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RHODE ISLAND POLITICS IN 2023

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2023 was a bookend year of surprises in Rhode Island politics. The biggest surprise in Rhode Island politics in 2023 was the announcement in January that Congressman David Cicilline was retiring from U.S. Congress to take the chief executive officer position of the Rhode Island Foundation, the largest philanthropic organization in the state. This was the second year in a row that a congressional seat became vacant after Congressman Jim Langevin announced his retirement in 2022 and former Secretary of State Seth Magaziner won the election in the second district. After winning a competitive Democratic primary that included twelve names on the ballot, Gabe Amo cruised to victory in the general election, becoming the first person of color to represent Rhode Island in Congress. At the end of the year, another announcement took Rhode Islanders by surprise – the closure of the Washington Bridge in Providence due to immediate safety concerns. The closure has had a significant impact on the lives of thousands of Rhode Island and Massachusetts residents who use the bridge daily to travel to work, school, and stores.

This report gives an overview of these notable events and describes other policy priorities in 2023, including: housing and development, reforming the law enforcement officers' bill of rights (LEOBOR), addressing coastal access, and expanding coverage of abortion care. The report ends with an overview of the first results from a new survey initiative from the University of Rhode Island (full disclosure: the author is a member of the team of researchers who collaborated on this effort) that provides new insight on Rhode Islanders' views about government, the media, public policy, and levels of political engagement across the state.

The Special CD-1 Election

In February 2023, Congressman David Cicilline took Rhode Islanders by surprise by announcing his plan to retire from Congress on June 1. Cicilline, a former mayor of Providence from 2003 until 2011, had served the state's more liberal district since 2011. District 1 encompasses the eastern part of the state, including parts of Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket, East Providence, North Smithfield, Woonsocket, Cumberland, Barrington, Warren, Jamestown, Bristol, Newport, Tiverton, Little Compton, Portsmouth, and Middletown. Cicilline was extremely popular, winning about 60% of the vote on average throughout his time in office. Cicilline stated that leading the Rhode Island Foundation was "an extraordinary opportunity to have an even more direct and meaningful impact on the lives of residents of our state" (Farzan 2023). His announcement quickly led to the formation of a large a pool of candidates who were eager to fill Cicilline's seat.

Since District 1 is a safe seat for Democrats, there was a lot of news coverage on the competitive Democratic primary. Twelve candidates were on the Democratic primary ballot, but the race seemed to circulate around a handful of frontrunners. The primary election was a test of the extent to which CD-1 voters supported a moderate or progressive Democratic candidate.

Gabe Amo, a moderate and newcomer to elected office but not to politics, won the election with 32.4% of the vote, with former progressive State Representative Aaron Regunberg in second (24.9%), followed by State Senator Sandra Cano (13.9%), Lieutenant Governor Sabina Matos (8%), and State Representative Stephen Casey (5.8%). Gabe Amo was unknown before the race, but quickly won the trust and support of many Democratic voters. Amo's past political experience consisted of working for President Obama in the Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs, working for former governor Gina Raimondo, and, most recently, he resigned from his Office of Intergovernmental Affairs position in the Biden White House to run for the congressional seat.

Several candidates received support from national and state-level groups and political leaders. Less than a week before the September primary, former representative Patrick Kennedy endorsed Amo, indicating that the Democratic establishment was behind him (Fitzpatrick 2023, August 31). Amo also had the backing of the Congressional Black Caucus. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez endorsed Regunberg, the progressive candidate in the race, who also had support from Senator Bernie Sanders and the House Congressional Progressive Caucus (Gibson 2023). At the state level, Regunberg secured mixed support from progressives. Furthermore, Regunberg faced criticism when his father-in-law set up a Super PAC to support him. Lieutenant Governor Matos was supported by women and Hispanic groups, including the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Elect Democratic Women PAC, and Her Bold Move PAC. Senator Cano had union support from United Nurses and Allied Professionals.

