

2024-25 Report on The State of Democracy in Rhode Island

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The 2024-25 report on the state of democracy in Rhode Island gives an overview of the 2024 election, an assessment of public opinion based on the 2024 Rhode Island Survey Initiative, and a brief overview of policy priorities in 2024 and 2025. Key indicators of a strong democracy include an open electoral process, substantial political participation, and a functioning and responsive government. This report provides a brief overview of these factors in Rhode Island politics and government. The first part of the report examines the 2024 presidential election. Donald Trump's win was a victory for Republicans nationwide, yet the election had less of an impact on state-level party politics. Public opinion in Rhode Island indicates high levels of trust in the branches of government, election authorities, and traditional voting methods and high levels of political interest based on the percentage of Rhode Islanders who follow what is going on in government and public affairs. Yet, the level of political engagement can be considered low based on other measures, including the fact that over half of the General Assembly elections were uncontested, less than half of Rhode Islanders feel empowered to make changes within communities, and the low participation levels of other forms of civic engagement in the state. The report concludes with a summary of several critical areas including: the budget, housing, healthcare, transportation, education, and the environment.

Did the Republican Party make any headways in Rhode Island politics and government?

The political drama of the 2024 Presidential election did not result in historical voter turnout levels in Rhode Island. The 2024 voter turnout among registered voters (65.7%) did increase slightly from 2020 (64.4%).² In 2024, fifty-six percent of Rhode Islanders supported Kamala Harris and forty-two percent supported Donald Trump. Support for Trump increased by three percentage points, up from thirty-nine percent in both 2016 and 2020.³ Raw vote numbers in 2020 and 2024 indicate that Trump support increased by about 15,000 votes.⁴ Coastal cities and towns supported Harris and the interior parts of the state supported Trump, with Trump winning in three new communities compared to 2020, and all cities and towns increasing the margin of support for Trump since 2020 (Sherman 2024). Overall, the election results show a small but meaningful uptick of support for a Republican national candidate in a state that has averaged about thirty-seven percent support for the Republican candidate since 2000.

All Republican candidates in U.S. congressional elections lost to Democratic incumbents. In the U.S. Senate race, three-term Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse beat State Representative Patricia Morgan, sixty percent to forty percent. His margin of support was slightly lower than his last win in 2018 (61.4%). On the House side, Representative Gabe Amo, the winner of a 2023 special election to replace Representative David Cicilline's seat, easily beat his Republican opponent, Allen Waters, 63% to 32%, and independent candidate C.D. Reynolds (4.7%).⁵ Democratic incumbent Seth Magaziner (58%) won the District 2 seat. Steven Corvi, the

Republican candidate, received the same percent of support as Trump (42%). Magaziner's percent of the vote increased by eight percentage points from his first election in 2022 to well-known Republican Allan Fung, the popular former mayor of Cranston (50% Magaziner, 47% Fung). All told, the three-percentage point gain in support for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump did not mirror down-ballot support for Republican candidates for Congress.

The 2024 state legislative races continued to have many uncompetitive races with no surge in candidates running for office. The high percent of uncontested seats in the Rhode Island General Assembly (58% Senate; 64% House) was slightly higher than the percent of uncontested seats in the 2020 election (55% senate; 59% House).⁶ The number of Republicans elected to the General Assembly remained the same as last session at fourteen Republicans with one seat lost in the senate and one seat gained in the house (Republican Senate seats: 4/38; Republican House seats: 10/75). Just as in 2022, one independent was elected to the House in 2024. Voter registration trends show that the percentage of registered Republicans have remained consistent at 14% in November 2022, 2023, and 2024. The percentage of unaffiliated registered voters has been increasing (43% unaffiliated in November 2022; 46% in November 2023; 48% in November 2024) and the percentage of registered Democrats has dropped (43% Democrat in November 2022; 40% in November 2023; 38% in November 2024) (Rhode Island Department Of State 2024). The relative consistency of the low number of Republican candidates and the low percentage of registered Republican voters in recent elections further underscore the lack of significant Republican support in the state in 2024. Elections in the Rhode Island General Assembly and the percentage of registered voters indicate consistency in the size of the Republican party over the past several years.

