

End The Master Lever

Putting the good of Rhode Island ahead of partisan maneuvering, three freshmen legislators from different parties — Democrat, Republican and independent — are pushing for an end to the straight-ticket voting on the state ballot, a corrupt legacy of century-old machine politics. Freshman Representatives Michael Marcello (D.-Scituate) and Brian Newberry (R.-North Smithfield) are working together to get rid of this confusing system, bringing Rhode Island in line with the vast majority of states, which ban the practice. In the Senate, independent freshman Ed O'Neill of Lincoln has joined with David Bates (R.-Barrington) in sponsoring a similar bill, though not as strong.

Rhode Island is one of just 16 states that still allow straight-ticket voting, also known as the “master lever.” Under that system, a voter can draw one line and vote for every candidate from a single party on the entire ballot. In practice, the system often results in voters’ putting into office people they have never heard of, without considering qualifications.

This system hurts minority-party candidates in elections lower down the ballot (such as for the General Assembly and local offices) and discourages voting for nonpartisan candidates, too. People in most states understand that gives too much power to the dominant party and undercuts healthy competition for public office.

It is unlikely that the reform would affect the political balance of power in the state in any appreciable way. Even after the reform, citizens would find it easy to vote for all Democrats or all Republicans. They would simply have to go down the ballot and vote in individual races. Surely, it is not too much to ask citizens to actually directly vote for the people they put in positions of power! It is past time for Rhode Island leaders — including House Speaker William Murphy and Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed — to support this reform, put the public interest ahead of narrow party interests and bring healthier elections — and stronger democracy — to the state. With a bipartisan (tripartisan?) effort under way, and a rising public clamor for better state government, now is a great time for our legislators to make this change.

Citizens should call their own district’s legislators, as well as Mr. Murphy [(401) 222-2466; e-mail: rep-murphy@rilin.state.ri.us] and Ms. Paiva Weed [(401) 222-3310; e-mail: sen-paivaweed@rilin.state.-ri.us] and ask them to end of the “master lever.”

Let’s bring Rhode Island into the modern age with most other states.