

In Their Own Words

We asked the following questions of candidates for US Congress. These are the people we'd be sending to Washington, so we went easy on the RI-related policy questions and tried to open up some of the bigger pictures. Respondents in the race for District #1 were David Cicilline (Dem, incumbent) and Russell Taub (Rep). Respondents in the race for District #2 were Jeff Johnson (Ind), James Langevin (Dem, incumbent), Rhue Reis (Rep). Independent candidate Sal Caiozzo could not be reached for comment. Any editing was strictly for clarity or spelling.

What is the single most important issue facing RI right now and how would you address it in Congress? Is the biggest issue facing the country different?

David Cicilline (D): The most important issue facing Rhode Island is the need for more good-paying jobs that can support a family. Spurring economic growth for our state has been my number one priority in Congress. My focus has been on: 1) Helping secure more than \$300 million in funding to improve public safety, fix our crumbling infrastructure and create quality jobs. 2) Revitalizing our manufacturing sector by passing an amendment that levels the playing field for American manufacturers when competing for government contracts and cosponsoring legislation to promote our advanced manufacturing economy. 3) Creating an economy that works for everyone by working to raise the minimum wage and cosponsoring the Paycheck Fairness Act to end the wage gap for women. 4) Making it easier for Rhode Islanders to get the skills they need to compete in a global economy by introducing new legislation to reduce student loan debt.

The most important issue facing our country over the next few weeks is making sure that Donald Trump is soundly defeated. He has shown a stunning level of disrespect to women, immigrants, Muslims, the disabled, veterans, Gold Star families, Latinos, African Americans ... the list goes on. In addition, he is woefully uninformed on both domestic and foreign policy issues and is fundamentally unfit to serve as president.

Jeff Johnson (I): The most important issue facing both Rhode Island and the world today is climate change. Rhode Island, as a coastal state, should be especially concerned with ensuring that sea levels do not continue to rise and threaten our coastal residences. We face a choice: we can choose to work together and invest in the energy of the future, or remain idle and succumb to big business interests, who would make money at the expense of the health of our nation. As your congressman, I promise to put the climate first. I will implement both a carbon tax and further regulate industrial agriculture to ensure that our climate is protected.

Jim Langevin (D): The most important issue facing Rhode Island and our nation is the economy, and fostering an environment that supports job growth. This is one of my top priorities in Congress, because as I visit businesses around our state, I hear often that companies are hiring but are struggling to find qualified candidates. This gulf, known as the skills gap, is a national issue because our education system has become disconnected from the workplace. As co-chair of the bipartisan Career and Technical Education Caucus in Congress, I am focused on closing that skills gap and ensuring that young people have access to the training, education and certification programs that will prepare them for the jobs that are available today and will grow in the future.

Rhue Reis (R): I believe the single most important issue facing RI and the country is illegal

immigration. Illegal immigration costs the country \$113 billion annually with the bulk of that falling to the states and local cities and towns. As RI is considered a sanctuary state, significant burdens of those costs are being levied to our taxpayers both individual and corporate. This can only cause those taxpayers to seriously evaluate whether staying in RI will continue to be viable in the future. The high taxes contribute to our state's ranking as the unfriendliest place to do business, while sending jobs out and keeping wages low. This also takes resources away from the poor, elderly and veterans, many of whom are members of the homeless community. I fail to understand how my opponent can claim that jobs and the economy are his greatest concern when he continues to promote illegal immigration with the gift of amnesty and reform. He is also calling for an increase in the number of Syrian refugees at the extreme cost of \$64,000 per person. This is not only a threat to our safety and security, but will put a drag on wages, jobs and state and local budgets.

Russell Taub (R): The economy is the biggest issue facing Rhode Island according to recent polls. Its the same issue [for the nation].

Would you advocate changing any gun laws, if elected? In what ways?

Cicilline: I've stood firm against the gun lobby to fight for common-sense gun safety reforms such as universal background checks, a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and preventing anyone on the No-Fly List from purchasing a firearm. I was proud to have helped organize an unprecedented sit-in on the House floor with my colleague Congressman John Lewis to insist that Congress act to get guns out of the hands of felons, domestic abusers and those suffering from mental illness.

Johnson: I am a gun owner and an avid supporter of the Second Amendment, so I recognize that gun ownership is a very important part of American culture. However, we should not be allowing criminals and those suffering from severe mental illness to purchase a gun. As your congressman, I will advocate for strong, mandatory background checks on all gun sales. This also means closing the gun show and private sales loopholes.

Langevin: I support the Second Amendment, but I also support commonsense reforms that will keep guns out of the wrong hands. I believe that every person who purchases a gun should have to undergo a background check. That means we must close the gun show loophole, and prohibit individuals on the No-Fly List who are suspected of terrorism from purchasing weapons. I also introduced the Crackdown on Deadbeat Gun Dealers Act to ensure that gun dealers are complying with federal regulations. Finally, we should reinstate and strengthen the federal ban on assault weapons, some of which have been used in recent shootings.