Rhode Island remains a moderate state based on the general tenor of its residents. The 2024 Rhode Island Survey Initiative (RISI) gave insight into the ideological and partisan makeup and views of Rhode Islanders. Like the 2023 results, the ideological breakdown of the state comprised of moderate (35%), liberal/very liberal (36%), conservative/very conservative (17%), and not sure (16%) residents. Based on a three-point party identification scale, the party breakdown consisted of: 39% Democrat, 15% Republican, 34% independent, and 12% not sure/other. The seven-point party identification scale shows that the percentage of true independents is at 18%, while 54% are Democrats/independent leaning Democrats, 23% are Republicans/independent leaning Republicans, and 5% marked "not sure." Both the three- and seven-point party identification responses are similar to the 2023 responses, although there was a noticeable increase in the percentage of respondents who identified as Democrat and Lean Democrat in the 2024 survey. More annual data will give us a clearer picture of whether there are real shifts in party identification in the state. Interestingly, a majority of respondents are concerned that Rhode Island is a "one-party state," with the Democratic supermajority in the general assembly, Democratic governor, and all other state offices being held by Democrats. According to RISI survey results, party support is not an important motivator for voting. Among a set of choices for reasons to vote in the 2024 election, the least popular reason was "to support my political party," which suggests that there are other reasons, including "to support policies or issues," that are stronger motivations than simply party identification. More of the 2024 RISI survey results will be discussed later in the report.

Although there was little inter-party competition in the 2024 state legislative elections, there was one notable intra-party competitive leadership race within one chamber of the General Assembly. Former Senate Majority Leader Ryan Pearson challenged Senate President Dominick Ruggerio for the top seat in the senate, but Ruggerio prevailed and supported then Majority Whip Valarie Lawson over Pearson for the majority leader position that Pearson held since 2022 (Gregg 2024; Lavin 2024b; Nesi2025b). Senate leadership positions opened up again in the spring of 2025 when Ruggerio passed away. Ruggerio, a North Providence Democrat, was considered “socially conservative, but politically pragmatic,” and he had served in the General Assembly since 1981 and was Senate President since 2017 (Farzan and Gregg 2025). Majority Leader Lawson combined forces with Labor and Gaming Chair Frank Ciccone (both have strong union ties) to become the new Senate President and Majority Leader over rival candidates Pearson and Alana DiMario (Gregg 2025; Anderson and Gregg 2025). The Senate President is a coveted leadership role in the Rhode Island General Assembly since legislative leadership, including both the House Speaker and Senate President, are considered to have an outsized role in Rhode Island government decision-making due to the weak institutional powers of the governor.

In sum, although more Rhode Islanders supported Trump in the 2024 election than in the last election, this did not translate into more Republican representation in the General Assembly. The Rhode Island Democratic congressional delegation continues to have widespread support in the state as well. Furthermore, consistent voter registration and party identification does not indicate any signs of a conservative or Republican shift in the state.

What is public opinion about the current state of democracy in Rhode Island?

There is a burgeoning amount of public opinion surveys that policymakers, media, scholars, and the public at large can examine for a richer understanding of the current political landscape in Rhode Island. The University of Rhode Island’s annual Rhode Island Survey Initiative (RISI) focuses on a comprehensive overview of public opinion about public policy, media, spending, trust, and political participation, with the goal that some questions remain the same each year to support longitudinal studies about public perceptions.⁷ The inaugural 2023 poll included a special module on education and the 2024 module focused on election systems. In addition to the RISI poll, other Rhode Island surveys include the Salve Regina University Voices of Value Survey Project and the University of New Hampshire’s States of Opinion Project. Other recent state polls provide insight into Rhode Islanders’ opinions on targeted issue areas.⁸ While the rest of this report focuses on results from the RISI survey data, additional perspectives can be gleaned from survey results in these other reports.

