NH gubernatorial candidates debate budget, taxes at Rivier University

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NASHUA, N.H. — New Hampshire's gubernatorial candidates met for their second debate Thursday, with Democrat Maggie Hassan accusing Republican Ovide Lamontagne of ignoring the true price tag of economic recovery, while he said she would chip away at freedom with taxes and fees.

Lamontagne, a lawyer who has made unsuccessful runs for governor, Congress and U.S. Senate, and Hassan, a former state senator, are competing to replace Democratic Gov. John Lynch, who is not seeking re-election after four terms in office. The format they faced at Rivier University was a bit of a departure, modeled after the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. Each candidate had eight minutes to address each of five questions, with topics ranging from the values that would guide the as governor to budget priorities.

Hassan, who argued that the best way government can help business is to ensure they have a skilled workforce, wants to restore nearly $50 million in annual state aid cuts to the University System of New Hampshire and make other investments to infrastructure and education.

"We can't have a strong economy if we just put our heads in the sand and pretend the things we need don't cost any money," she said.

Lamontagne emphasized his support for the constitutional amendment banning an income tax that will appear on the November ballot and pointed out that Hassan opposes it. Both have pledged to veto an income or sales tax if elected.

"I think we have a spending challenge and we need to reform state government by being fiscally responsible ... not raising taxes and taking more freedom and liberty from our people. That's what taxation is. It's not investment, it's tax and spend, that's the truth," he said.
While Lamontagne equated higher taxes to fewer freedoms, Hassan made a comparison of her own, saying not trusting women to make decisions about their own health is akin to blocking their participation in the economy or democracy. Lamontagne has backed allowing employers to deny services to customers and not pay for birth control in their health plans if it violates the employers' religious beliefs.

"It is really important for any governor to welcome every single citizen into the decision-making process as full and equal citizens," Hassan said. "If we don't trust women to make their own decisions, they're not welcome here and they're not welcome to participate in our economy and government in the same way."

From health care to education, Lamontagne boiled down several questions to a matter of local control versus government intrusion. He opposes the Obama administration's health care overhaul and mandatory kindergarten but favors vouchers to help students attend private schools outside their districts. Hassan, who takes the opposite view on all three, said Lamontagne is stuck in the past.

"Ovide is still pushing the same outdated ideas he started to run for office with 20 years ago," she said. "Giving state tax dollars to private schools that have no standards, or teach that dinosaurs and humans walked together 5,000 years ago isn't going to make our economy better."