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Politics in Rhode Island in the Aftermath of the 2002 Elections

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The elections of 2002 signaled stunning new beginnings in Rhode Island, providing a clear benchmark for the new century. Yet as one might expect, events that surrounded these changes were derivative of the history and culture of the state. Rhode Island remains a “modified one party” Democratic state with a political culture that supports individualistic politics. Government at the state level, while modern, progressive and efficient in most respects, still retains elements of an old style patronage system, which engenders some costly inefficiencies, political favoritism and occasional corruption.

The vestiges of this system provided the clear subtext for the 2002 election. Issues in the election ranged from the standard debates about taxes and spending, public education and urban redevelopment to other questions steeped in the distant past. Indeed one significant debate literally related to the origins of the colony. Such discussions had some comical moments—as somewhat tortured interpretations of our colonial past were offered by various advocacy groups debating proposed constitutional changes. But the controversy did provide an instructive example as to the importance of our past and how the character of the state as we know it today is very much linked to its earliest beginnings.

New Faces and New Beginnings

Change was the leitmotif that became obvious after the election. First, at the gubernatorial level, much to most observers' surprise, a Republican political

neophyte, retired businessman Don Carcieri handily beat three-time aspirant for the position, Democrat Myrth York. In this heavily Democratic state, the Democrats became victims once again of a contentious three way primary that essentially undermined the campaign of the candidate most people considered the frontrunner, former Attorney General Sheldon Whitehouse. An unexpected turn of events involving a scandal involving the speaker of the house caused a former legislator, Tony Pires, initially considered an also ran, to receive a last minute surge of support that many believe took a critical margin of votes away from Whitehouse, giving the primary to Myrth York. She then lost the general election to Republican Carcieri, a self- starter millionaire who essentially financed his own race.

It is not unusual that in heavily Democratic states crowded primary fields often do not produce the most electable general election candidate. This, in turn, gives an advantage to the minority party. This recently has become common in Rhode Island. While there are unique factors associated with each election, for the twenty-two year period from 1984 through 2006—there have only been four years (1990-1994) when a Democrat held the governor's office. It is, also, increasingly common that millionaire self-starters get elected. Both these conditions applied in Rhode Island in 2002 and, as is the case in other situations where millionaires some would say “buy” their way into the system, neophyte Carcieri has thus far proved to be engagingly political—winning over the support not only of the voters who respond to his affable, fresh and energetic style but, also, many in the Democratic establishment. Indeed, a poll taken in June of 2003 found that his approval ratings were at 72 percent, far above any other statewide or federal official.

Initial positive impressions of Carcieri were reinforced when, in early February, one of the worst tragedies in the state's history occurred. The Station nightclub, a gathering place for second-tier rock groups in West Warwick, caught

fire as a result of the group's pyro-tronic display, killing 100 people and injuring, seriously, over 100 others in a matter of minutes. This fire was the fourth-largest fire disaster in the country in a century and proved to be a stunning blow to the residents of this small, tight-knit state. The governor's decisive, efficient, and heartfelt response created what is likely to remain a lasting impression of him as an able and engaged political leader. He has great promise as a successful governor.

Rhode Island, as are most other New England states, is considered a “weak governor” state. But, in addition to Carcieri's popularity, a number of key political factors enhanced his capacity to work his political will, at least in the short term. Although an institutionally weak Republican governor in this heavily Democratic state, he derived additional leverage with the legislature because that institution has just undergone difficult structural changes, was under a cloud of suspicion because of a scandal related to the former speaker of the house, and was embroiled in a contentious house-senate political rivalry.

The structural component of the legislature's troubles was related to the downsizing of the legislature. In a ballot initiative in 1992, voters passed an amendment that required the General Assembly to downsize from 100 seats in the House to 75 and from 50 to 38 seats in the Senate. Districts were to be redrawn in conjunction with the decennial redistricting. As expected this process caused widespread tensions, some hard-feelings, and a great degree of uncertainty among members who had either to consider resigning or face off against former colleagues—all in areas with some parts of their districts having new constituents. A redistricting commission did a competent job in redrawing the seats, and although there was ample political maneuvering on the margins, it was, in the end, a fairly reasonable and successful plan. There were three cases brought against the state Senate; one was dropped, one is on appeal in federal

court in Boston, and one is, still, pending. None is expected to cause any significant changes.