The main module for the 2024 RISI survey asked a series of questions about Rhode Island election systems. YouGov conducted the poll between August 15 to September 8, 2024, and the representative sample size included five hundred Rhode Island residents. The following sections summarize some of the key results related to perceptions of the strength of democracy in the state, including support for election legislation, trust, election concerns, community engagement, and political interest and knowledge.

Election legislation

Rhode Islanders supported several election proposals that were introduced in the 2024 Rhode Island legislative session. There was widespread approval (80% strongly/somewhat approve) for neutral legislation that bans artificial intelligence (AI) generated political media that includes fake images, video, or audio recordings within ninety (90) days of an election. Two proposals related to more conservative views about election integrity were supported by a majority of Rhode Islanders. Sixty-two percent of Rhode Islanders supported increasing the responsibilities of the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) in preventing noncitizens from registering to vote, and sixty percent of Rhode Islanders approved legislation that mandates that no person can mail another person's mail ballot except for a spouse, court-appointed guardian, cohabitant, or any adult person related by blood or marriage to the voter. Breaking down these results by partisanship shows that while a majority of Democrats and Republicans agree with the proposals listed above, they differ on the following set of proposals related to youth participation, same day voter registration, and rank-choice voting:

- Fifty-two percent approval for legislation that would allow citizens who are at least 16 years of age to vote in school committee elections (67% Democrats, 40% independents, 29% Republicans)
- Forty-seven percent approval for an amendment to the state constitution that would remove the thirty-day state and local residency requirements to vote and require that a voter be registered by, or on election day (57% Democrats, 41% independents, 31% of Republicans)
- Forty-five percent approval for legislation that establishes ranked-choice voting for Rhode Island presidential primaries (56% Democrats, 43% independents, 22% of Republicans)

Trust

The RISI survey showed several positive indicators about the perceived strength of democracy in the state, yet perceptions of corruption remain high. A majority of respondents are satisfied with the way democracy is working in Rhode Island. The most general level of trust assessed in the survey, whether respondents trust their neighbors, was at fifty-seven percent. Levels of trust in government is highest for respondents' local government (68%), then the state government (61%), and finally the U.S. federal government (54%) with a great deal or fair amount of trust. In Rhode Island, respondents trust the state judicial branch the most (73%), then the legislature (60%), and then the executive branch (57%). Additionally, trust in election authorities was very high (even across party identification), with a supermajority of respondents, over 72%, having a fair amount or great deal of trust in the Rhode Island Department of State (73%), Rhode Island Board of Elections (72%), the respondents' local board of canvassers (73%), and Rhode Island poll workers (79%). Rhode Islanders had high levels of trust in certain election systems as well, including the requirement to show a valid photo ID in Rhode Island

when checking in to vote (84%), Rhode Island voting machines (82%), Rhode Island mail ballot drop boxes (64%), and mailing a ballot using the U.S. postal services in RI (64%). However, when comparing trust levels by partisanship, a majority of Republicans and independents did not trust mail ballot drop boxes nor mailing a ballot using postal services. Half of Rhode Islanders think that about half (or more) of the people running the RI state government are corrupt. These findings suggest that many Rhode Islanders believe democracy is working in Rhode Island and they trust most aspects of the government system, such as the election authorities, but half of Rhode Islanders also believe the state government is corrupt. Future studies should try to parse out the factors that contribute to perceptions of trust and corruption.

Election concerns

There is a mixed bag of attitudes toward other components of elections when taking a closer look at additional election questions. Although a majority of Rhode Islanders believe elections are fair and accurate and journalists provide fair coverage of elections, a majority also believes they are exposed to inaccurate information about elections and that wealthy donors unfairly influence election outcomes. As for voter fraud concerns, a majority of residents are concerned about votes being tampered with and someone claiming to be another person to vote. A majority of Rhode Islanders were also concerned with the following issues: interference from election observers, voter intimidation, civil unrest after election day, interference from foreign entities, and use of AI generated political media with fake images, video, or audio recordings. Democrats, Republicans, and independents differ in the amount of concern over some of these issues. Rhode Islanders are not concerned about accessibility issues with elections. A majority of respondents perceive that voters with disabilities and voters who require assistance in languages other than English have equal voting accessibility in the state.

