

Partisan Disarray in Rhode Island

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Long considered one of the most Democratic states in the Union, Rhode Island is experiencing an unraveling of the Democratic establishment. This unraveling presents some important questions, specifically: how enduring this dislocation is, what party or group might be the beneficiary of this unrest, and whether or not a viable GOP opposition might emerge as an electoral force in this traditionally one party state.

The catalyst for this scenario was the 2010 gubernatorial election wherein the Democrat candidate garnered only 23 percent of the vote, a newly formed party, the Moderates, received 6.5 percent of the vote, the Republican candidate received 33.6 percent of the vote and the winner, independent Lincoln Chafee received 36.1 percent of the vote.

CANDIDATE	TOTAL VOTES	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
Lincoln D. Chafee (IND)	123,571	36.1%
John F. Robitaille (REP)	114,911	33.6%
Frank T. Caprio (DEM)	78,896	23.0%
Kenneth J. Block (MOD)	22,146	6.5%
Other	2,766	.8%

The Democrats have long and strong roots in the state and certainly at the federal level they have dominated the field. In presidential contests voters routinely turn in some of the highest levels of support for Democratic candidates. In 2000, voters gave Al Gore his highest plurality in the country and in 2004 their support for John Kerry was second only to levels of support for the Democrat in Massachusetts. In 2008, they overwhelmingly supported Barack Obama. The federal delegation of two senators and two house members, with a few exceptions in the 1980s, remains solidly in the Democrats' column. Yet in the election of 2010, the Democrat who ran for Patrick Kennedy's vacated seat had a tight race and won by just under 10,000 votes. His Republican opponent, with the help of national Republican money, could pose a formidable challenge in 2012.

The real unease however, is at the statewide level where, since the late 1980s, voters have been skittish in their support for Democratic candidates. At the gubernatorial level, for example, since 1985 there has only been one Democratic governor, Bruce Sundlun, who served from 1990-1994.

Moreover, during this time there has been an array of GOP victories for other general offices. Despite the relatively disorganized and poorly financed state party, individual Republican candidates have been able to run for and win general offices. For example, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, a succession of woman self-starters - who were not part of the GOP establishment - was successful at winning as Republican general officers.

The core of Democratic support lies in the legislature and here the Democrats continue to dominate. In a body of 75 in the House the Republicans hold only 10 seats and in the State Senate 6. Beyond the inclinations of the voters, strong forces keep the majority party in power. One is the overwhelming support of the unions. Union leadership is active and engaged at all phases of the legislative process and exercises influence not only in terms of protecting their legislative agenda, but also in targeting opposition candidates, especially in primaries. They have been forceful and strategic in using money and manpower to influence legislative elections. In Rhode Island, districts are relatively small – about 13,000 constituents in House districts and 26,000 in Senate districts. Given normal turnout, a hundred votes can make a difference in a general election and fifty or less can swing a primary race. Unions have used their electoral influence strategically, picking a few recalcitrant legislators and targeting them either in the primary (if they are Democrats) or the general election. These victories resonate in the General Assembly and individual legislators try to steer clear of crossing union forces.

The other factor that sustains the majority is the power of being in the majority. As a citizen legislature, rank and file members have few resources – no office or staff and meager pay -- all of which makes going it alone or being in the minority a lonely and legislatively difficult endeavor. Thus, there are a significant number of DINO's - Democrats in Name Only- in the General Assembly. These are members who are ideologically and fiscally more conservative than the Democrat mainstream and or representatives from old line Democratic locales where there is also a misfit between voters and the Democratic agenda. If the opposition could muster a sufficient critical mass, one might see a sorting out ideologically of these legislators into more coherent partisan groupings.

The long simmering resentment or distrust among significant numbers of voters began in the late 1980s and 1990s. This dissatisfaction was related to the collapse of the credit unions in 1990 and continued revelations of favoritism and corruption, which soured support for the political establishment. But up until recently, the consequences of this culture, while it prompted dismay and distrust, really didn't hit home with most of the voters in the state. The recent recession however, has changed the picture. For the past several years, Rhode Island has been an outlier in that while the rest of New England region experienced less economic dislocation than the rest of the country, in the Ocean State unemployment was one of the highest in the nation. At the time of the 2010 election, regional unemployment was about 8 percent – below the national average, but in Rhode Island it ran at above 11 percent.

