

The State of Rhode Island Politics and Government in 2025-26

Emily Lynch¹
University of Rhode Island

Current Rhode Island politics are shaped by the state government response to changes made by the federal government under the Trump administration, and concerns about affordability, standards of living, and ethics. The 2025-26 report on Rhode Island politics and government begins with a summary of how political leaders in the state are dealing with federal actions that have a direct impact on Rhode Islanders. The next section examines economic and social policy areas related to affordability and standards of living in the state, including the budget, housing, healthcare, transportation, education, and the environment. Candidates in the upcoming gubernatorial race and other key state races are beginning to share their plans to improve Rhode Island. Top gubernatorial competitors include incumbent Democratic Governor Dan McKee, Democratic candidate Helena Buonanno Foulkes, Republican candidate Aaron Guckian, and independent candidate Ken Block. The final portion of the report covers ethical concerns related to the judicial nomination system and General Assembly leadership and key findings from the 2025 Rhode Island Survey Initiative related to Rhode Island public opinion on trust, the economy, state priorities, and political engagement.

¹ The author thanks Maureen Moakley, Political Science Professor Emerita at The University of Rhode Island, for her thoughtful review of the report. The author also thanks Leonard Lardaro, Professor of Economics at The University of Rhode Island, for his phone interview about his views on the Rhode Island economy and his Current Conditions Index.

Rhode Island Responds to Federal Actions that Impact the State

All of Rhode Island's statewide officers are Democrats, so it is not surprising that state leaders, given their institutional capacities, have challenged the Trump administration's efforts to roll back social safety net programs, end renewable energy projects, and retrieve voter files with sensitive voter data. Most notably, Attorney General Peter Neronha, Governor Dan McKee, and Secretary of State Gregg Amore immediately contested executive actions that negatively impact Rhode Islanders.

Attorney General Peter Neronha has been especially active in his service as the leading public advocate in the state. His office has filed over fifty cases against the Trump administration.² For example, offshore wind projects halted abruptly last year, and Attorney General Neronha responded with lawsuits. One of the wind projects was nearly complete when the administration ordered a work stoppage on the project due to security risks, but a federal judge ruled that construction could resume (Friedman & Joselow 2026). Attorney General Neronha, in coordination with other state attorneys general, has been instrumental in checking the powers of the federal government.

Addressing fiscal challenges driven by the federal government's decisions to reduce healthcare support is front and center in this year's budget proposal. Some federal subsidies for health care will be ending, so Governor McKee's proposal aims to fill the gap. Also, the state will have to provide additional support for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) due to the federal government's reduction in financial support for the program. In the fall of 2025, Governor McKee responded to the suspension of SNAP benefits by declaring a state of emergency so federal funds could be secured. The Big Beautiful Bill Act will enact penalties if a state's SNAP error rate is not below a certain percentage. The Governor's budget plans to address future budgetary issues related to SNAP, especially since the Rhode Island SNAP error rate is above the national average (Lavin 2026). We will see whether the Rhode Island state budget will include the Governor's priorities once it is passed in June 2026. In addition to his budget proposal, Governor McKee contacted the U.S. Treasury office and requested a refund in tariff payments to Rhode Islanders (Office of the Rhode Island Governor, 2026). Other Democratic governors have also made the same request.

As the Rhode Island's chief elections officer, Secretary of State Gregg Amore focuses on upholding the integrity of the Rhode Island elections process amidst federal changes with the elections process. Secretary Amore refused to give voter files with sensitive voter data to the Trump administration that resulted in a lawsuit against the state (Gregg 2026a). In April 2026, a federal judge granted Secretary Amore the motion to dismiss the lawsuit. Secretary Amore and a coalition of public interest groups across the state have pressed for the passage of the Rhode Island Voting Rights Act to prevent voter discrimination. This legislation codifies voter

² For a review of the cases brought against the Trump administration by the Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha, see the Attorney General's website, <https://riag.ri.gov/federal-action-response/our-cases>.

protections as federal actions, Supreme Court decisions, and conservative legislation at the national level seek to dismantle parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Members of the General Assembly leadership team support this bill (Rhode Island General Assembly, 2026). If the General Assembly passes the bill, Rhode Island will join a growing number of states that have already enacted similar legislation.

Beyond Rhode Island leadership responses to current federal policies, the state also has an active community of protesters that have voiced concerns about the Trump administration during No Kings rallies. Large rallies were held across the state in June 2025, October 2025, and March 2026. It is likely there will be more rallies as President Trump approaches the halfway point of his term in office.

Economic and Social Policy in Rhode Island

Rhode Island leaders continue to deal with concerns about the economy. Rhode Island is in an economic recession based on University of Rhode Island Economics Professor Leonard Lardaro's Current Conditions Index, although his most recent April 2026 report suggests the possibility that the state could be in the earliest stages of recovery (Lardaro, 2026b). The Rhode Island economy is 'k-shaped' with wealthier households doing well and low-income households facing challenging times with the high cost of living (Lardaro, 2026a). Moody's Analytics described Rhode Island's economy as "underperforming," and the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council's economic prosperity scorecard listed Rhode Island as losing ground when the state is compared to other states and the national average (Lavin, 2026a). One recommendation from Professor Lardaro is that the state should invest in more economic analysts (2026a). Altogether, these reports show that Rhode Island's economy needs to be strengthened.