Community Engagement

There were positive signs of strong Rhode Island community engagement when examining measures of satisfaction with the quality of life, connection with communities, and spending time among diverse communities. We asked the same question on ‘satisfaction with the overall quality of life in Rhode Island’ in 2023 and 2024, and it increased slightly from 45% in 2023 to 52% in 2024 who were somewhat or very satisfied. Half of the respondents agree that they feel connected to their community. A majority of the respondents (69%) spent time with people of different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds from their own. Yet, comfort in engaging in diverse conversations, community empowerment, and civic engagement was low. Less than half of the respondents are comfortable discussing local and state issues with community members who have different political beliefs than they do (49%) and feel empowered to make changes within their community (41%). Less than half of the respondents (48%) feel similar to their neighbors in terms of values and beliefs and feel similar to their neighborhood in terms of political views (40%). The most popular form of civic engagement includes donating blood, food, or clothing to local organizations (43%) and then expressing support or a political candidate on social media (26%), but other forms of engagement was below twenty percent, and thirty-three percent of respondents indicated that they did none of the political or community activities on the list. Taken together, there is a positive general feeling of satisfaction and

connection and people spend time in diverse groups, yet they do not feel empowered to make changes within their communities, they are not comfortable engaging in diverse conversations, and there is low civic engagement.

News Interest and Political Knowledge

The 2024 RISI survey results indicate that many Rhode Islanders follow politics. Seventy percent of respondents follow what is going on in government and public affairs most or some of the time. Rhode Islanders get their political and election news from news websites or apps (55%), television (54%), and social media websites (44%), with *Facebook* and *YouTube* as the most frequently used social media sites. When asked to imagine that they had to choose one media source to get recent political and election news, the top three national or local source chosen were: *Fox News* (14%), *CNN* (12%), and local news station *WPRI Channel 12* (12%), and less than ten percent of respondents preferred to learn about news from social media sites, *Google News*, *Apple News*, online influencers, friends, or families. Very few respondents (under 10%) chose national or local newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Providence Journal* as their preferred media source. Thus, more Rhode Islanders would choose *Fox*, *CNN*, or *WPRI* to get recent political and election news over social media sites, friends, families, or even traditional newspapers. When asked about where respondents get information about how to vote in Rhode Island, the top three most popular responses were through state government websites (43%), local television news (41%), and town/city hall websites (38%). Similar to the previously discussed findings about preferred media choice for political and election news, social media posts and print publications like newspapers were less popular choices to get information about how to vote in Rhode Island. Yet, friends and families were a popular choice (37%) to get information about how to vote.

The survey also shows that Rhode Islanders are aware of important political issues and the elections process. A majority of respondents agree that they understand the most important political issues in their community, Rhode Island, and the United States. More specifically, over three-fourths of respondents agree that they understand the elections process in Rhode Island. Similar to 2023, slightly less than a quarter of respondents knew that Joe Shekarchi is the House Speaker in the Rhode Island General Assembly in 2024. This finding shows that most Rhode Islanders do not know the leadership role of one of the most influential political leaders in the state. Yet, the results also suggest that Rhode Island politics continues to be a spectator sport for a small but meaningful percentage of residents who know the speaker's name. It would be beneficial to measure public awareness of additional political actors, institutions, and processes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of general political knowledge in the state.⁹ More research is needed to further examine levels of political interest and knowledge in Rhode Island.

What are the policy priorities in the state?

The Budget

In June 2024, The General Assembly approved a 13.9 billion dollar budget that increased funding for multi-language learners in K-12 schools, increased Medicaid reimbursement rates,

