

BIPARTISAN UPRISING:

Drive For Fair Elections Gains Traction

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ONE OF THE NICE things about living in Rhode Island is that there are genuinely good people here who strive to make the state better, in spite of everything arrayed against them — apathy, smears, an entrenched culture of corruption, powerful interests working every day to drain the state's lifeblood.

Public-spirited citizens are now pushing for fair elections, and an end to the master lever, a legacy of corrupt machine politics that most states have rejected. These good people would like to see even-handed elections, ballots without technical flaws, a more responsive legislature and, all around, a better-run Rhode Island. And they are gaining impressive, bipartisan momentum.

Governor Carcieri, a Republican, has come out for ending the master lever, as has General Treasurer Frank Caprio, a Democrat (bravely, because he might benefit from the system in a general election). So has Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian. In the legislature, Democrats, Republicans and — yes, the state Senate's sole independent, Ed O'Neill — are also committed to this change.

And, as I write this, the town and city councils of 16 communities have passed resolutions supporting the reform: Charlestown, Coventry, East Providence, Exeter, Gloucester, Lincoln, Little Compton, Middletown, Newport, New Shoreham, Portsmouth, Richmond, Smithfield, Warren, West Greenwich and Woonsocket. Several other communities have the matter on the agenda: Barrington, East Greenwich, Foster, Jamestown, North Kingstown, Pawtucket and Scituate.

Citizens groups are also fighting for the change, including Common Cause Rhode Island, Operation Clean Government, the League of Women Voters Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Statewide Coalition.

And the state Board of Elections, whose job it is to oversee fair elections, voted 3-1 in support of eliminating the master lever.

In most states, perhaps, it would not take such an outpouring of public concern to motivate legislators to do what is transparently the right thing: operating elections that are fair to all. In most states, such an outpouring would be more than enough to shame the laggards into action.

But moving our General Assembly to serve the common good is often a Herculean task. Some hearts are hardened against the public. Some legislators owe their power to a tilted playing field. Special interests who control legislators' votes frown on the idea of genuinely competitive elections; they want to see their carefully cultivated members uncontested for re-election.

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Thus, though it would surely have no influence on the balance of power, this reform is bottled up in the House and Senate judiciary committees, which have not yet seen fit to remove this stain on Rhode Island's reputation.

The master lever is terminology left over from the days of voting machines. It let voters, by pulling one lever, elect all the Democrats or all the Republicans up and down the ballot. This was a bad idea then — people should actually vote for those they put in positions of power — but it is a worse one now.

Rhode Island uses paper ballots rather than voting machines (superior to the machines, because they leave a paper trail and make elections less susceptible to fraud). But the paper ballots, scanned optically, do not function the same way.

If a voter chooses the master-lever option on paper, voting for all Democrats, and then goes down to vote for, say, one Republican in a local council race with five positions open, the ballot will not "fill in" the other positions with Democrats. The machine will read the ballot as one vote for a Republican, and no other votes in the council race.

The old voting machines worked differently. An "X" appeared next to the name of every candidate selected (even through the master lever). An "X" could be moved to another party's candidate without wiping out all the straight-ticket votes.

But the issue goes way beyond that technical glitch.

Straight-party voters may not know they are not casting a ballot in nonpartisan elections.

Worst of all, the master lever tends to give a huge advantage to members of the majority party, particularly well down the ballot, in races that would otherwise not draw as many votes. Independent and third-party candidates face a huge disadvantage.

That is obviously one reason for the overwhelming dominance of one party in the General Assembly. Many seats go uncontested because potential opponents do not believe they have a fighting chance. They start a race, in effect, hundreds of votes behind because of the advantage the master lever provides the other guy. The system is inherently unfair, a racket.

Needless to say, competitive elections are the lifeblood of any democracy. Without them, politicians heed the wishes of special interests and ignore the common good.

When Democrats gained power in New Hampshire, they got rid of the master lever, which for years had unfairly benefited Republicans.

Our state deserves fair elections and healthier governance, too. Our children deserve a better legacy than a corrupt system. The people to call are your legislators and their leaders: House Speaker William Murphy (401-222-2466) and Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed (401-222-6655).

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