The FY2027 Budget

Based on recent analyses, Rhode Island has a larger than expected amount of revenue and a smaller than expected deficit. An extra \$233 million in revenue was revealed during the April and May annual revenue and caseload estimating conference. In December 2025, the budget projections shrank the anticipated size of the FY27 state deficit to about \$100 million, which was originally estimated at nearly \$250 million (Lavin, 2025b). Over the next month, legislative leadership will finalize plans on how to use the funds and fill budget gaps. McKee's FY2027 proposal is at 14.9 billion dollars which included a proposal to increase taxes for richest Rhode Islanders. McKee and other Democratic leaders support the millionaire tax. Republican leadership proposed their own legislation to cut income taxes. McKee is also pushing for a phaseout of state's income tax on social security benefits as well as a permanent child tax credit (Lavin, Shea, & Castro, 2026). His budget proposal seeks to address a rise in state costs for social welfare programs due to the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

Housing

Rhode Island leaders continue to work on improving the housing situation. For the sixth year in a row, former House speaker Joe Shekarchi introduced a comprehensive legislative package to address homelessness and housing affordability. Additionally, Governor McKee's budget proposal included a housing bond. Even at the city-level, elected officials are trying to find a viable way to address housing shortages and rising housing costs. However, there are proposed solutions that have been met with resistance. For example, a rent stabilization proposal was defeated in Providence. Although housing has been a top priority for political leaders over the past several years, this is not a new problem. Recent investigative reporting discusses how a 2011 law established a council to address homelessness, but council meetings were inconsistently held over the past fifteen years (Hummel, 2026). The investigative report underscores the need to assess the feasibility of the new strategic plan for housing once it is completed by the Office of Housing and the roles of the new council and advisory board as well as nonprofit organizations in serving the homeless.

Healthcare

Leaders are focusing on the affordability of healthcare as the state decides to take on the portion of funding that will be no longer covered by the federal government. As discussed in previous sections, Governor McKee's budget places healthcare at the top of his priorities as he addresses how Rhode Island will have to contribute more funding to social support systems due to the reduction in federal support. Political leaders are also working with the healthcare industry to come up with long-term strategies to support healthcare in the state. Fortunately for Rhode Islanders living in and around Providence, there was a successful acquisition of Roger Williams Medical Center and Our Lady of Fatima Hospital hospitals by Centurion, an out-of-state nonprofit organization. This prevented the two hospitals from closing due to previous owners who faced bankruptcy. In January 2026, a Rhode Island Special Legislative Commission published a report that supports the establishment of a medical school at The University of Rhode Island to address concerns about primary care shortages in the state. Increasing access to healthcare and dealing with rising healthcare costs remain top issues for political leaders.

Transportation

As expected after the state budget passed last year, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) was forced to eliminate some of its routes and services. Public testimony made in front of the Senate Finance Committee highlighted the negative impact it had on locals who rely on bus services daily. Governor McKee included funding for RIPTA in this year's budget. Legislative proposals include appropriating additional funds to RIPTA in the upcoming budget. Other proposals recommend reallocating inspection fees to RIPTA, creating rideshare fees to be allocated to RIPTA, and allocating a portion of the highway maintenance account to RIPTA. Debate over funding RIPTA always leads to questions about how to encourage more Rhode Islanders to take advantage of public transit. City and town planners as well as those involved in

housing policy should be heavily involved in these conversations as political leaders consider the future of transportation in the state, especially with the rising cost of a gallon of gas.

At the end of April 2026, Rhode Island received a final permit to replace Washington Bridge with a projected completion date of fall 2028. As the Washington bridge takes less of a center stage in political discussions, the failing transportation infrastructure continues to be on the public mind. After facing record snowfall this winter, Governor McKee and the Department of Transportation launched a pothole hotline and a corresponding website that includes a dashboard to keep track of the pothole locations and fixed sites. Although fixing potholes is a clear sign that the state is improving roads, there is a need for a larger long-term solution in repairing roads and bridges across the state.

Education

For the second year in a row, a proposal for a constitutional amendment that guarantees the right to an “adequate, equitable, and meaningful” education was passed by the State Senate and referred to the House. The House State Government and Elections Committee recommended that it should be held for further study. Because the amendment includes the statement that it “provides judicial enforcement of this provision,” it would give courts the right to decide on cases related to educational inequities.

Another way to address educational inequities is through policy reform. In January 2026, the Rhode Island Foundation, Rhode Island’s largest philanthropic community foundation, published a blue-ribbon commission report on recommendations about state education funding. The main recommendations include the following: accounting for the full cost of education including transportation, tailoring costs to student needs for multi-lingual learners, students with disabilities, and schools with career and technical education programs, requiring local contributions based on a municipality’s ability to pay, and increasing fiscal responsibility and strategic management (Cicilline, 2026). The Rhode Island Education Funding and Accountability Act was introduced in both chambers that revises the education funding formula based on these recommendations.