Initially, Lieutenant Governor Sabina Matos was considered a top contender for the seat due to her name recognition and political experience in state and city politics. However, Matos gained a lot of negative publicity when her campaign submitted forged signatures, including names of the deceased, on the nomination petition. The Matos campaign blamed an outside vendor who was hired by the Matos campaign to collect signatures (Lavin 2023). In the end, Matos had enough valid signatures to qualify for a place on the ballot, but she never recovered from the negative impact this scandal had on her campaign. Matos' favorability decreased based on internal polls from Amo's campaign, indicating that the signature scandal damaged her reputation (Fitzpatrick 2023, August 24). The Attorney General's office is currently investigating the signatures.

In the general election, Gabe Amo became the first person of color to represent Rhode Island in Congress with nearly 65% of the vote, defeating Republican military veteran Gerry Leonard. Over 66,000 votes were cast in the special election. Three main take-aways from this race include the following: (1) Rhode Island continues to be a state with moderate voters who are not quite ready to send a progressive leader like Regunberg to Capitol Hill, (2) election integrity was an important factor in this election, especially since Matos, previously considered a frontrunner and potential first woman of color to represent District 1, was unable to bounce back from the fraudulent signature debacle, and (3) it is important to consider the impact of having a large Democratic primary field where traditional coalitions of voters fail to coalesce around one preferred candidate and the votes are split amongst several candidates. When this happens, the winner of the primary will only need a small share of the vote to win the party nomination.

The Other Surprise - The Washington Bridge

On December 11, 2023, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation abruptly closed the I-95 Washington Bridge that connects Providence near India Point Park with East Providence. There were structural failures that required the westbound bridge to close immediately. The closure took state and local leaders and residents by surprise with no early warning from the McKee administration that the closure was happening. The Washington bridge has continued to garner a lot of news coverage as we begin 2024 due to the huge impact it has on 90,000 drivers who use the bridge on a daily basis (Anderson 2023). In January 2024, no timeline has been solidified to indicate when bridge repairs will be completed, with one of the latest updates suggesting that a new bridge might be necessary. The U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Transportation's Inspector General began a federal investigation of documents related to the inspections and repairs of the bridge. The Governor's office and Attorney General's office said this type of investigation was not out of the ordinary (Nesi 2024), and Congressman Seth Magaziner and Senator Jack Reed stated that they were in support of the investigation (NBC 10 News 2024). The Washington Bridge serves as an example of the necessity to immediately improve the state's infrastructure. Federal, state, and local leaders should examine the extent to which they incorporate policy plans that improve the crumbling infrastructure across the state. The bridge will continue to impact Rhode Islander's views of Governor McKee and his administration as residents deal with disruptions in their daily routines.

Housing and Development

Rhode Island leaders, facing a housing crisis, established the Rhode Island Department of Housing in 2022 that went into effect on January 1, 2023. The original Housing Secretary, Josh Saal, stepped down in January 2023, due to criticisms of his leadership effectiveness. Governor McKee appointed Stefan Pryor, the former Rhode Island Commerce Secretary, to take Saal's place. 2024 will remain an important year for the new leadership at the Department of Housing to showcase their effectiveness in dealing with the housing crisis, especially since the General Assembly has criticized the Housing Department's speed at which they shared updates on housing initiatives and how Secretary Pryor has spent funds on outside consultants (Anderson 2024). Housing was a main priority for The General Assembly in 2023 where legislators approved bills that focused on increasing funding for building projects and streamlining the building process, among other housing objectives. In December 2023, Speaker Shekarchi stated that housing remains a main priority for him for the 2024 session, with a specific focus on new construction, including accessory apartments.