Reis: I would only be looking to roll back gun laws as they have no effect on criminals other than to give them a comfort zone. Gun laws only seem to apply to law abiding citizens and thus hinder their ability to protect themselves, their families and the community. First we must look at the whole picture. The FBI statistics say stricter gun laws cause more deaths among minorities. According to the *Chicago Reporter*, "**more felony cases involving a gun-from illegal possession to unlawful sale to a felon-have been thrown out than cases with any other type of charge.**" Most gun laws are written with fear, not common sense. Clearly what we need is for our government officials to uphold the laws, and to be accountable for their irresponsible actions.

Taub: Yes, to increase background checks and enforce the gun laws that are already on the books. Appropriate more funds to fight the illegal guns going around our country.

If you had to choose, would you allocate more financial support to 1. arts education 2. health education / fitness or 3. traditional academics?

Cicilline: I support all three. It's important to support art as part of STEAM education, and make investments for our future. We must work to make education accessible and affordable to all.

Johnson: If I had to choose, I would advocate for increased funding of traditional education. However, this question does not address the real problem plaguing our education system. Instead, we need to focus on systematic poverty. This is why I advocate for a Universal Basic Income. Every American family will be given a small amount of money each month, enough to cover food, clothing and basic living expenses. Studies confirm that children raised in single parent households face significant educational disadvantages due to a lack of parental involvement. With a Universal Basic Income, single parents will be able to spend more time at home rather than being forced to work as long as 80 hours per week in order to just scrape by.

Langevin: Arts education, health education and traditional subjects like math and science are all critical to a well-rounded education, and none should be overlooked. Last year, I supported passage of the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act, which empowers schools to incorporate art, music and many other subjects beyond the standard curriculum, and includes grant programs for extracurricular activities, with a special focus on using them to further student achievement. All of these investments are critical to student success.

Reis: To define which area of education is the more deserving or needing of additional financing is too far reaching and certainly varies by location. I believe the question should be [about] education as a whole. We need more effective use of the already substantial dollars that are being put toward education. Much of the waste in education is due to outdated and duplicate programs, fraud and the millions in RI alone who are not entitled to such programs.

Taub: Arts education.

What's your position on the idea of free college tuition?

Cicilline: Rhode Island college graduates currently have the second highest student loan debt of any state in the country. Access to higher education shouldn't just be available to the wealthy — every Rhode Islander deserves the opportunity to earn a college degree without financially crippling loans. I recently introduced legislation to help ease the burden of student loans by restructuring payments and making student loans interest-free.

Johnson: We are in the midst of a second industrial revolution. Mechanization and the internet are replacing many of the jobs traditionally held by American workers, while many more of these jobs are moving overseas as a result of globalization. The government has a responsibility to provide the opportunity to every American to earn a decent standard of living. In this modern world, this means providing access to higher education. A person's financial situation should not be a barrier for any American to have access to opportunity. It is for this reason that I support making all public higher education institutions tuition free for all those families making under \$125,000.

Langevin: I believe that higher education should be accessible to all students - not just those who can afford it. I have advocated strongly for the expansion of Pell grants that help young people pay for college, and we must do more to get the overall cost of college under control. That must include

reining in interest rates on student loans. I believe that the interest rate should cover only the essential costs of administering the loan. The federal government should not be making a profit on the backs of hardworking students.

Reis: Nothing is free. Why should those who choose not to go to college have to pay for those who do? Also, those who do go to college will be paying for college education for the rest of their lives through higher taxes. Public education is free and look at where that is getting us ... declining results. We need to get education costs down and lower the cost of student aid.

Taub: I do not support free college tuition because it means we have to increase taxes and eventually graduates will have to pay for it.

According to a study in the journal *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, US maternal mortality rates are currently some of the highest among developed nations. What do you view as the biggest contributing factor to this statistic and what can be done to address it?

Cicilline: American women must have better access to healthcare. We need to improve and expand the ACA to ensure all Americans, especially women and children, have consistent access to affordable healthcare.

Johnson: Our maternal mortality rates are much higher because we do not have a system of universal healthcare. Our private healthcare market lets many Americans who cannot afford overly expensive private insurance fall through the cracks while enabling pharmaceutical companies and hospitals to charge rates much higher than the rest of the developed world. Obamacare was a step in the right direction, but even the Bronze Plan is much too expensive for the average American. As your congressman, I will expand Medicare, which has been incredibly successful for our seniors, to cover every American. Nobody should be bankrupted from high premiums nor from high copays.

