



## Findings from the Rhode Island Young Democrats Survey

*This report details the results of a 26-question survey conducted by the Rhode Island Young Democrats (RIYD). RIYD collected 265 surveys from respondents between February 23 and March 7, 2009. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the way things are going in Rhode Island, their priorities for state government, and their attitudes toward several proposed public policy measures. All interviews were self-administered and completed online.*

*RIYD sought participants by publicizing the survey on its email list, Facebook, and rifuture.org. Given that the survey did not rely on a probability sample, the reported results cannot be generalized to the entire population of young adults in Rhode Island. However, it is a fair representation of the opinions and perceptions of the self-selected group of young, politically-minded Rhode Islanders who completed the survey. A summary of respondent demographics is located at the end of this report.*

*The questionnaire and research design were devised by Meghan Grady, Kim Ahern, and the other members of the RIYD Executive Board. Georgi Vogel Rosen was responsible for data analysis and reporting.*

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Respondents are generally unhappy with the way things are going in Rhode Island. As with many Rhode Islanders, they are displeased with the state of the economy and the high rate of unemployment. Respondents tend to consider these problems as the most important issues that their state leaders should be focusing on at this time; several hope candidates for governor in 2010 will prioritize these issues in their campaigns. Respondents also are very concerned about the quality of education in the state.

Many respondents believe that one of the best ways to fix the state's current budget deficit is to raise taxes on Rhode Islanders from high-income households. Most are strongly opposed to a policy that would cut taxes for the wealthy as a way to encourage investment in the state, and a number of respondents also say they oppose cuts to human service programs such as RIte Care as a way to balance the budget.

#### **Respondents Are Unhappy with the State's Current Course**

By a 70% to 20% margin, respondents believe the state of Rhode Island is generally heading in the wrong direction.

Respondents were invited to explain their responses in their own words. Fully 5% indicate they based their response on concerns about the state's present economic situation and high unemployment rate. Another 4% say they believe Governor Don

Carcieri is at least partially responsible for the current state of the state. Some respondents also note that they feel the state lacks direction, strong leadership, or a sense of innovation (4%).

### Top Issues: Employment, Education and the Economy

Using a scale from 1 to 5, respondents assessed the importance they believe should be placed on a host of public policy areas affecting the state of Rhode Island. The topics ranged from the economy to the environment to the criminal justice system.

Overall, three central issues emerge as respondents’ most pressing concerns: employment, education and the economy.

With an average rating of 4.20 out of a possible maximum score of 5, employment ranks as the highest issue on the list. Over half of all respondents (52%) give this policy area a rating of “5.”

The emphasis respondents place on employment issues is closely matched by their concern for education. This policy area receives an average score of 4.19, with 54% saying this issue is one of the “most important” facing the state.

The third highest ranked issue on the list is the economy, which yields an average rating of 4.05. Two-in-five respondents (39%) consider this to be a top priority.

Areas of Public Policy	Average Rating	Percentage Rating “5”
<b>Employment</b> <i>Training, New Job Creation, Opportunity</i>	4.20	52%
<b>Education</b> <i>Infrastructure, Early Childhood through Higher Education, Public Aid</i>	4.19	54
<b>Economy</b> <i>Taxes, State &amp; Local Spending, Business Regulation</i>	4.05	39
<b>Human Welfare</b> <i>Basic Needs, Housing, Child Care</i>	3.88	40
<b>Energy</b> <i>Clean, Renewable, Affordable</i>	3.88	35
<b>Civil Rights</b> <i>Equality, Protection, Expansion</i>	3.86	41
<b>Open Government</b> <i>Transparency, Ethics, Separation of Powers</i>	3.81	34
<b>Environment</b> <i>Protection, Conservation, Pollution</i>	3.61	24
<b>Transportation</b> <i>Access, Cost, Mass Transit</i>	3.44	17
<b>Criminal Justice</b> <i>Mandatory Minimums, Reintegration, Conditions of Confinement</i>	3.23	15

*Question wording: Please rate the following areas of public policy on a scale of 1 to 5 based on their importance to you, 1 being least important and 5 being most important.*

### Other Issues

The other six issues tested in the survey receive average scores below 4.0 on the 5-point scale. These include: human welfare (3.88), energy (3.88), civil rights (3.86), open government (3.81), the environment (3.61), transportation (3.44), and criminal justice (3.23).



Respondents were asked to name any public policy areas that did not appear on the list of issues but that are important to respondents. Fully 5% mention access to affordable health care or insurance.

### The Most Important Issue Facing Rhode Island

In a separate follow-up question, respondents were asked to name “the most important issue facing Rhode Island today.” Again, jobs and the economy remain at the forefront of respondents’ minds, with fully two-in-five (40%) either volunteering the state’s current economic situation, jobs or unemployment as their top concern. Four of the seven next most-oft cited issues also relate in some way to the crisis caused by the ailing economy: the budget deficit (10%), the state’s current business climate (6%), budget cuts to social programs (4%), and affordable housing and foreclosures (4%).