and included pension reform (Rhode Island 2024). The General Assembly also approved four bond referendums to add to the 2024 election ballot that related to housing, environment, education, and arts infrastructure, all of which passed. The budget process felt different in 2025 where Rhode Island political leaders faced a \$250 million dollar deficit and the end of an influx of federal funds due to the pandemic (Rhode Island Office of Management and Budget 2024). In a recent report, University of Rhode Island economist Leonard Lardaro shared his concern about Rhode Island's economy, especially since the employment rate has been falling (GoLocalProvBusinessTeam 2025). This year's budget proposal by Governor McKee reached 14.2 billion dollars. Governor McKee proposed several forms of revenue, including a digital advertising tax, re-implementation of the truck tolls, electric vehicle registration fees, hospital licensing fees, and an increase in the cigarette tax. At the end of June, the General Assembly passed a 14.3 billion dollar budget that Governor McKee refused to sign (but did not veto) due to the Assembly's revisions to his original proposal, including their decisions to increase the gas tax, add a new health insurance fee, and increase the real estate conveyance tax (Lavin 2025d). Given the uncertainty over the federal budget and its impact on Rhode Island's budget, the General Assembly will have some difficult decisions to make over the next few years as they prioritize different issues in the budget. Due to the limited projection of revenue, a proposed "millionaire's tax" similar to Massachusetts will likely be a factor in future budget discussions.

Views of the Economy and Spending

Overall, Rhode Islanders' perceptions of the state's economy continued to be low, with twenty-two percent of 2024 RISI respondents stating that the Rhode Island economy is very or somewhat strong, which was a slight improvement over last year's RISI survey (17%). In the 2024 RISI survey, respondents indicated whether they would like to see state-level spending increase, decrease, or stay the same for eight policy areas. A majority of Democrats, independents, and Republicans supported an increase in spending for the following policy areas: (1) education, (2) housing, and (3) building and repairing roads and bridges. A majority of Democrats and independents also supported increasing spending for health care, protecting the environment, and clean energy. A majority of Republicans and independents supported increasing spending on dealing with crime. The top three priorities differed slightly among partisans and independents. The top three priorities among Democrats were housing, health care, and education. The top priorities for independents included housing, health care, and building and repairing roads and bridges, and Republicans chose building and repairing roads and bridges, crime, and housing.

Housing

A recurring issue in Rhode Island is the availability and affordability of housing. A recent US Department of Housing and Urban Development report found that homelessness in Rhode Island increased by 35% from 2023 to 2024, and "Rhode Island also had the second-highest percentage of people experiencing chronic patterns of homelessness in the country." (Carraciolo 2025) Housing advocates are concerned about whether federal funding for housing will continue at the same levels under the new Trump administration. In 2024, House Speaker Joe Shekarchi successfully pushed through a housing package that supported housing production, including

support for accessory dwelling units, and support for renters in the state, of which came after the success of a set of housing bills during the 2023 session. Housing projects from the recently approved housing bond are expected to begin in 2026. Speaker Shekarchi continues his efforts to improve housing in the state by pushing for another package of bills in the 2025 session, as the *Providence Journal* reported in February 2025 that he stated, "four years and almost 50 new housing laws later, we are still chipping away at the barriers that have made development in Rhode Island more costly and more cumbersome than necessary." (Anderson 2025a) Efforts have been made to improve the efficiency and structure of the Housing Department that has had a quick turnover in leadership. In March 2025, Deborah Goddard was confirmed as the fourth housing secretary in three years. Governor McKee recently submitted a budget amendment with a recommendation from Secretary Goddard to improve the housing governance structure. The approved 2026 budget included more funding for homelessness than the governor's proposal (Rhode Island 2025). In a state with one of the highest homelessness rates in the country, it makes sense that all Rhode Islanders – no matter their partisanship – support spending on housing and it is one of their top three priorities based on the 2024 RISI survey. Federal, state, and local leaders and advocacy groups will need to continue to collaborate on effective ways to address this problem.