The unease among legislators because of downsizing and redistricting was only enhanced during the latter stage of the election, when allegations of Clintonesque behavior by the house speaker and a subsequent pay-off to a female member of the speaker's staff created a wave of outrage among voters who were already angered by some of the heavy-handed machinations of the leadership over the past few years. Ironically, this outrage boosted the electoral fortunes of the weakest of the Democratic gubernatorial candidates—a former legislator turned foe of the speaker—causing the Democrat frontrunner to lose. This nomination loss, in turn, provided the opportunity for Republican Carcieri to take the election.

The other direct effect on the legislature was overwhelming support for a ballot question labeled “Separation of Powers” that was, originally, a limited question about prohibiting legislators from sitting on boards and commissions. The firestorm over the house scandal, however, made this question a rallying point for reform groups and *The Providence Journal*, which promoted this issue as being, somehow, representative of all the abuses of power exercised by a legislature that is, both, constitutionally and politically powerful. The then governor, Republican Lincoln Almond, who has the ability to put an unrestricted advisory question of his own wording on the ballot, inserted language into a question that drew on somewhat inflated references to the original colonial charter of the state. The question essentially said that the General Assembly has enjoyed excessive and/or supreme power since 1663, when Rhode Island received its charter from King Charles II and asked was it not time we changed all this. A fascinating, although sometimes skewed, debate ensued. The positive effect was that it brought attention to some of the founding principles of the state. The charter was, essentially, a corporate document that

allowed for self-government without a royal governor or much interference from the Crown and provided freedom of religion. Although the colony was founded in 1636 by Roger Williams when he settled here after being expelled from Massachusetts, there was no official recognition of the colony until Williams returned to England, in 1644, and received a Patent for the colony from Oliver Cromwell, during the period of the Long Parliament. After the Restoration, the colony received a proper charter in 1663 from King Charles II. The legacy of these somewhat *ad hoc* beginnings was a colony and, then, a state that was highly secular, unruly, and individualistic. Gordon Wood, in his *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, describes it as “the most liberal, the most entrepreneurial and the most ‘modern’ of eighteenth-century colonies...” (Wood 1991, 140). The charter was replaced by a constitution in 1842.

Proponents of the ballot question somehow transformed this rich history into a simplistic scenario in which the legislature, because of the rights granted in the Charter by King Charles II, still enjoys supreme authority. This overlooks the fact that Charles II, whose predecessor Charles I lost his head to a legislative takeover of the English crown by Oliver Cromwell, was unlikely to have supported or intended such a system of complete legislative control. Moreover, the debate seemed to omit the critical fact that the state did draft and pass a constitution, in 1842, which has, since that time, given the governor considerable authority, albeit consistent with those powers of the other weak governor states of New England. In Rhode Island however, the governor does not have a line-item veto.

The advisory question passed with a whopping 76 percent of the vote and a debate then ensued as to the actual wording of the constitutional amendment that will go on the ballot in 2004. The Governor obviously supported this reform initiative but in a measured way—in counter-distinction to some members of the legislature who turned it into a *cause celebre* for political purposes. It then became

the linchpin of an internal power struggle between the House and Senate leadership over control of a key joint committee that, essentially, controls the legislature's internal budget, perks, and patronage. Senate leaders used their position "on the side of the angels," so to speak, in supporting a somewhat extreme reform bill—one that would subject the institution to extensive litigation and court interpretation—to pressure the House and portray it as anti-reform. While some state-Senators privately have serious concerns with the wording of the constitutional amendment, the pressure to go along is intense. The other group of supporters is, mostly, Republican legislators who are in such a weak minority position that they, as is typical of minority legislators in other states, support any position that diminishes the authority of the dominant majority and provides for the possibility of gaining some additional leverage through the courts. The obvious beneficiary of all of the maneuvering is the governor, who engaged in some artful triangulation with the leadership in the General Assembly, initially giving him a political edge. His Republican administration was off to an impressive start.

Continued Democratic Dominance

With the exception of the governor's race, the Democratic Party essentially swept statewide and legislative races. Indeed, in the past few election cycles, they appear to be holding their own. Voter dissonance with the establishment (read Democrats) was obvious in the late 1980s and early 1990s—and, certainly, it had an impact on the most visible 2002 race for governor. But election results for all other offices suggest a traditional pattern of Democratic dominance.

In addition to winning the statewide races for Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General and General Treasurer, the Democrats retained their impressive hold on both houses of the General Assembly (see Table 1). While several races that were closer than usual, particularly in the southern part of the state, the Democrats still hold veto-proof majorities in both

chambers. Making headway with these margins remains a considerable task for the GOP, which hopes that a popular governor could at least help elect a veto sustaining group in the State Senate, which would at least give the governor some leverage during the budget negotiations—the Rhode Island Constitution requires a three-fifths override vote.