Providence public schools are finally returning to local control after seven years under state management by the Rhode Island Department of Education. The state cited several improvements since the state takeover, including stronger academic outcomes, higher graduation rates, an increase in school funding, and stronger accountability systems, among others (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2026). It is expected that city leadership and the Providence public schools will be heavily scrutinized over the next year to evaluate the success of the transition.

Lawmakers recently introduced a bill that pauses the creation or expansion of charter schools in the state. Other bills proposed an expansion of charter schools by allowing school districts to adopt an all-charter public-school model and allowing charter schools the autonomy

to engage in nontraditional approaches to learning.³ Legislation was also introduced to create a commission to study Rhode Island’s method of funding charter schools. At this point, the legislation does not include relevant community partners from the Rhode Island Foundation Blue Ribbon Commission, such as the Rhode Island Public Expenditures Council, the Economic Progress Institute, education experts, and economic analysts in higher education. It is likely that developing a comprehensive plan for charter schools will continue to be on the education agenda over the next few years.

Environment

Rhode Island leaders need to devise plans to deal with high energy costs, coastal erosion, and the need to expand the state’s shrinking wastewater infrastructure. Due to the high energy costs and the reality that the federal government is no longer supporting green initiatives to combat climate change, Governor McKee is reconsidering renewable energy laws that are related to the Act on Climate that he signed into law in 2021 (Kuffner, 2026a). This will be a key issue to watch over the next several months.

Many Rhode Island lawmakers and environmental advocacy groups focus on coastal resiliency. Resilient Rhody 2025 is a recently released comprehensive statewide climate change and coastal resilience plan that includes actions related to infrastructure, utilities, community health, and finance (Resilient Rhody, 2026). Successful implementation of the actions requires strong coordination between local and state partners to identify and fund projects.

The Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) is the primary agency tasked with the “preservation, protection, development, and where possible the restoration of the coastal areas” in Rhode Island.⁴ Over the past several years, the CRMC was criticized about the lack of expertise on the Council as well as a lack of transparency in decision-making on controversial issues. At the end of the 2025 legislative session, the General Assembly revised the structure of the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) by reducing its size. Appointees are now required to have experience and expertise in environmental and coastal management. This year’s legislative proposal pushes for reconfiguring the CRMC as a bureau with the Department of Environmental Management (Department of Environmental Management Act, 2026).

The state must also balance business growth with environmental and quality of life concerns. In Quonset Business Park, a sludge plant is poised to open, but North Kingstown officials and residents oppose the plant (Kuffner, 2026c). This is a bigger issue about wastewater infrastructure in southern New England. The Sewage Sludge Incinerator in Woonsocket is

³ See the Rhode Island General Assembly for legislation on charter schools, including the following: Establishment of Charter Public Schools Act (H7415), Joint resolution creating a special joint legislative commission to study Rhode Island’s method of funding charter schools (H8131), Establishment of Charter Public Schools Act (H7615), Cooperative service among school districts—charter school reform Act (H7525). *Rhode Island General Assembly*, Retrieved May 19, 2026, <https://status.rilegislature.gov/>

⁴ For more information about the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), visit their website at <https://www.crmc.ri.gov/>

closing, which has raised concerns from the Department of Environmental Management about the reliance of the incinerator, which processes sixty percent of Rhode Island's sludge (Kuffner, 2026b). The Woonsocket company is facing lawsuits from residents who complained about the odors. A special legislative commission will study the challenges of disposing biosolids (Rhode Island General Assembly, 2026). These environmental issues related to energy, the coastline, and wastewater infrastructure will require long-term solutions over short-term fixes.

The 2026 Election in Rhode Island

As the midterm election season begins, the media is ramping up their coverage of the most prominent candidates. The upcoming election will be a test in whether incumbents will have their usual outsized power advantage in the governor's and lieutenant governor's races. Many questions arise about the upcoming Rhode Island elections. Who will accumulate the largest war chest? Which prominent leaders and groups will make political endorsements for primary candidates? Will unions support Governor McKee or Helena Foulkes or remain silent until the Democratic primary is over? Will Republican candidates run on similar platforms as President Trump or distance themselves from his policies and rhetoric? How will candidates frame their experience, leadership, and management skills? What solutions will they prescribe to address concerns about affordability in the state?

The gubernatorial election is the most high-profile race this year. Based on public opinion polls, Governor Dan McKee is dealing with low favorability ratings, a large group of undecided voters, and a formidable challenger, Helena Foulkes, a formidable challenger with leadership experiences as a former CEO of CVS and former CEO of Hudson's Bay Company. Governor McKee has complained about being challenged by his own party and called it "disgraceful" (Anderson, 2026). In the 2022 Democratic primary, McKee narrowly beat Foulkes. The five-way race also included former Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea. Foulkes secured the most votes on election day but trailed behind McKee and Gorbea for mail ballots and early voting, indicating a late surge in support for Foulkes (Anderson 2022; Rhode Island Board of Elections, 2022). Polling data shows a consistent trend where McKee's disapproval rating is higher than his approval rating except for one of Morning Consult's 2025 polls (Yokley, 2026b). Both the 2025 Rhode Island Survey Initiative and University of New Hampshire polls show that many voters are unsure, don't know, or are undecided when asked about their level of approval or whom they would vote for in the upcoming election.