Healthcare

Rhode Island faces a critical primary care shortage, which has been further realized by the announcement that Anchor Medical Group, a primary care provider with 25,000 patients in the state, will close this summer (Nesi 2025a). Governor McKee addressed this concern in his budget by proposing the requirement for the Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner to review and recommend and raise primary care provider rates. Governor McKee's other proposal addresses the primary care shortage by incentivizing primary care doctors to stay in the state by providing loan repayment assistance which mirrors the Shekarchi's goal to improve incentives in the state (Gregg and Anderson 2024). Shekarchi has mentioned the importance of increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates but also the cost of increasing rates given budget concerns but it's an issue that they will be forced to contend with (Anderson 2025c). McKee's budget also included a smaller Medicaid annual rate hike for hospitals and nursing homes than the expected amount, a cut in reimbursement payments to hospitals, and an increase in hospital fees which are unpopular proposals among hospital leaders (Lavin 2025a). The recently passed state budget included several healthcare provisions, including raising Medicaid reimbursement rates for primary care providers, increasing the hospital reimbursement rates more than the governor's proposal, and removing prior authorization requirements for primary care providers from insurers, among other changes. The 2024 RISI survey results show that a majority of Democrats and independents support increasing spending for healthcare and chose healthcare as one of their top three priorities for the governor and general assembly to address this year.

In January 2013, the state signed a contract with Deloitte, a technology and strategy consulting firm, to make a state-based health exchange and unified system for human services programs. This was an attempt to make the first upgrade to the system in decades but the new system, called Unified Health Infrastructure Project (UHIP), had major issues with

implementation, and it was later rebranded as RIBridges (Beane 2017; GoLocalProv 2017). The state continued to use Deloitte as the contractor for RIBridges. In December 2024, RIBridges, the Rhode Island public benefits computer system, was breached by a cybersecurity attack that affected over half of the state's residents (NBC News 10 2024). Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how state officials make cybersecurity a priority and ensure contractors that are in charge of running large state systems like RIBridges will keep Rhode Islanders safe from future cyber-attacks.

Transportation

In December 2023, the Washington Bridge that connects Providence to East Providence was abruptly shut down due to safety concerns. This was big news in the state given that thousands of drivers use the bridge on a daily basis. There has been a lot of media attention on the issue that has led to questions and lawsuits about government transparency, delays in contracts, escalating costs, and lives and businesses disrupted by traffic. After some uncertainty over whether the new Trump administration would honor the 220-million-dollar federal funding grant that was approved under the Biden administration for the Washington bridge project, Governor McKee recently announced that they signed the agreement for the grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation. All eyes are fixed on the bridge rebuilding process. It has even drawn attention from out-of-state critics with environmental concerns about the demolition of the site, but Governor McKee and Director of the Department of Transportation Peter Alviti maintain that they have followed the necessary protocols for the bridge demolition (Anderson 2025b). A joint oversight hearing in the General Assembly provided information about the current and future state of the bridge, but questions could not be raised about the design or past inspections of the bridge because of ongoing litigation (Castro 2025). After the initial failed attempt to solicit proposals in the summer of 2024, the state announced the two finalists for the bridge rebuild in December, and then the winner of the contract was announced in June with the expectation that the bridge will be completed in 2028. RIPBS and The Public's Radio created a new series, "Breaking Point: The Washington Bridge" to cover information, reactions, and the impact of the bridge on the community. Republican leaders continue to use the Washington Bridge incident as an example to support the need for an inspector general in the state (Fitzpatrick 2024; Lavin 2025c). Critics of McKee's handling of the Washington Bridge will remain a problem for Governor McKee as he looks toward his reelection bid in 2026.

Another big issue in transportation policy that has not emerged as a major concern for the state legislature is how to fully fund the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) despite the paucity of public transportation, particularly in the southern part of the state (Farzan 2024a). Last year, the General Assembly funded RIPTA more than five million dollars more than the governor had requested. This year, RIPTA is facing a thirty-two million dollar budget gap, so state legislators proposed to increase funding to RIPTA from the gas tax, adding fees for rideshare companies, shifting existing rideshare fees, and allocating funding from the general fund to fill the budget gap (Shea 2025). Governor McKee wanted RIPTA to complete an efficiency study before allocating more funds to RIPTA. The budget gap was only partially filled with the gas tax in the recently passed state budget. This means RIPTA will have to make tough

decisions that may include eliminating routes and services, increasing fares, and laying off employees (Anderson 2025e). A majority of Democrats, independents, and Republicans supported an increase in spending on transportation as defined as “building and repairing roads and bridges,” and it was one of Republicans’ and independents’ top three priorities for the governor and general assembly to address this year.

