

Running Unopposed: It's not a race if there's no one to race against

Just under half of the 75 Rhode Island House seats in 2018 are uncontested in the general election. The Senate is only slightly better, with 22 of 38 primary nominees facing a challenge in November. Altogether, of the 113 members of the legislative branch of our state government, 51 of them will appear on ballots with no alternatives. Why aren't candidates emerging to contest for the General Assembly?

There are assuredly multiple answers to this question: time commitment, expenses and strain placed on one's job and family, to name a few. I have a theory, however, regarding a major factor contributing to why we have so few contenders for the General Assembly.

I am a politics and policy guy. I love to argue and debate and read and write politics and policy. The only time I don't turn the conversation to current political affairs is when I am talking to my children who are 4 and 6 years old. Over the past few years, my diet of political and policy media consumption has gradually shifted from a balance of local, national and world coverage to almost entirely national. This narrowing focus is spreading and, when combined with consolidated media-fueled partisan polarization, results in the perception of local candidates as merely proxies for their national political parties.

As identity increasingly tethers itself to partisan politics, running for state representative or senator is harder to do on one's own terms. Voters are less locally engaged with their neighbors, much less with their State House representation. They may not know you or your opponent, or where either of you stand on issues relevant to the district. But they know Nancy Pelosi or Donald Trump, and the 24/7 coverage of their exaggerated antics is what comes to mind when searching for an anchor point. Not only are you running against an opponent, you are running against a caricature of your own partisan identity. Therefore, despite local elections weighing exponentially more on the scale of influence on the everyday lives of Rhode Islanders, local politics has become compelling only when associated with national political coverage.

This theory is supported by a 2016 study by Professor Steven Rogers of Saint Louis University. Rogers studied voter behavior in state legislative elections and determined that legislators who share a president's party are more likely to be challenged. Furthermore, when compared with voters' evaluations of their state legislature, presidential approval ratings impact votes for state legislators three times as much as voters' individual evaluations of their legislatures.

In Rhode Island, a state in which the General Assembly looks like a blue background speckled with red, very few incumbents running for reelection share the party of a Republican president whose best record of consistency throughout his term so far is his disapproval rating. Considering our current political environment is far more reflective of national partisan tribalism than local policy concerns, the fortitude required to muster a campaign for a part-time, seasonal, legislative office is understandably difficult to find. Keep in mind, Rhode Island is not alone in its lack of local electoral enthusiasm. Massachusetts, an equally Democratic state, has a higher percentage of uncontested candidates in 2018. In fact, the more imbalanced a state's elected government is with regard to party, the more uncontested state legislature

races it sees.

I don't have a solution to offer for this problem of low candidate participation. At least, I have no proposal without complications that cause more problems than they solve. However, I will make a concerted effort to engage less with national politics, and more with Rhode Island politics. Eat local, buy local and vote local.