The Democratic primary competition is already in full swing with fundraising events and the first attack ads. In the latest quarterly campaign reports from the Rhode Island Board of Elections, Foulkes had a \$3.6 million balance with McKee trailing at \$1.36 million (Lavin, 2026c). Foulkes has a considerable amount of personal wealth. Additionally, Attorney General Peter Neronha has already voiced his support for Foulkes. The criticisms have been predictable where Foulkes complains about McKee's leadership role over the Washington Bridge crisis and McKee connects Foulkes with the opioid crisis during her time as CEO of CVS. It will be

important to consider how retrospective voters will evaluate McKee's performance while in office, and what exactly they remember most from his past six years in office. Over the next few months, McKee and Foulkes will have plenty of time in three debates to distinguish themselves as the best Democratic candidate with the strongest leadership and managerial skills, the most innovative solutions to the state's most imminent problems with affordability at the forefront of everyone's minds, and the most positive vision for the state's future.

Aaron Guckian is the most prominent Republican candidate in the race. He has run for lieutenant governor and was the executive director of the Rhode Island Dental Association. Guckian's campaign message is focused on change to make state government more efficient by lowering taxes, making the state more business-friendly, but also protecting state jobs. This is in line with goals of state Republican party leaders.

Ken Block, a dynamic candidate, is another voice of reform. Block should have some name recognition in the state since he has run for governor in the past for the Moderate Party in 2010 and as a Republican candidate in 2014. Block wrote *Disproven*, a book that discussed how he was hired by the Trump administration to search for voter fraud but found no systemic cases of fraud. Time magazine listed Block as a "Democracy Defender" for his efforts at debunking the claim that the 2020 election was stolen (Elliott, 2024). Block is running on an efficiency platform with the argument that the current administration is poorly managing the state with examples of the state's handling of the Washington bridge and mailing incorrect W-2 forms to state employees. The last time an independent won the gubernatorial race was in 2010 when Lincoln Chafee, a former US senator whose father was also a senator and former governor, garnered a lot of union support in the state (GoLocalProv, 2010). Recent internal polling by Block's campaign finds that Block has a chance to be competitive against McKee or Foulkes.

The Rhode Island congressional delegation appears to be relatively safe due to their incumbency advantage and a lack of well-known challengers. Voters will be paying attention to campaign messages that resonate best with the issues they face with their daily lives. Rhode Island's senior Senator Jack Reed has been representing Rhode Island in the U.S. Senate since 1997 and is running again in the 2026 midterms. Based on 2025 approval ratings from Morning Consult, Senator Reed was ranked the fifth most popular senator in the country (Yokley, 2026a). According to the Cook Political Report, seventy-six-year-old U.S. Senator Jack Reed is "assured reelection" (The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter, 2025). U.S. Representative Gabe Amo from District 1 faces no Democratic Primary challenger and no Republican challenger at this time. U.S. House Democratic Representative Seth Magaziner will likely face Republican challenger Victor Mellor who is endorsed by President Trump's former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn.

The most competitive statewide elected offices are the Attorney General and Lieutenant Governor's races. Incumbent Attorney General Peter Neronha will leave the office with the legacy of serving as a proactive leader by addressing a breadth of issues through investigations

and lawsuits at the state and national level. Moreover, the attorney general's office released a three-hundred-page report about child sexual abuse in the diocese of Providence based on a seven-year investigation. There are several Democratic candidates seeking to fill the attorney general's seat. In the lieutenant governor's race, incumbent Sabina Matos faces multiple Democratic primary challengers. John Loughlin, a former Rhode Island Representative and radio host, is running for lieutenant governor as a Republican. Democrat incumbent Secretary of Treasury James Diossa is currently running unopposed in the Democratic primary, and Micholas Credle has announced his candidacy as a Republican. Democratic incumbent Secretary of State Gregg Amore is running unopposed. Rhode Islanders have not yet elected a Republican for a statewide office since Governor Donald Carcieri was elected in 2002. The most competitive races tend to be the Democratic primaries, so the Governor, Attorney General, and Lieutenant Governor races will be closely analyzed to see whether there are any major ideological shifts in support among Democrats and Independents.