Education

One of the major ongoing education issues is the state takeover of Providence public schools and the city’s attempt to regain control of the school district. The state took over Providence schools in 2019, largely due to a Johns Hopkins education report about Providence schools that led to national headlines like “An Education Horror Show” in the *Wall Street Journal* (Pierce 2019, Wall Street Journal Editorial Board 2019). The current plan is for the state to continue to control Providence schools through 2027. Providence Mayor Brett Smiley recently released a report that outlined a transition plan for city control over the schools, but the Education Commissioner Angelica Infante-Green said that the Mayor’s report was incomplete (Leslie 2025). In order to help fund education and other services in the capital city, Mayor Smiley was granted an exemption to the state tax levy cap by the General Assembly. It is expected that Mayor Smiley will continue to address any issues that the Commissioner and RIDE has with his transition plan.

In the 2024 RISI survey, a majority of Democrats, independents, and Republicans supported an increase in spending for education. Only Democrats listed education as one of their top three priorities for the governor and general assembly to address this year. The 2024 RISI survey results show that insufficient funding for Rhode Island K-12 public schools was the most important problem facing Rhode Island K-12 public school leaders. A teacher/staff shortage was listed as the most important problem for public school leaders in last year’s survey. Local media and good government groups like Common Cause will pay close attention to any issues related to education since the new Senate President Valarie Lawson is also the president of the National Education Association Rhode Island (NEARI), and they have already questioned whether there is a conflict of interest by holding both positions. The Rhode Island Ethics Commission ruled that Lawson’s position as President of the Senate does not create a conflict of interest as the president of the NEARI (Anderson 2025d). The Ethics Commission can provide recommendations about ethical concerns if future cases come up related to her day job. It is also important to keep in mind that the Rhode Island General Assembly is a part-time legislature where there are many conflicts of interest that could arise no matter what position is held outside of the elected office.

Environment

The 2023 shoreline access law continues to be a controversial subject for public beachgoers and private landowners. In July 2024, the Rhode Island Superior Court decided that the 2023 state law that defined public land at the beach beginning at ten feet above the high tide line was unconstitutional. According to the superior court judge, the General Assembly overstepped their power by redefining the property rights changing the definition of the “high water mark” that was decided in a 1982 Rhode Island supreme court case and that it violated the

taking of private property without just compensation (Farzan 2024b; Lavin 2024a). Although this does not change the law now due to pending litigation, this is considered a win for property owners. The media has raised awareness of shoreline access by providing in-depth coverage of other public access controversies, including a lawsuit over a public right-of-way to a beach in a wealthy section of a southern Rhode Island town (Tosca 2025; Farzan 2025). The next couple years should provide clarity on the extent to which the public can access Rhode Island beaches.

For the third year in a row, state legislators have proposed abolishing the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), stemming largely from their handling of the controversial Champlin Marina expansion in Block Island which was eventually overturned by the state Supreme Court (Hummel 2022; Lavin 2025b). The proposal would be to replace the CRMC with a Department of Coastal Resources with professional appointees and staff that would provide more efficiency, especially since the CRMC is an appointed council that has had trouble filling empty seats. Supporters of abolishing the CRMC include the RI Attorney General Peter Neronha's office and local environmental groups who testified in a recent General Assembly hearing in support of the structural change, but the legislation did not pass in 2025.

A majority of Democrats and independents supported increasing spending for protecting the environment and clean energy, but it was not one of their top three priorities in the 2024 RISI survey. Respondents were asked about investment in several initiatives related to Rhode Island's blue economy as defined as the economic sectors that are linked to the state's ocean and coasts. The University of Rhode Island has been a strong proponent of the blue economy and considers it a critical economic factor in the state (McCann 2020). Commercial fishing/aquaculture, marine tourism and recreation, ports and shipping, and offshore wind and energy had about the same amount of support in the survey, and maritime defense had slightly lower support. Forty-two percent of respondents think Rhode Island is doing too little to address climate change versus 15% who think the state is doing too much. Another 43% feel the state is doing about enough. Environmental advocates are paying close attention to the impact of the Trump administration on major federal funding for environmental initiatives in the state.

