



July 8, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

I hope your Independence Day provided a meaningful reminder of our country's distinctive heritage of ideals, rather than shared nationality. This week's letter discusses a recent controversy over political party endorsements, and a possible solution some of our civic-minded neighbors have developed.

Last week, a controversy arose after the Rhode Island Democratic Party endorsed challengers to two incumbent members of the Rhode Island General Assembly, generating [a national debate](#). The national media followed the critics in framing the issue as an ideological struggle between the party's old guard and its progressive wing. By the end of the week, the State Democratic Party withdrew these endorsements in response to an avalanche of criticism.

While the endorsements (one of which was for a former Trump Republican) were a mistake that needed to be corrected, I believe that the national coverage was oversimplified, as several of the progressive critics themselves participate in, and benefit from, an endorsement process that has its own significant flaws.

In the great majority of cases, party endorsements for General Assembly and/or City Council contests are made by a committee of citizens subject to election by voters at party primaries. With that said, we rarely see these positions on the ballot because there are usually the same number or fewer endorsement committee candidates for the available seats. The sole responsibility of these committees is to approve an endorsement in June of each election year. When a committee fails to form, the responsibility for endorsements reverts to the State or City party.

It is common for candidates and office holders to recruit members for these district committee seats so they can control their own endorsement in the next election. You can review the list of district and ward committee candidates [on the Secretary of State's website](#). Such a review will reveal a large number of office holders who serve on their own endorsement committee, and/or who recruit their spouse and/or other family members to make the decision whether to endorse the office holder in the next election. This type of committee-stacking is a common practice across both parties and across both wings of the Democratic Party. If the two incumbents from last week's controversy had, during the last election, recruited a slate of favorable endorsement committee members who had won at the last election (or not faced opposition) those incumbents would have ensured themselves of gaining "their" committee's endorsement. As a result, I believe the recent endorsement debate is more of a power struggle between incumbent office holders and the party over who controls the endorsement process, rather than any type of debate over political principle or "good government."

This fuller understanding of the problem sheds light on possible solutions. One possible solution is to acknowledge that these endorsements are inherently political, and for voters to take them with several grains of salt. Another is to abolish the endorsement process entirely as an archaic vestige of a bygone political era. While each of these alternatives has its own advantages and disadvantages, we have a third alternative in Ward 2 that I believe works very well for us, and could be a model for the rest of the State.

You will not see the eight candidates for the Ward 2 Democratic Party endorsement committee on the ballot, because they automatically will qualify for the eleven vacant seats with three to spare. These eight civic-minded citizens are Joshua Eisen, Wally Gernt, Susan Gunter, Barbara Harris, Terrance Martiesian, Bill Mott, Howard Schulman (Committee Chair) and Susan Tremblay. Many of them date back to 2010, when I sought

their endorsement, but unlike other committees, they have maintained an identity completely separate and apart from this office holder. They fill their own vacancies, and I have never recruited any candidates to serve with them (or against them). To their credit, they hold quarterly meetings to discuss City issues with me, providing me with valuable feedback to help me perform my work on the City Council more effectively and responsively. In short, they are ideal public servants, working on a purely voluntary basis above and beyond the single official role they have been assigned. (I also had no role in their endorsement decision for the current election cycle.) If any Ward 2 residents (who are members of the Democratic Party) wish to apply for the three anticipated vacancies, please [send Howard an email](#) and you can gain a chance to learn and shape City government. The Secretary of State's website also provides information about members of the Ward 2 Republican endorsement committee if you wish to join that organization.

Rather than view the recent endorsement controversy as part of the ongoing struggle between progressives and conservatives, let's instead learn from the legacy of the Progressive era of the early 20th century, which brought such "good government" reforms as political primaries, voter initiative and referenda. Our Ward 2 Democratic Committee offers a positive alternative to either incumbent-based or central Party-based control over endorsements, and I encourage you to consider joining them in their good work.

Sincerely,