General Assembly races have begun with a soft buzz as candidates begin to disseminate campaign flyers and seek endorsements. In the Rhode Island Senate, Ryan Pearson recently made headlines for his \$275,000 personal donation to his campaign (McGowan, 2026). Last year Pearson unsuccessfully sought the Senate President position after President Dominick Ruggiero passed away. Pearson will be in a competitive primary race against James Metivier, a Democratic candidate who is endorsed by the League of RI Businesses. The League created forty political action committees (PACs) across the state, a general PAC and a PAC for each of the thirty-nine Rhode Island municipalities. Their website displayed clear instructions about how to donate to the League's PACs confidentially, which means they can donate nearly ten thousand dollars in the aggregate to the local PACs without it becoming a part of the public record. The League is nonpartisan, with a more conservative approach that is labeled as "common sense" that focuses on conservative spending and reasonable gun laws. The organization is endorsing more conservative Democratic candidates and looking to unseat progressives.

Affordable RI, a 501(c)(4) group, was recently formed by the PAC of Service Employees International Union 1199 NE, a healthcare workers union in New England. They already have a social media presence on Instagram and Facebook and use text messaging to reach out to Rhode Islanders. Affordable RI is focused on raising wages and encouraging working people to run for office. These new organizations are visible signs of intraparty competition in Rhode Island. Political observers should be paying attention to the tactics and efforts of groups like the League of RI Businesses and Affordable RI to better understand the extent to which these groups will play a role in the 2026 election and beyond.

In the Providence mayoral race, incumbent Mayor Brett Smiley will face a formidable Democratic primary challenger, Rhode Island State Representative David Morales. Morales, a progressive, is the youngest Latino ever to be elected to a state legislature. He has been compared to Democratic Socialist New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani (Donnis, 2025). One distinct policy preference is that Smiley vetoed recent city legislation on a rent stabilization

ordinance and Morales supports rent stabilization (Castro, 2026). The mayoral primary will be a test to see whether Providence voters want a more progressive leader or if they will continue to support a more moderate Democrat during a time when the city is dealing with housing issues as well as the transition of Providence public schools from state to city control.

Ethics and Political Leadership

In the 1980s through 1990s, Rhode Island established several good government measures. The state established an independent ethics commission through constitutional amendment. The General Assembly established a revolving door law that required state elected officials to wait a year before taking a job with the state government. State law established a judicial nominating commission to prevent cozy relationships between the General Assembly and state courts whereby former speakers and legislative aids received lifetime judicial appointments. However, recently, a legislator was appointed to the state court system circumventing the requirement that they must not serve in government at least a year before a nomination. Erin Lynch Prata, a former senator, became a state supreme court justice in 2021 despite concerns raised by staffers at the Ethics Commission that this violated the revolving door policy. Common Cause Rhode Island has expressed concerns about the violation of the revolving door law.

Rumors proved to be true that House Speaker Joe Shekarchi is seeking the nomination of the open seat on the state supreme court. Once he applied for the position, he stepped down as speaker of the House. The judicial nominating commission will review the applications and recommend the top applicants to Governor McKee, and then once McKee chooses a nominee, both the House and Senate must confirm the nomination. A former dean of Roger Williams University's law school filed an ethics complaint that Shekarchi broke the revolving door law by not waiting a year to move from an elected office to a state position (White 2026). Shekarchi defends his decision because he believes the revolving door law is not applicable to supreme courts seats because it is a constitutional office (Gregg, 2026b). Supporters believe Representative Shekarchi is capable to serve in this position because of his successful work as the House Speaker and practicing attorney (Shea, 2026). If Shekarchi is chosen for this lifetime appointment, then this may impact public opinion of the courts and the state's institutional structure. There should be a careful assessment of levels of trust in the judiciary, trust in judges, and views on the integrity of the judicial nominating process. Institutionally speaking, a representative's direct movement from the House to Supreme Court indicates a weak separation of powers among the branches of state government. Rhode Island's degree of separation of powers would be considered weaker than other New England states if measured by the number of supreme court justices who moved directly from a legislative office to a state supreme court seat.

The Ethics Commission cleared the way for new Senate President Valarie Lawson and head of Rhode Island's National Education Association (NEARI) teacher union to serve in both

leadership roles in their advisory opinion in June 2025. The opinion stated that there are times when there should be recusal if a policy or funding change affects Lawson personally, her family, or the teacher's union members, and if NEARI is lobbying a particular bill (Lavin 2025a). To understand how Rhode Island politics works, it must come with a recognition that Rhode Island has a part-time legislature, and most lawmakers come to the State House with jobs outside of politics, with priorities reflective of their experiences and interests.

There are a few methods that limit a legislator's own interests from being taken too far, including lobbying transparency through the Secretary of State's office, clear campaign finance reporting through the Board of Elections, and upholding the Code of Ethics by the Ethics Commission. Recently, Speaker Chris Blazewski proposed legislation that promotes independent oversight through an office of the inspector general, but his legislation excludes the General Assembly and courts from oversight (Gregg, 2026c). Other legislators have introduced inspector general legislation in the past. The idea of an inspector general has gained popularity with Republicans and Democrats. These important current and potential future safeguards must be trusted by Rhode Islanders to be effective ways to ensure transparency in politics.