Conclusion

There will be a lot to pay attention to in Rhode Island politics over the next year. The upcoming months will set the stage for a gubernatorial election that will surely have competition, especially in the Democratic party primary. The full impact of Trump's executive orders on the state will be clearer after current lawsuits are decided over the next several months. The extent to which political polarization at the national level will influence levels of civic engagement and perceptions of democracy in the state should also be monitored to see if there are any major shifts in public opinion and action in Rhode Island.

It is likely that political leaders will continue to stress the importance of compromise in decision-making in Rhode Island politics. In the 2025 legislative session, the General Assembly passed legislation that bans the sale of assault-style weapons even though progressives wanted to see a complete ban that included ownership of weapons and conservatives opposed any type of ban. Compromise in Rhode Island politics was also reflected in the passage of last year's Law

Enforcement Officer's Bill of Rights (LEOBOR) reform bill. The late Senate President Ruggerio's stated, "while there will be some who say this bill goes too far and others who say it doesn't go far enough, I think the bill strikes a responsible balance that brings necessary and appropriate reforms to LEOBOR." (Shea 2024) Ruggerio's statement about balancing competing interests reflects the moderate state of Rhode Island politics that will slowly bring forth progress. It is expected that we will continue to see incremental changes in policy related to the economy, housing, healthcare, transportation, education, and the environment in the coming years.

¹ The author thanks Maureen Moakley, Professor Emerita at the University of Rhode Island, for her thoughtful review of the report.

² Over the past twenty years, the highest registered voter turnout was in 2008 (67.8%). See Voter Turnout in Rhode Island, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/22ebdb981f5a4bb2b920916e7229a437>; See State of Rhode Island Board of Elections for 2020 and 2024 results, <https://elections.ri.gov/elections/previous-election-results>. When comparing the raw number of votes cast for president in recent elections, there were about 4,000 *less* votes cast in 2024 than in 2020 (although both 2020 and 2024 each had about 50,000 more votes cast for president than in 2016).

³ Support for Harris decreased by three percentage points from the 59% of Rhode Islanders who supported Biden in 2020. Harris earned a higher percent of the vote than Hillary Clinton in 2016 (54%).

⁴ Harris lost about 22,000 votes compared to Biden in 2020, and about 3,500 more votes were cast in 2024 for third-party candidates or write-ins.

⁵ Amo's vote share was slightly lower in 2024 compared to the 2023 special election (64.7% Amo, 35% Gerry Leonard, Jr.) and compared to David Cicilline's election win in 2022 when Cicilline also faced Allen Waters (64% and 35.8%, respectively). The addition of the relatively unknown independent candidate Reynolds seems to have taken some votes away Amo and Waters.

⁶ For a review of factors that may influence state contestation rates, see Myers, A. S. (2020). Explaining Increased Contestation in the 2018 State Legislative Elections. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 53(3), 429–434. doi:10.1017/S1049096520000232.

⁷ The author was a part of the team that created the 2023 and 2024 RISI surveys.

⁸ Other Rhode Island survey includes local pollster and WPRI political analyst Joe Fleming's poll for Rhode Island AFL-CIO and YouGov conducted a poll for the housing advocacy organization Neighbors Welcome! Rhode Island. Brown University School of Public Health collaborates with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Rhode Island for the Rhode Island Life Index (<https://rilifeindex.org/>) that examines the health and wellbeing of Rhode Islanders and the Rhode Island Humanities publishes the Civic Health Index (<https://rihumanities.org/program/ri-civic-health-index/>) to gauge community wellbeing and participation in the state using survey data from several studies and data from other sources, such as voter registration from the Department of State.

⁹ For an example of a survey that includes political knowledge questions about state government, see Jill Rosen, "Americans don't know much about state government, survey finds," *Hub Johns Hopkins University*, December 14, 2018, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/12/14/americans-dont-understand-state-government/>. Their results show that less than twenty percent of respondents could name their state legislators.

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