All of this set the context for the ensuing partisan shuffling. First, Democratic candidate Frank Caprio, a competent and well-financed contender, received only 23 percent of the vote. His candidacy was hobbled from the start, especially when voters learned that before he announced for the Democratic primary he had made overtures to the national Republican Party about running as a Republican. He had long been part of the conservative wing of the Democrats and was not particularly supportive of the unions. When he didn't receive any encouragement from the national GOP, he announced as a Democrat. He had a hefty

war chest and as other potential Democrats dropped out of the running, he was unopposed in the primary. But as the campaign got rolling, he ran as a fiscal conservative and gave only tepid support to the more progressive social agenda of the Democrats.

A critical factor in the run up to the primary and the subsequent general election was that the popular former US senator, Lincoln Chafee made known his intentions to run as an independent. Chafee had been appointed to the US Senate seat in 2000 as a Republican to complete father John's term. He was then reelected in his own right in 2002. But he lost reelection in 2008 after a bruising primary and a tight general election. The striking thing about this loss was that although the voters turned him out of office, exit polls taken on the day of the election indicated that 63 percent of the voters had a favorable view of him and that the vote against him was related to opposition to fellow Republican President Bush. Given this general support, he bided his time with an appointment at Brown University and geared up to run for governor in 2010. Running as an independent, he was able to avoid a primary but faced formidable opposition as he framed his campaign around raising the sales tax to deal with the state's structural deficit. His pitch from the beginning was if you don't like the sales tax increase, give me a better idea. An essential segment of support came from the unions who preferred his positions of raising revenue with higher taxes and holding the line or only moderately altering public employee benefits.

Republican candidate John Robitaille was a moderate fiscal and social conservative who balked at the sales tax plan and vowed instead to "cut back on government spending." He provided an acceptable option for estranged voters and almost won by default. The entry of a competent and knowledgeable candidate from the newly formed Moderate party—Kenneth Block—who took 6.5 percent of the vote, just gave an edge to Chafee – the most liberal candidate in the race- and allowed him to edge out a victory.

As the newly elected governor and the legislature attempt to grapple with budget issues in an era of stubborn economic stagnation, new taxes, and diminished services, an emerging crisis in the pension system could be the catalyst for significant realignment. A newly elected General Treasurer, Democrat Gina Raimondo, has begun documenting a truly staggering unfunded public pension liability that, on a per capita basis, is the largest in the country. In a state where the total annual federal and state budget runs just over 7 billion dollars, the unfunded pension liability at the municipal and state level has been estimated at 9.2 billion dollars.

In a small state with 39 local municipalities, there are over 150 pension plans and a legacy of reckless or thoughtless concessions that the unions and elected politicians have pushed through on the behalf of state and municipal employees. These concessions have left one municipality in bankruptcy, two teetering in that direction and a staggering multi- billion dollar liability that is unsustainable. In many cases, municipalities would have to set aside half of their revenue collections just to fund these pension obligations. This not only creates hostility between public employees and taxpayers who have to foot the bill, but also has the potential to promote clashes among various contingents of public employees in the system. Active workers are forced to contribute more each year in co-pays for ever diminishing benefits in order to sustain generous payments to a cadre of retirees who enjoy salaries, disabilities benefits, colas and health care coverage that escalate yearly. Once the 2012 budget -- which will include new taxes -- is set, the political struggles will be intense. The Treasurer has already indicated that the settlements may

not only involve givebacks or reductions for new hires and those already vested in the system, but might also include those already retired. The question of pension benefits as a property right is, in her judgment, “unsettled law” and destined for judicial review. Whatever the outcome, the fallout will be significant.

If the dynamics from this struggle take on a partisan cast, the Democrats, with their traditional strong links to the unions and their general position of being in charge of the store when these pension deals were created, could be in trouble. Resentment of the unions certainly has the potential to enhance support for Republicans and a few key wins in the next election could promote their position. The diffusion of the opposition, however, especially in light of the new Moderate party, and an independent governor who is probably the most liberal player in the field, may give the Democrats some room to recoup and regroup. President Obama will likely be on the top of the ticket in 2012 and perhaps offer minimal shelter for the Democrats but Rhode Island has off year statewide elections – so any coattails shouldn’t make much difference.

Whatever the outcome of the pension crisis, in the short term partisan disarray in the Ocean State is likely to continue. The next question is can the GOP, with a few more strategic wins, translate these upheavals into the beginnings of a two-party system in Rhode Island?