Rhode Island Public Opinion on Trust, the Economy, Priorities, and Political Engagement

Perspectives on Rhode Island government and politics

Over the past few years, the Rhode Island Survey Initiative (RISI) from The University of Rhode Island asked respondents about their perspectives on Rhode Island government and politics. The survey included questions on trust, quality of life, the economy, and top policy priorities. There were separate measures of trust in government for each level and branch. Rhode Islanders trust local government the most. Based on the results from the 2025 Rhode Island Survey Initiative, trust in local government dropped to sixty-two percent of Rhode Islanders who have a great deal or fair amount of trust in local government in 2025 from sixty-eight percent in 2024. Fifty-seven percent trust Rhode Island state government, which was sixty-one percent in 2024. The least amount of trust was in the United States federal government at thirty-nine percent in 2025, down from fifty-four percent in 2024. Taking a closer look at the breakdown of trust in the state, sixty-one percent have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the state judicial branch, which was seventy-three percent in 2024, fifty-seven percent trust the legislative branch, which was sixty percent in 2024, and forty-nine percent trust the state executive branch, which was fifty-seven percent in 2024. These comparisons show that trust has dropped for all levels and branches of government. The largest decline in trust over the past two years was trust in the federal government, which was a fifteen-percentage point decline and the state judicial branch, a twelve-percentage point decline. In contrast, the only trust measure that positively changed was trust in neighbors, with sixty-one percent of Rhode Islanders who say they trust their neighbors compared to fifty-seven percent in 2024. When asked about perceptions of the amount of people running Rhode Island state government that are corrupt, twenty-eight percent responded with 'all or most,' twenty-four percent responded, 'about half,' and forty-eight percent responded, 'a few or

none,’ which was about the same as in 2024. Although perceptions of corruption remain steady, the drop in percentage in all measures of government trust is concerning. Taken together, these measures show that although trust in government declined between 2024 and 2025, there are still a majority of respondents that trust all levels and branches of government and their neighbors with the exception of the federal government and state executive branch.

Satisfaction with the overall quality of life in Rhode Island remained nearly the same in 2025 with fifty-three percent somewhat or very satisfied with the overall quality of life. The views of the economy remained the same in both years with twenty-two percent responding that the economy was very or somewhat strong. The top three most important priorities remained the same in 2025 as in 2024 for all Rhode Islanders: health care, housing, and building and repairing roads and bridges. Breaking it down further based on partisanship, for Democrats, their priorities remained the same over the past two years, including health care, housing, and education. Independents’ priorities were health care, housing, and roads and bridges, remaining the same as in 2024. Republicans’ priorities included health care, roads and bridges, and dealing with crime. Republicans’ priorities changed from 2024 when housing was one of the priorities and health care was not in the top three. The biggest overall change from 2024 to 2025 was an increase in prioritizing health care. In 2025, a majority of Democrats, Republicans, and independents believe health care should be a priority for state leaders.

Political engagement in Rhode Island

Rhode Islanders’ level of political engagement varies based on the type of engagement. There are several questions related to political engagement in the 2025 RISI survey under the broad categories of news interest, political knowledge, political discussions, and connectedness with the community. For news interest, as in 2024, seventy-one percent of respondents follow what is going on in the government and public affairs most or some of the time. This high percentage of respondents is a strong indication that most Rhode Islanders like to stay informed about politics. Television is the most frequently used source for political news, with fifty-six percent of respondents. Forty-four percent chose news websites or apps, thirty-eight percent chose social media websites, and another thirty-eight percent search through google or other search engines. Facebook and YouTube were the most frequently used social media sites for political and election news. When asked to choose one media source to get recent political and election news, the top sources were Fox News (13%) and WPRI (13%). Altogether, these results show that television remains popular among Rhode Islanders, yet there is no single news source that a majority of Rhode Islanders choose for political and election news. Only about one-tenth of Rhode Islanders chose each of the most popular news sources.

The 2025 RISI survey included one question that could account for levels of political knowledge. A question asked respondents to identify the Senate President, a powerful political leader in the state. Only five percent of Rhode Island respondents could name Valarie Lawson’s role as the Senate President. Lawson had just become senate president, so it is not that surprising

that she was not as well-known as Joe Shekarchi, the House speaker in 2024, who was correctly identified as speaker by twenty-three percent of respondents.

There was little to no change in most measures of community engagement and connectedness. In 2025, forty-nine percent of respondents feel connected to their community, sixty-eight percent spent time with people of different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds from their own, thirty-eight percent feel empowered to make changes within their community, and forty-seven percent feel similar to their neighbors in terms of values and beliefs. Forty-nine percent of respondents felt comfortable discussing local and state issues with community members who have different political beliefs than they do. The largest difference in responses over the past couple of years for community connectedness and engagement was that in 2024 forty percent felt similar to their neighborhood in terms of political views, and in 2025 it dropped to thirty-four percent. Respondents may perceive more political differences with their neighbors, yet there was no change in their level of comfort to discuss issues with them. However, the percentage of people who feel empowered to make changes within their community is low, and it should be explored further to understand why that is the case.