Rhode Island had plans to work with Scout, a private developer from Philadelphia to rehabilitate the 100+ year old Cranston Street Armory in Providence. Scout employees accused high-ranking officials from the Department of Administration of misconduct relating to racist and sexist behavior during a trip to Philadelphia to view one of Scout's renovated buildings in March 2023 (Fitzpatrick 2023, June 8). The ordeal was an embarrassing incident for the McKee administration. Governor McKee terminated the contract in July 2023, ruling that the General

Assembly did not allocate funding for the project (Gregg 2023). The Armory is currently being used as a movie set. Political leaders and community groups should continue to think creatively about potential options to use this space to promote local and state goals.

Rhode Island Coastal Access

In 2023 the General Assembly passed legislation that focused on shoreline access. Now, the shoreline is public land if it is ten feet above the high tide line, which recognizes the line based on the seaweed left by the tide. The new law has been the subject of contention in recent lawsuits. A group of shoreline property owners sued the attorney general, the head of the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) , and the director of the Department of Environmental Management in US District Court, arguing that the law represents an unconstitutional taking of their property. The district court dismissed the case because it lacked standing. Attorney General Peter Neronha, a strong advocate for shoreline access, issued a statement supporting the judge's decision to dismiss the case, and reiterated that he "remains committed to protecting those rights against any legal challenge" (Rhode Island 2023). Shortly after this case was dismissed, another case was filed, this time in Washington County Superior Court, against CRMC and the State of Rhode Island, challenging the constitutionality of the law based on a separation of powers argument that the case went against a supreme court decision from the 1980s that labeled shoreline access as the mean high tide line and violating the state and U.S. constitution by taking property without just compensation. The court decision for this case will have an impact on the nature of future cases about shoreline access. Currently, the CRMC is raising awareness by educating the public about the new shoreline access law to ensure that local police, town administrators, and the public understand their rights (Farzan 2024). Shoreline access will remain an issue to pay attention to in the years to come.

Reproductive Rights

In 2019, Rhode Island lawmakers passed the Equality in Reproductive Rights Act that codified the right to abortion in state law in anticipation of the U.S. Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*. In the Fall 2022, shortly after the Supreme court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, Governor McKee's gubernatorial campaign focused on reproductive rights. In Governor McKee's budget proposal, he included funding to cover abortions for individuals in the Medicaid program and state employees. Governor McKee's efforts were successful when the General Assembly supported the Equality in Abortion Coverage Act in 2023.

LEOBOR Reform

Rhode Island lawmakers failed to adopt any reforms to the Law Enforcement Officer's Bill of Rights in 2023. Originally established in 1976, the Law Enforcement Officer's Bill of Rights (LEOBOR) in Rhode Island codified the rights of officers when they are under investigation. There were calls for police reform across the country after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and advocacy groups and legislators in Rhode Island focused on reforming LEOBOR. Early in the 2023 legislative session a reform bill passed the Senate, but the House did not approve the legislation. Efforts to revisit this legislation came early in the 2024 session, with the Senate approving the same legislation from the previous session. A group of House

members, led by Deputy Speaker Raymond Hull, a Providence police officer, proposed a different version of the bill, and progressives in both chambers introduced legislation to repeal LEOBOR. The primary areas of contention among the House and Senate bills are the members of the hearing panel, length of officer suspension, and the ability for police departments to provide information about the case (Gregg 2024). Both Speaker Joe Shekarchi and Senate President Dominick Ruggerio have expressed that LEOBOR reform is a priority for them in 2024 (Lavin 2024).

Other General Assembly Highlights

Other notable laws that promote youth political participation and racial and educational equity include:

- In elections, young adults who are 17 and registered to vote can now vote in a primary if they will turn 18 by the general election.
- “Juneteenth National Freedom Day” is officially a state holiday.
- The General Assembly provided more funding to K-12 public education for multi-language learners, special education, and after school learning.
- The General Assembly established a pilot program to cover tuition for eligible Rhode Island College students in their junior and senior years.
- A new law gives teachers access to a student loan forgiveness program.ⁱⁱ