Table 1: Partisan Division of Rhode Island General Assembly, 1986-2002

Year	State Senate Dem-Rep	State Assembly Dem-Rep
2002	32-6	63-11*
2000	44-6	85-15
1998	42-8	86-13*
1996	42-8	84-16
1994	40-10	85-15
1992	39-11	85-15
1990	45-5	89-11
1988	41-9	84-16
1986	38-12	80-20

Source: Office of the Secretary of State, *Rhode Island Manual*.

* Third party or independent elected.

Looking at the party affiliation of registered voters and the polling preferences of voters in Rhode Island suggest what a formidable task this will be. The Republicans have only 68,000 registered voters compared to about 254,000 registered Democrats. The potential for the GOP however lies with the over 340,000 unaffiliated voters who choose not to identify with either party.

Table 2: Registered Voters by Party Affiliation in Rhode Island, 1998-2003

Year	Rep	Dem	Unaffiliated	Other	Total
1998	52,387	217,218	352,445	830	622,880
1999	54,140	220,698	344,223	1,052	620,113
2000	64,360	243,163	355,042	1,129	663,694
2001	62,897	237,989	350,711	1,209	652,806
2002	70,786	260,706	336,014	1,262	668,768
2003	68,080	254,141	340,291	314*	662,826

Source: Office of the Secretary of State, May 2003.

* Cool Moose Party failed to qualify after 2002 election.

Table 3: Party Identification in Rhode Island, 1994-2003

Date	Rep	Dem	Ind	Other	DK
1994	13	26	51	7	3
1995	12	28	48	7	5
1996	12	31	46	6	5
1997	11	28	50	5	6
1998	11	31	46	6	6
1999	12	28	51	5	4
2000	13	29	46	8	4
2001	14	26	49	5	6
2002	14	28	48	6	4
2003	10	27	50	6	7

Source: Years 1994-2003, John Hazen White Poll, Brown University

If the governor could appeal to a portion of those voters and encourage energetic candidates to run under the banner of the GOP for the legislature, he could make some headway towards building, at least, a core loyal opposition in this one party state. Also, as noted earlier, there were some demographic changes in the southern part of the state. There, Republicans came closer than usual to winning (see Tables 2 and 3).

Federal Elections

The 2002 federal elections held no surprises. Democratic Senator Jack Reed, who is on his way to becoming a respected institution in the state, was elected with over 70 percent of the vote, as was Democratic Congressman Jim Langevin. Democratic Congressman Patrick Kennedy, who managed to garner just 60 percent of the vote, retook the other congressional seat. Kennedy remains a controversial figure, who is prone to political blunders. Thus far, he has been successful in overcoming these mistakes and in 2002 getting 60 percent of the vote was seen as critical to his political credibility. But he is likely to face continued opposition in the future fueled by a core group of anti Kennedy voters in his district (about 30 percent), outside national money and the diminishing luster of the Kennedy name.

The enigma in the congressional delegation, who was not up for re-election, is Republican Senator Lincoln Chafee. He was appointed, in 1999, to his father's seat at the time of U.S. Senator John Chafee's unexpected death. Although not the most articulate or compelling figure, he was elected handily in his own right in 2000. Since that time, he has become something of a national curiosity in that he routinely and bluntly refuses to back President Bush and, on more than one occasion, out-liberals the rest of the state's fairly liberal congressional delegation. While this behavior does rankle the administration in Washington and fuels speculation that the Senator—given his abstruse style—is a bit dim-witted, he is doing fine by Rhode Island standards. His liberal and

independent positions play very well back home where people seem to like his quirky independence from the President in a state where George W. Bush in 2000 received his lowest presidential vote of any state in the union. Moreover, the national speculation that he might switch parties overlooks that fact that, were he to do so, he would most certainly face tough primary opposition and would probably lose in a Democratic primary.

A New Era in Providence

In this city-state, Providence is, in many ways, the heart of the political establishment. Here the course of new electoral beginnings took on blockbuster proportions. Over the past year the state, as well as the nation were drawn to the saga and eventual demise of the notorious, flamboyant, long-time Mayor, Vincent “Buddy” Cianci, a larger-than-life political figure who is now serving time in a federal prison in New Jersey for a conspiracy conviction under the federal RICO statutes.

Cianci was the longest serving mayor in the history of the state. He was first elected in 1974 as a Republican after a divisive Democratic primary weakened the ticket. He was, then, reelected as a Republican in 1978 and as an Independent in 1982. During that term he was forced to resign for a felony conviction for assaulting his wife’s alleged lover. After having served a community service sentence and worked as a radio talk show host, much to the amazement of most observers, he was reelected with a narrow victory in 1990 in a three-way race. After that, he appeared unstoppable, putting drive, imagination and energy into promoting the redevelopment of the city in a highly successful urban development project—started a decade before—that became known as the “Providence Renaissance.”