Conclusion

The current state of Rhode Island politics and government is marked by the oversized influence of the federal government on the everyday lives of residents. Statewide officers and lawmakers must take the time to deal with changes at the national level and anticipate how they can minimize any negative impact these national policies may have on Rhode Islanders. Affordability is a nationwide concern, and Rhode Island leaders are addressing healthcare, transportation, and housing costs at the state level. Furthermore, political leaders must take steps to ensure that Rhode Islanders trust the political systems in the state. It is likely voters' perceptions of political candidates at the local, state, and national levels will be shaped by how well the candidates communicate their top priorities, leadership skills, and especially their level of trustworthiness in making decisions that will improve the overall standard of living in Rhode Island.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Patrick. 2022. One measure of whether things are returning to normal? How Rhode Islanders voted. *The Providence Journal*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/2022/09/17/rhode-island-voting-method-primary-election-early-mail/10387882002/>
- Anderson, Patrick. 2026. Foulkes responds after McKee calls election challenge 'disgraceful.' *The Providence Journal*, February 27, 2026,

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/elections/2026/02/27/ri-gov-mckee-calls-primary-challenge-disgraceful/88902679007/>

Castro, Alexander. 2026. "Veto override vote fails on Providence City Council's rent stabilization ordinance." *Rhode Island Current*, May 15, 2026, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2026/05/15/veto-override-vote-fails-on-providence-city-councils-rent-stabilization-ordinance/>

Cicilline, David N. 2026. "Equalizing Opportunity: Creating a Fair and Transparent Funding System for Rhode Island's Public Schools." *Rhode Island Foundation*, January 4, 2026, <https://rifoundation.org/news/equalizing-opportunity-creating-a-fair-and-transparent-funding-system-for-rhode-islands-public-schools>

Department of Environmental Management Act (S3082), *Rhode Island General Assembly*, <https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/BillText/BillText26/SenateText26/S3082.pdf>

Donnis, Ian. 2025. "Rhode Island State Rep. David Morales Announces Run for Mayor of Providence" *Ocean State Media*, September 15, 2025, <https://www.oceanstatemedia.org/politics/elections/rhode-island-state-rep-david-morales-announces-run-for-mayor-of-providence>

Elliott, Philip. 2024, Democracy Defenders – Ken Block, *Time*, September 19, 2024, <https://time.com/collections/democracy-defenders/>

Friedman, Lisa, and Maxine Joselow. 2026. "Judge Strikes Down Trump's Latest Effort to Stop Offshore Wind Project," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/12/climate/judge-strikes-down-trumps-latest-effort-to-stop-offshore-wind.html>

GoLocalProv. 2010. "Lincoln Chafee, the 'Union Candidate'?" GoLocalProv, September 21, 2010, <https://dev.golocalprov.com/politics/chafee-union-support>

Gregg, Katherine. 2026a. "Trump administration seeks do-over in RI voter data case. Here's why." *The Providence Journal*, April 14, 2026, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/2026/04/14/doj-seeks-do-over-in-ri-voter-data-lawsuit-following-ma-dismissal/89605328007/>

Gregg, Katherine. 2026b. "Shekarchi explains why he's stepping down, going for RI Supreme Court." *The Providence Journal*, May 12, 2026, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/government/2026/05/07/why-house-speaker-shekarchi-is-giving-up-one-of-rhode-islands-most-powerful-political-positions/89932460007/>

Gregg, Katherine. 2026c. "Blazejewski responds to criticism over inspector general proposal." *The Providence Journal*, May 21, 2026,

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/2026/05/20/blazejewskis-inspector-general-proposal-generates-criticism/90175519007/>

Hummel, Jim. 2026. “What’s the plan?” *The Hummel Report*, April 9, 2026, <https://www.hummelreport.org/4-9-2026>

Kuffner, Alex. 2026a. “Is the Act on Climate on the chopping block? Why a rewrite might be coming,” *The Providence Journal*, February 11, 2026, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/environment/2026/02/11/ris-act-on-climate-might-need-a-rewrite-as-state-poised-to-miss-goals/88622725007/>

Kuffner, Alex. 2026b. “As Woonsocket plans to close sludge incinerator, a regional crisis looms,” *The Providence Journal*, March 3, 2026, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/environment/2026/03/03/woonsocket-sludge-incinerator-closure-effects-towns-across-new-england/87445680007/>

Kuffner, Alex. 2026c. “North Kingstown considers legal action to stop controversial sludge plant,” *The Providence Journal*, April 28, 2026, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/environment/2026/04/28/controversial-quonset-sludge-plant-on-hold-as-north-kingstown-considers-lawsuit/89829598007/>

Lardaro, Leonard. 2026a. Phone interview with Leonard Lardaro about the Rhode Island Economy, May 6, 2026.

Lardaro, Leonard. 2026b. Current Conditions Index, April 2026, Current Conditions Index Email Newsletter, May 30, 2026.

