative voters who dominate GOP primaries chose the more right-wing Bob Stefanowski instead. Lamont beat him easily in the general election.

In a strongly blue, anti-Trump state, Stewart's appeal to unaffiliated and even Democratic voters still costs her with some of the MAGA contingent that so far has held sway over the GOP endorsement process.

In her tenure as New Britain mayor, Stewart endured numerous social media attacks describing her as a RINO Republican in name only, and in 2014 was slammed by some on the right for publicly welcoming Democratic President Barack Obama to her city. Soon after she Tweeted a selfie with the president, she acknowledged coming in for "a lot of grief" from fellow Republicans.

Four years later, state Democrats and left-leaning commentators in her city sharply criticized her visit to Washington to talk with President Donald Trump about tax incentives for poor cities. And if she gets on the ballot this year, Democrats are ready to make an issue of her shift rightward in recent years.

"With Republicans still in the wilderness, Erin Stewart has to ask conservative voters: Do you want a true conservative, or do you want a winner?," said Prof. Scott McLean, political science professor at Quinnipiac University.

"It's a matter of how the candidates speak to their base but also to the unaffiliated voters," said Prof. Jonathan Wharton, who teaches political science and urban affairs at Southern Connecticut State University.

"She has a brand: She doesn't always toe the party line, she's been successful in courting Democrats and unaffiliated voters for years in New Britain. But it's a double-edged sword here, and that's the nature of politics," Wharton said.

[Stewart told the CT Mirror in 2018](#) "I've been pretty outspoken about not supporting Trump and about not supporting or being in favor of a lot of

That position played well in with voters in New Britain, a hugely diverse, heavily Democratic and very poor urban center. It wasn't popular among conservative Republican party leaders from Connecticut's rural towns and middle-class or affluent suburbs, though.

In January, Stewart first spoke publicly about perhaps trying again for the governor's job; [this time she acknowledged she'd voted for Trump](#) in his three campaigns, and saw similarities with him.

"He's the type of leader who says he's going to do something and does it. He doesn't waffle. And I'm that same type of leader," she said.

In her social media video announcing her candidacy, Stewart included two photos of her meeting with Trump — and no Obama picture.

Still, at least some of the party's right wing appears no warmer about her candidacy. The democraticgovernors.org site [cheerfully used the phrase "a chaotic MAGA mess"](#) last week to describe the early days of the GOP race, posting a mailer from a pro-Fazio group belittling Stewart as "anti-Trump" and declaring "Republicans can't trust Erin Stewart."

State legislative leaders from the GOP caucus endorsed Fazio before Stewart even announced, but she has picked up [support from several dozen Republican leaders](#) in small to mid-sized communities along with numerous state legislators and former legislators.

To some who've been watching Connecticut politics for decades, Stewart represents a new opportunity for the GOP to make headway in a state that hasn't had a Republican governor since the late M. Jodi Rell left office in 2011.

She campaigns on a story of New Britain's revival: The city's budget was \$30 million in the red when she took office, she said, and now has a \$34 million surplus. Downtown was deserted and derelict; now private developers have put more than \$300 million into new projects.

Local Democrats argue that she took on long-term debt to make annual budget numbers look appealing, and some predict a newly commissioned audit will take the luster off her proclaimed achievements. They also slam

Nevertheless, even her opponents concede that downtown New Britain looks nothing like it did. Modern market-rate apartment complexes have been rising for several years, half-abandoned buildings are being refurbished and bike lanes run down several streets.



New Britain Mayor Erin Stewart announces that she will explore a run for governor during a press conference at the New Britain Town Hall on Jan. 28, 2025. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

Along the way, she's built a sizeable social media following that's notable because it's undeniably fervent. [Any online criticism of her is rapidly met](#) by scores of people responding "She has my vote," while even her most low-key posts attract her supporters' praise.

"Erin Stewart is the Republican's strongest candidate. I don't think Ned Lamont is going to take her lightly," said John F. Droney, former Democratic state chairman. "I don't think she has a chance against him, she doesn't have the experience — yet. But I think she could be governor in four years."

McLean sees some opportunities for her next year.

"She has proven that she can win in New Britain despite a 3-to-1 voter

"It's a real possibility that Stewart can do better in the cities than (Bob) Stefanowski did in 2022, and if that happens, it will become a battle for the suburbs. That's a fight the GOP might just win, even with an unpopular president in Washington," McLean said. "The primary will give us a preview of whether Stewart's charm and energy will win over suburban Republicans, and if she can generate sufficient excitement in the primaries, and cuts into Lamont's margins in cities, it's game on."

Wharton predicted Stewart will face an important test in the campaign: How well she can attract older Republicans in the state.

"In the previous conventions there was always talk about 'At what point will Millennials step up to the plate? How do we get younger people to run for office?'," Wharton said. "But the base of Republican donors is traditionally older. She has to find a way to connect with them more. She has some work to do."

Given that Lamont self-funds his campaigns with millions of dollars, the issue of financing will also face Stewart or Fazio.

"Of course, the question is money. There is no way any Republican currently in the field can match Gov. Lamont's ability to self-finance, even with public financing grants," McLean said. "There's no denying that is a disadvantage in the general election, but in the primary, all the Republicans will have to cross that bridge after the nomination. For now, we have to reckon on Stewart having the early advantage."

Around the Web

REVCONTENT

