

Are Rhode Island's Seniors a Political Force?

Our state is beginning an exciting season leading to primaries for U.S. Representative, Governor, as well as all General Assembly seats. It seems a good time to ponder the “civic engagement” of Rhode Island’s seniors in the political process, and their influence with candidates. The conventional wisdom tells us that seniors are a potent interest group. They are more likely to be registered and vote than any other demographic group. Seniors identify more strongly than younger voters with one or the other of the two major political parties. Politicians have always courted the senior vote. Yet, as political scientist Robert Binstock, who has studied senior voting patterns, wrote in 2006, “to date older Americans have not shown any tendency to vote as a bloc.” He found that in presidential elections, voters over 60 have distributed their votes among candidates in the same ratio as other age groups, except for voters age 18-25.

Nonetheless, on the national level politicians and advocacy groups are currently paying attention to senior issues like the future solvency of Social Security and impact of national health care reform on Medicare. The AARP has mounted a strong national effort to educate seniors about the benefits that health care reform could provide for them, such as a greatly improved Medicare prescription drug subsidy. Opponents of the President’s national health care plan have appealed to seniors’ fears about so-called “death panels” and “cuts to Medicare”.

However, within Rhode Island seniors’ political power seems to be declining. During the past eight years the Governor and General Assembly have whittled down the staff of the R.I. Department of Elderly Affairs to a skeleton crew, and there have been efforts to eliminate the agency entirely. In the fiscal 2009 state budget legislative grants to all senior centers were cut by fifty percent, despite a strong turnout of seniors at the State House in opposition. Several non-partisan senior advocacy groups such as the Silver-Haired Legislature and the Forum on Aging have declined in influence. There seem to be few members of the General Assembly who specialize in senior issues or pay close attention, although fortunately there are important exceptions such as House Finance Chair Steven Costantino, Representative Eileen Naughton and Senate Health & Human Services Committee Chair Rhoda Perry.

Seniors, their relatives and caregivers, as well as soon-to-be-senior “baby boomers” will have opportunities this year to turn this trend around. We all need to bring up issues like “rebalancing long-term care” at public candidates’ forums and in our one-to-one conversations with candidates. We need to find out where candidates stand on preserving state programs like RIPAE and free/reduced transportation for seniors. Unless seniors’ voices are heard, our interests may not be considered when elected officials make the difficult budget decisions that lie ahead. The Senior Agenda Coalition, in concert with other groups, will be sponsoring a Candidates’ Forum on Senior Issues for gubernatorial candidates. That Forum will be held prior to the general election on November 2, but after the primaries on September 14. We hope other interested groups will join us and

also develop their own events and opportunities to be heard. We need to rebuild “senior political power” in Rhode Island.

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