Lavin, Nancy. 2025a. How to win elections and influence the State House? The League of RI Businesses has a plan. *Rhode Island Current*, November 25, 2025a, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2025/11/25/how-to-win-elections-and-influence-the-state-house-the-league-of-ri-businesses-has-a-plan/>

Lavin, Nancy. 2025b. “New R.I. budget projections shrink FY27 deficit by more than half,” *Rhode Island Current*, December 22, 2025, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2025/12/22/new-r-i-budget-projections-shrink-fy27-deficit-by-more-than-half/>

Lavin, Nancy. 2026a. “Why Rhode Island can’t afford to lose the race to reduce its SNAP error rate,” *Rhode Island Current*, April 20, 2026, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2026/04/20/why-rhode-island-cant-afford-to-lose-the-race-to-reduce-its-snap-error-rate/>

Lavin, Nancy. 2026b. “Rhode Island: Where often is heard a discouraging word on the economy,” *Rhode Island Current*, April 29, 2026, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2026/04/29/rhode-island-where-often-is-heard-a-discouraging-word-on-the-economy/>

Lavin, Nancy. 2026c. “Foulkes, McKee report record donation hauls as campaign fundraising kicks into high gear.” *Rhode Island Current*, May 1, 2026, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2026/05/01/foulkes-mckee-report-record-donation-hauls-as-campaign-fundraising-kicks-into-high-gear/>

Lavin, Nancy, Shea, Christopher, Castro, Alexander. 2026. “Under a federal buzzsaw, McKee pitches affordability in nearly \$15 billion budget.” *Rhode Island Current*, January 15, 2026, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2026/01/15/under-a-federal-buzzsaw-mckee-pitches-affordability-in-nearly-15-billion-budget/>

McGowan, Dan. 2026. “Senator Pearson's \$275,000 show of force.” Boston Globe’s Rhode Map newsletter. Also, on *Boston Globe*, April 16, 2026, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/04/16/metro/ri-senator-ryan-pearson-275k-primary-campaign-loan/>

Office of the Rhode Island Governor. 2026. Press release, “Governor McKee Calls on Treasury Department to Refund \$770 Million in Tariff Payments to Rhode Islanders,” March 11, 2026, *Office of the Rhode Island Governor*, <https://governor.ri.gov/press-releases/governor-mckee-calls-treasury-department-refund-770-million-tariff-payments-rhode>

Resilient Rhody 2025. 2026. *Rhode Island Climate Change*, <https://climatechange.ri.gov/resilient-rhody-2025>

Rhode Island Board of Elections. 2022 Statewide Primary. *Rhode Island Board of Elections*. https://www.ri.gov/election/results/2022/statewide_primary/races/8.html#

Rhode Island General Assembly. 2026. Press Release, “President Lawson, Whip Kazarian and advocates highlight RI Voting Rights Act” April 2, 2026, *State of Rhode Island General Assembly*, https://rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/_layouts/RIL.PressRelease.ListStructure/Forms/DisplayForm.aspx?List=c8baae31%2D3c10%2D431c%2D8dcd%2D9dbbe21ce3e9&ID=376290&Web=2bab1515%2D0dcc%2D4176%2Da2f8%2D8d4beebdf488

Rhode Island Department of Education. 2026. Press release, “Citing Measurable Progress Under State Intervention, RI K-12 Council Approves Order to Transition Providence Public Schools to Local Control.” *Rhode Island Department of Education*, May 27, 2026. <https://ride.ri.gov/press-releases/citing-measurable-progress-under-state-intervention-ri-k-12-council-approves-order-transition-providence-public-schools-local-control>

Rhode Island General Assembly Press Release. 2026. “House OKs creation of commission to study sludge disposal,” *Rhode Island General Assembly*, April 16, 2026, https://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/_layouts/RIL.PressRelease.ListStructure/Forms/DisplayForm.aspx?List=c8baae31%2D3c10%2D431c%2D8dcd%2D9dbbe21ce3e9&ID=376359&Web=2bab1515%2D0dcc%2D4176%2Da2f8%2D8d4beebdf488

Rhode Island Senate. 2026. (Updated February 11, 2025). *The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter*. <https://www.cookpolitical.com/senate/race/488666>

Shea, Christopher. 2026. “Shekarchi apparently resigns as speaker to pursue seat on Rhode Island Supreme Court,” *Rhode Island Current*, May 6, 2026, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2026/05/06/shekarchi-apparently-resigns-as-speaker-to-pursue-seat-on-rhode-island-supreme-court/>

White, Tim. 2026. “Law professor files ethics complaint against Shekarchi over RI Supreme Court application,” *WPRI*, May 8, 2026, <https://www.wpri.com/target-12/law-professor-files-ethics-complaint-against-shekarchi-over-ri-supreme-court-application/>

Yokley, Eli. 2026a. “Tracking the Approval Ratings of All 100 U.S. Senators.” *Morning Consult*, January 25, 2026, <https://intel.morningconsult.com/mc-content/trackers/senator-approval-ratings>

Yokley, Eli. 2026b. “Tracking the Approval Ratings of All 50 U.S. Governors,” *Morning Consult*, February 2, 2026, <https://intel.morningconsult.com/mc-content/trackers/governor-approval-ratings>