Education also ranks toward the top of the list, with 8% of all respondents naming it as one of their most pressing concerns.

The other two most frequently volunteered issues deal with respondents’ concerns about the character of state government; fully 4% say they are worried about a lack of leadership or innovation at the State House, and another 4% point to a lack of transparency.

### Reactions toward Possible Measures for Closing the Budget Gap

Respondents were presented with a list of six different policy measures being proposed to close the state’s “significant budget deficit,” and were asked to evaluate them on a 5-point scale, with “1” representing strong opposition to the policy and “5” representing strong support for it.

Overall, respondents are most supportive of a measure that would “raise taxes on only the wealthiest” in the state. This proposal receives an average score of 3.74, which is considerably higher than the ratings for the other five policies tested in the survey; one-in-three respondents (32%) favor this approach to reducing the budget deficit.

Policy Measure	Average Rating	Percentage Rating “1”	Percentage Rating “5”
Raise taxes on only the wealthiest Rhode Islanders	3.74	9%	32%
Reduce the number of state employees	2.72	21	13
Cut state service	2.27	31	5
Raise taxes across the board to help close the budget gap	2.20	30	3
Cut state entitlements like RIte Care	1.95	44	3
Cut taxes for wealthy Rhode Islanders to spur investment	1.83	55	8

*Question wording: Rhode Island faces a significant budget deficit this year. The following are policies being considered to help close the gap. Please rate each policy from 1 to 5, with 1 being you think this policy should not be put in place, and with 5 being you think this policy should be put in place.*



Three other proposals are met with relatively lukewarm response: reducing the number of state employees (2.72), cutting state service (2.27), and raising taxes on all Rhode Islanders (2.20).

Respondents express strong opposition to a policy that would “cut taxes for wealthy Rhode Islanders to spur investment.” More than half of all respondents (55%) rate this as a “1.” Overall, this measure yields an average score of 1.83.

There also is substantial opposition to cutting state entitlements such as RIte Care; more than two-in-five respondents (44%) indicate that they do not believe this plan should be put in place. Respondents give this proposal an average rating of 1.95 out of 5.

### **A Message to Gubernatorial Candidates: Focus on Economy, Jobs, and Fiscal Responsibility**

Respondents were asked to volunteer in their own words “what kind of message [they would like to see] communicated from a candidate running for governor in 2010.” They offer a variety of ideas, but two central themes emerge: respondents want gubernatorial candidates to be talking about strengthening the economy and fiscal responsibility.

One-in-eight respondents (12%) say they think a candidate for governor should emphasize the importance of attracting businesses to the state, improving the local economy, and creating job opportunities for Rhode Islanders.

In addition, one-in-nine respondents (11%) hope to hear a candidate for governor talk about the need for fiscal responsibility, addressing issues like making government more efficient, spending money more wisely, and fixing the deficit.

### **Other Messages Important to Respondents**

Respondents also identify a number of other messages that they would like a gubernatorial candidate to put forward. The third most oft-volunteered message is one of change and reform; 7% of respondents would like a gubernatorial candidate to frame their messaging around these themes.

Many respondents also believe a candidate running for governor should talk about the need for transparency and accountability in state government (5%).

A number of respondents say they want a gubernatorial candidate to focus on improving the education system or supporting teachers (4%).

Fully 4% of respondents indicate they would be responsive to a candidate for governor who uses future-oriented rhetoric and emphasizes themes like hope and innovation.



## Respondent Demographics

The great majority of respondents describe themselves as current Rhode Island residents (84%). Thirty-two of the state's 39 cities and towns are represented in the survey, with the most common city of residence being Providence; three-in-ten respondents (31%) hail from the capital city. Cranston (8%) and Warwick (6%) are the next two most commonly represented cities.

Not surprisingly, the sample is heavily Democratic, with nearly two-in-three respondents (63%) saying they are registered Democrats. One-in-five (20%) indicate they are independent or unaffiliated, and 2% say they are registered Republicans.

This is a fairly politically-minded group. Nearly nine-in-ten respondents (86%) report that they voted in the 2008 election, and one-in-three (33%) say they would consider running for public office themselves someday. Respondents are particularly interested in state politics, with 80% describing this as an area of interest. Three-in-four (75%) say they are interested in national politics, and three-in-five (57%) report an interest in local politics.

Men outnumber women in the sample. Fully 46% of respondents say they are men, while 37% say they are female. (The remainder do not indicate their gender.)

Respondents range in age from under 18 to over 36 years old. However, the most common age bracket for people who filled out the survey is 25 to 30 years old; one-in-three respondents (34%) fall in this age range. Another 24% say they are between 19 and 24 years of age.

Respondents come from a variety of employment backgrounds. Students are the most heavily represented population, as one-in-five respondents (22%) are currently in school. Another one-in-five respondents (21%) are employed in the non-profit industry, and one-in-six (15%) work in the private sector. Another one-in-six (17%) indicate they are government employees.