Rhode Island Public Opinion

A team of faculty and students from University of Rhode Island’s Harrington School of Communication and Media, the College of Arts & Sciences, and the Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy (SSIREP) collaborated to develop a new public opinion survey that gauges Rhode Islanders’ views about public policy, media, spending, trust, and political participation (Rhode Island Survey 2023). YouGov conducted the survey using an opt-in panel that consisted of a representative sample of 500 Rhode Islanders between August 17 through September 6, 2023. The inaugural survey focused on education policy with the plan that each year students and faculty will choose a different policy area for the main module. The survey data will give researchers and students the ability analyze public opinion on issues for scholarship in their field and to provide a survey tool for the media, political and community leaders, and the public. Highlights from the survey results are described below.

Public Education Policy

The main module for the 2023 survey was about education. Overall, respondents supported an increase in school funding in K-12 and higher education. Less than a majority of respondents were somewhat or very satisfied with K-12 public schools. Nearly two-thirds of respondents were at least very concerned about poor standardized test scores. Most recent education proposals brought forth by the General Assembly were supported by a majority of respondents. Respondents believed the most important problem facing K-12 public school leaders was the teacher shortage.

- 42% respondents were somewhat or very satisfied with K-12 public schools in their community.
- 53% respondents agreed in increasing state government funding levels for Rhode Island public colleges and universities.
- 67% respondents agreed in increasing state and local government funding levels for K-12 public schools in Rhode Island.
- 64% respondents supported allocating funds more equitably to better serve historically disadvantaged school districts in Rhode Island.
- 41% respondents agreed that the local school board or committee puts the needs of students above all else.
- 61% respondents agreed that parents should have a significant role in the decision-making process for their child's public-school curriculum.
- 59% respondents agreed that K-12 schools should teach about the historical mistreatment of minorities.
- 32% respondents believed that the teacher shortage was the most important problem facing K-12 public school leaders, 23% respondents said that the most important was insufficient funding, and 14% did not know.
- 59% of respondents were either very or extremely concerned about poor standardized test scores in reading and math, 41% of respondents were either very or extremely concerned about political indoctrination of students, and 30% were very or extremely concerned about the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in educational materials.
- The survey asked respondents whether they supported several recent education proposals. Proposals that had over 50% support (strongly or somewhat approve) included:
 - an amendment to the state constitution that guarantees a fundamental right to education in Rhode Island,
 - legislation that creates universal pre-kindergarten courses for all children ages 3 and 4,
 - legislation that requires free lunches to be provided for all K-12 students attending public schools,
 - legislation that provides state funding for police officers in public schools,
 - legislation that provides state funding for social workers in public schools,
 - legislation that requires all public high schools to provide instruction on technical and vocational training.
- The only legislation that did not get majority support was legislation that establishes public school sex education that is inclusive of LGBTQ topics for 6th through 12th graders.

Views of the Economy, Spending, and Other Issues

Overall, Rhode Islanders' perceptions of the state's economy were low. Only 17% said Rhode Island's economy was somewhat or very strong. A majority of respondents would like to see an increase in state-level spending for education, housing, dealing with crime, building and repairing roads and bridges, aid to the poor, protecting the environment, and health care. Forty-

nine percent of respondents would like to see an increase in spending on clean energy. The survey also asked questions related to other issues, including abortion, climate change, the blue economy, same day voter registration, and concern about discrimination facing LGBTQ people and racial and ethnic minorities in Rhode Island.

Media Usage

Television continues to be an important news source. Nearly 58% of the respondents held at least a moderate amount of trust for traditional media like television. During a typical week, most respondents got their political and election news from television. Sixty-three percent of Rhode Islanders get their political and election news from television sources and 34% from word-of-mouth, with most respondents indicating that they go online to get their news. Out of all the social media sites, Facebook was most popular to use to get political election news, yet a larger percentage of respondents stated that they do not use social media sites to get political and election news. About two-thirds of respondents stated that they rarely discuss post or comment about political and election news on social media. Respondents had the least amount of trust in social media sites to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly. Most respondents get their news from local and national sources, and a plurality of respondents view both liberal and conservative news organizations equally.