In 1994 he ran for office with no Democrat on the ballot and, in 1998, he ran unopposed. But beneath the surface of the “New Providence,” there were serious problems in the city with the police department, decaying poor urban

neighborhoods, unworkable public schools, a shrinking property tax base and an underfunded pension system. There was, also, substantial graft, patronage and extortion. Shortly after 1998, the feds began an investigation dubbed Operation Plunderdome and this talented and forceful leader who presided over one of the last corrupt urban political machines was, finally, indicted and convicted on RICO charges of conspiracy. After a riveting trial, the jury exonerated him on 26 of the 27 charges of extortion and conspiracy but found, with a kind of commonsensical wisdom, that he was guilty of general conspiracy, suggesting they felt while he might not have been directly involved in the many bribes and kickbacks that occurred, he nonetheless had to know that these corrupt enterprises were going on at City Hall. He is, now, in federal prison awaiting the outcome of his appeal.

Cianci probably represents one of the last of the old-style rogue mayors of large cities in the Northeast. True to his indomitable style, he remarked, as he was about to leave for prison, that he considered his impending confinement akin to spending time at a “very, very, inexpensive spa.” Rumors have it that he has stopped smoking, lost 40 pounds, and is, presently, learning Spanish. While, no doubt, he will return to Providence, his time has clearly passed and his successor—in many ways—exemplifies a new beginning for the city. The new mayor, David Cicciline, is a former state representative who, for starters, is gay, Jewish, and Italian. A smart, personable and accomplished trial lawyer who graduated from Brown University, he had a strong base in the liberal community as well as in the ethnic neighborhoods and ran especially strong with the emerging Hispanic population in the city. He hit the ground running after his inauguration in that he made some immediate changes in the police department, altered and made more transparent some city contracts and dealings with vendors, and began the difficult work of attempting to pare down a bloated and, in some cases, incompetent city work force.

But his bigger problems are fiscal and he has aggressively initiated a multi-faceted campaign to find money from every sector. While he needs to extract concessions from the unions and get more money for the city's public school system from the legislature—both tough sells—he has, also, taken on a few other interests. He made a forceful pitch for a share of the hotel and beverage tax, taking on the hospitality industry, and he also demanded some form of cash payment from the institutions of higher learning in the city—including Brown University. In a city where about 50 percent of the real estate is tax exempt, this demand makes sense but it has certainly ruffled a few feathers, particularly those of the President of his alma mater, Brown University. Yet, many of his local supporters live on the upscale East Side of the city where the university is located and were not at all inclined to prefer property tax hikes. Ciciline managed to get an historic agreement with the private colleges to make annual cash payments to the city to offset some expenses incurred by the colleges to help with the spiraling budget. He then attempted to wrestle concessions from the unions but was initially unsuccessful—mostly because of existing contracts. He was, then, forced to raise taxes—much to the chagrin of the city's property owners. However, taking the hit the first year for the tax hike and forging ahead with his others initiatives—including new contract talks with unions—should alleviate some of the budgetary problems of the city. These energetic beginnings could go wrong but, for now, the potential for changing the culture and political climate of the city as well as significantly improving services could launch a long and successful political career.

Issues in the Future

Whatever mischief the political establishment was engaged during the past few years, government at the state level is in relatively good shape and continues to develop and support progressive and effective programs, many of which receive national recognition. As to the budget, Rhode Island is in

relatively good fiscal shape. There are some projected shortfalls in the next two cycles but they are minor compared to the desperate condition of many other states in the country. The governor is aggressively pursuing initiatives to encourage business development and job creation which, given his background, plays to his strength. What will be more difficult will be his proposals to get public employee unions to ante up in light of the growing structural shortfall as health care and pension costs for public employees continue to escalate. The unions are, already, howling and any changes will involve protracted and contentious negotiations. One initiative, which holds some promise, is beginning the conversation to get state workers to pay some share on their monthly health insurance premiums. While that plan should meet with resistance, as all citizens perceive the escalating cost of health care, state workers may be hard-pressed to reject, flatly, making some contribution.

There are challenges ahead for the state and its municipalities. But the new governor and mayor of Providence are facing an era with considerable economic and political potential. Looking toward the 2004 elections, while there may be some changes on the margins, the patterns that emerged in this last election cycle are likely to hold.