

For Fair Elections

Providence Journal Editorial

Amid all the discouraging news about Rhode Island, it is encouraging that people keep striving to improve the state's civic culture. One of the most promising developments is the movement to get rid of the straight-ticket "master lever" on the ballot, a legacy of corrupt machine politics.

Last month, the state Board of Elections voted 3-to-1 to support the bipartisan effort to get rid of the master lever. The board's vote does not reform the system — it will take the General Assembly to do that — but it does send a signal that the body that oversees voting recognizes that the master lever gets in the way of fair elections. Nine town and city councils have also endorsed the reform.

Rhode Island would do well to join the majority of states and reform this disreputable system. Under the master lever options voters can choose to elect every Democratic or Republican candidate up and down the ballot. This creates unfair elections, for several reasons:

In races for General Assembly and local offices, it tends to give a huge • built-in advantage to members of the majority party. Independents and third-party candidates especially suffer. That is one reason for the gross disparity of party power in the legislature. Many seats go uncontested because potential opponents do not believe they have a fighting chance.

The state would fare much better by treating candidates equally. Competitive elections are the lifeblood of any vibrant democracy. They encourage politicians to serve the common good, and to defend their record at election time.

Rhode Island's optical scan voting machines, on the cutting edge of election technology, are not equipped to handle the old-fashioned master lever. Voters are being disenfranchised in ways they may not understand.

People who opt for the straight-ticket vote effectively get no say in nonpartisan elections for offices on the ballot, such as for local boards in some communities.

More troubling, people who use the master lever may have their votes for partisan offices wiped out without their knowledge. For example, say John Doe chooses the straight-ticket option for Democrats. If Mr. Doe goes down the ballot and then votes for one Republican in a town council race with five positions open, that Republican will be his only vote counted. The ballot will not "fill in" the other positions with Democrats.

With the state's old voting machine, an "X" clearly appeared next to the name of every candidate one had voted for. An "X" could be moved to another party's candidate without wiping out all of the straight-ticket votes. Such is not the case with the optical-scanning machine.

It makes no sense to perpetuate such a problematic system. If the straight-ticket option were removed, those who wanted to vote only for Democrats or only for Republicans could still easily do so. They would simply have to go down the ballot and vote in each race. And what's wrong with actually voting directly for the people we put in office?

Two bills that would make this long-needed reform (H-5318 and S-80) enjoy the support of Democrats, Republicans and independents. The General Assembly should embrace fair elections and make this change now.