Trust, Support, and Satisfaction Levels in Rhode Island

Overall, Rhode Islanders have a negative view of government, its leaders, and the overall quality of life in the state. Levels of trust in government were concerning. A majority of Rhode Islanders have little or no trust in the state government, the federal government, the state executive branch headed by the governor, and the state legislative branch that consists of the General Assembly. Forty-four percent believed that at least half of the people running the Rhode Island state government are corrupt. A majority of respondents had a moderate amount, a lot, or a great deal of trust in the local government and the judicial branch headed by the RI Supreme Court. Twenty-seven percent somewhat or strongly approved of the way Governor McKee is handling his job. Forty-five percent of Rhode Islanders were somewhat or very satisfied with the overall quality of life in Rhode Island.

Sense of Belonging and Political participation

While most respondents interacted with diverse groups, connection to community and empowerment within the community was low.

- 72% of respondents interact with people of different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds.
- 37% of respondents somewhat or strongly agree that they feel connected to their community.
- 21% of respondents somewhat or strongly agree that they feel empowered to make changes in their community.

While a majority of respondents follow politics, levels of political activities, political discussion, and political knowledge are quite low.

- 61% of respondents follow what is going on in government and public affairs.

- 67% of respondents did not do any typical political activities in the past year.
- 33% of respondents discuss political and election news at least a few times a week.
- 20% of respondents publicly expressed their support for a political candidate on Facebook, Twitter, or other social media.
- 17% correctly identified Joe Shekarchi as the House Speaker.

Party Identification

The survey results gave insight into the ideological and partisan make up of Rhode Islanders.

As expected, the largest group of respondents identified as moderate (35%), followed by liberal/very liberal (28%), conservative/very conservative (21%), and not sure (16%).

Based on a 3-point party identification scale, the party breakdown consisted of:

- 32% Democrat
- 15% Republican
- 38% Independent
- 15% Not sure/other

The 7-point party identification scale that includes leaners in the breakdown and provides a better estimate of total amount of partisans in the state:

- 44% Democrat and Independent leaning Democrat
- 22% Independent
- 27% Republican and Independent leaning Republican
- 7% Not sure

Proponents of participatory democratic theory would be concerned with Rhode Islanders' disengagement in political activities, disconnectedness with their communities, lack of knowledge of a key political leader, and low levels of trust in state government. Yet, the URI survey also indicates that most Rhode Islanders are interested in politics. Clearly there is a disconnect between the public's interests and their attitudes and behaviors that should be explored in more depth in future research.

What will happen in 2024?

Rhode Island General Assembly leaders tend to carefully examine major legislation over multiple sessions before supporting its passage. In 2023, for example, lawmakers passed a progressive law related to reproductive care and adopted a new coastal access law only after similar bills were introduced in the previous legislation session. Similarly, it is likely we will see the passage of LEOBOR reforms this session after it almost passed last year, especially since both House and Senate leadership recently expressed support for the reforms. Additionally, Rhode Island leaders indicated that housing and development will be a major priority in the coming months. In general, we can expect that legislation in 2024 will reflect the moderate political nature of the General Assembly leaders and Rhode Islanders. The General Assembly

members and other state leaders must continue to prepare for the 2024 election and the 2026 gubernatorial election. Rhode Island elected officials will be evaluated on their ability to successfully address difficult issues that may arise suddenly. The public is paying attention to how state leaders are dealing with the Washington Bridge closure, which is the most pressing issue for many Rhode Islanders at this moment.

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ⁱ The author thanks Maureen Moakley, Professor Emerita at the University of Rhode Island, for her thoughtful review of the report.

ⁱⁱ A full list of the 2023 General Assembly Highlights is on the Rhode Island General Assembly website. Legislative Press Bureau, “This year at the General Assembly.” *State of Rhode Island General Assembly website*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/Pages/wh2023.aspx>.