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Candidates for RI governor offer views on social issues such as sex education, abortion

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At Lincoln School in Providence were, from left, Kenneth J. Block, Frank T. Caprio, Lincoln D. Chafee, Patrick C. Lynch, Victor G. Moffitt and John Robitaille, all seeking to be governor.

PROVIDENCE — The candidates fighting to become Rhode Island’s next governor had sparred publicly before, but never quite like this.

Seated in the auditorium of an all-girls school Tuesday night, the six men faced an audience dominated by women and explained their positions on explosive issues such as abortion, sex education and welfare.

On many fronts, there were more similarities than differences among the slate of candidates that included two Democrats, two Republicans, a Moderate and an independent.

“I believe abortion should be safe, legal and rare,” said General Treasurer Frank T. Caprio, a Democrat who silenced the crowd of roughly 400 by sharing his personal story of dealing with an unplanned pregnancy while a high-school senior. “I was a teenage father.”

He said that Tuesday’s forum — sponsored by the Rhode Island Poverty Institute and the Women’s Fund of Rhode Island — was not his first time in the Lincoln School, where his daughter Ashley attended high school.

“I’ve been in this auditorium many times, celebrating her accomplishments,” Caprio said.

In an unusual public moment among rivals, his Democratic opponent, Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch, praised Caprio for speaking up.

“That type of message is one kids need to hear,” said Lynch, who is also pro-choice.

And Lynch went further.

When asked, he said he would support legislation requiring Rhode Island’s public schools to teach “a comprehensive sex education curriculum” that is “age-appropriate and medically accurate.”

Independent candidate [Lincoln D. Chafee](#), who noted that the pregnancy rate among Central Falls teenage girls exceeds 50 percent, also endorsed mandatory sex education, as did Moderate Party candidate Kenneth J. Block.

Republicans Victor G. Moffitt and John Robitaille were not asked about their positions on sex education or abortion, although both have described themselves as antiabortion.

Tuesday night may have offered the candidates their best opportunity in the relatively young campaign season to appeal to Rhode Island’s political left on a broad scale. There was no talk of cutting social services in Rhode Island.

Robitaille, [Governor Carcieri](#)’s former communications director, went the furthest when he endorsed the creation of a task force to improve the state’s cash-assistance program, known as welfare.

“I don’t think throwing more money at a problem is going to solve it,” he said. “I’m not talking about cutting programs. I’m talking about making them better.”

And Moffitt, a former state representative from Coventry, produced an awkward moment in an unfriendly crowd when he briefly slammed the recently passed national health-care overhaul.

“It might be another Big Brother,” he said. “Why can’t our state solve its problem here?”

Chafee, a former Republican U.S. senator turned independent gubernatorial candidate, drew some of the largest applause of the night when he offered a very different thought.

“My own view, I wish we were out of Iraq and Afghanistan and paying for the health-care bill,” he said, adding that he wished the so-called “public option” hadn’t been stripped from the legislation. But “we have to give this new health-care bill a chance to work.”

Despite the forum’s focus, it’s unclear what role health and social issues will play in the coming elections, as Rhode Island’s anemic economy is among the worst in the nation.

Poverty Institute executive director Kate Brewster acknowledged that the economy would play a central role in voters' minds, but said the state's social safety net becomes more critical given the massive number of Rhode Islanders without jobs.

"This is our next state's leader. They really have the ability to set the tone and push policies forward," she said of the safety-net programs. "They're important to not only women, but families as well. In this economy, it's been proven that anybody can be hit by a job loss."

There was consensus among the candidates that the economy was Number One.

When discussing economic development, Caprio joined Robitaille, Moffitt and Block in calling for lower taxes. Lynch emphasized plans to revitalize the manufacturing sector and promote better use of the state's colleges and universities. And Chafee reiterated his desire to stop cuts in aid to cities and towns, while instituting a 1-percent sales tax on items currently exempt.

Moffitt appealed to the crowd to think out of the box.

"We can't elect the same people over and over again and expect a different result," he said.

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