Langevin: While the Affordable Care Act has reduced the percentage of uninsured Americans to a record low of just over 9%, access to quality, affordable healthcare remains a challenge, particularly in rural communities and for low-income women. We must work to improve on the ACA and continue breaking down barriers to care, for women and for all Americans. We must also do much more to support mothers in general, and that includes enacting paid family medical leave so that women don't have to fear losing their jobs for taking care of themselves and their children.

Taub: It depends on the environment that they live in and the country. When I have more information I can give a better answer.

Are you concerned about the economic effects of climate change, particularly on RI? And if so, what should be done to slow or reverse the effects of climate change?

Cicilline: Of course. Climate change is happening and it's outrageous that we still have elected officials denying the overwhelming scientific evidence. Here in the Ocean State we are particularly vulnerable with hundreds of miles of coastline — our tourism, fishing and agricultural industries are at risk to changing weather patterns and rising seas. I'm a staunch supporter of President Obama's Climate Action Plan to join with global partners and commit to meaningful reductions in carbon pollution. I've worked to secure federal funding to give Rhode Island the tools to study the impact of severe weather on our state and develop response and resilience capabilities. In addition, I support legislation to prohibit the government from issuing leases for the exploration, development or production of oil and

gas drilling off of Rhode Island's coast.

Johnson: As we continue polluting and contributing carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, we put ourselves in an increasingly perilous position. Studies have found that as a result of sea temperature increases, hurricanes have been growing stronger in intensity and cause greater damage to coastal towns. As many as 40% of all Americans live on the coast, so as climate change causes additional flooding, many American homes and businesses will be terribly hurt by this. However, climate change does present a unique economic opportunity. As your congressman, I will not only work hard to reduce our carbon emissions, but I will ensure that the United States stays on the leading edge of green energy development. We will invest in research and engineering grants so that the United States can take its place in the world as a leading exporter of green technology.

Langevin: Climate change presents serious economic, environmental and national security challenges. In Rhode Island, we feel the effects more acutely because our economy is closely tied in to our coastal resources. Sea level rise, coastal erosion and the increasing frequency and severity of severe weather events threaten our homes, our businesses and the lives of our citizens. There are many steps we can and must take to address climate change, including reducing global emissions and decreasing our consumption of oil. As Energy Task Force Chair and a founding member of the Sustainable Energy and Environment Coalition, I believe that renewable energy is the future. We must invest in innovation and development of clean technologies like solar, wind and geothermal. I have supported legislation that would require 20% of our nation's electricity to come from renewable sources by 2020, and that is just the beginning of what we must do to slow the damaging effects of climate change.

Reis: Climate change is a given! Just look at historical diagrams of the world going back millions and billions of years. The climate is changing and will always be changing! Instead of putting money into research, we should be funding the fixes, to change the environment for the better. We should not be rewarding companies that move to other countries, which have little to no regulation, while taxing the middle class and poor, who have no control over this issue.

Taub: No, I am not concerned about the effects of climate change on Rhode Island.

In a recent *Washington Post* survey, only 3% who responded considered congresspeople highly productive. Why do you think people look at congress so unfavorably?

Cicilline: Voters have every right to be frustrated. Instead of finding common ground on common-sense solutions like fixing our country's crumbling infrastructure, making college more affordable, raising incomes or enacting sensible energy policies, Congress is stalled by members unwilling to compromise. I've rejected this and worked across the aisle to deliver for Rhode Island — most recently getting the GOP-controlled Congress to pass a bipartisan amendment I drafted that will help even the playing for Rhode Island-based manufacturers.

Johnson: People do not believe that Congress is highly productive simply because they are not. As much as Congress likes to claim that they are working for the American people, the fact remains that as long as big business and special interest groups are funding congressional campaigns, they will always be beholden to corporate interests. As your congressman, I will advocate for a constitutional amendment that would make all political campaigns publicly funded. This means that corporations would no longer be able to give money to congressional campaigns to advance their personal agenda. I will make sure that our democracy gives each American one vote, instead of giving those with more money an unequal say.

Langevin: Partisanship has reached an all-time high, which is incredibly frustrating because I have seen what good can come from working across the aisle. In fact, I have made bipartisanship a hallmark of my tenure in Congress, and I work with as many Republican partners as possible: on workforce development, it's Republican Congressman GT Thompson of Pennsylvania; on cybersecurity, it's Republican Congressman Mike McCaul of Texas; on disability policy, it's Republican Congressman Gregg Harper of Mississippi. And that's just to name a few. We don't agree on everything, but we work together to find common ground and get results. That's what our constituents deserve and expect from the people they elect.

Reis: Most Americans seem to think that overall, Congress is viewed unfavorably, but locally, most people view their congressman favorably. So there really should be two separate questions. I believe Congress is looked at unfavorably because of non-partisan bickering that produces minimal results.

Taub: Because there is no accountability, too many scandals, [it is] not productive, [and there is]non-stop arguing instead of finding common ground to find solutions.