

The Senior Vote

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As the saying goes, I wish I had a dollar for every time that, when I tell someone about my work with the Senior Agenda Coalition, they respond “Oh yes, seniors have a lot of political power in Rhode Island.” If only that were true. In Rhode Island seniors do not have political power. If we did, we would demand and get a much better system of senior services. We wouldn’t have over 1,300 “low care” seniors stuck in nursing homes when they don’t need to be there. We wouldn’t trail the entire nation with the lowest share of Medicaid long-term care dollars spent on home and community-based services instead of nursing homes.

I understand why people have this misconception. They realize our state has a high proportion of seniors (we were ranked ninth highest in the 2010 census.) They see political candidates speaking frequently at senior venues. Some may realize that seniors are more likely to turn out and vote than younger demographics. What most people miss is that there is not an organized senior vote that supports candidates based on “senior issues.”

Robert Binstock, in his book “Aging Nation,” points out some of the reasons for this. First, older voters can only vote for candidates, not for senior programs’ features or funding. Like other voters, seniors respond to candidates based on their backgrounds, messages, personalities, track records, and party affiliations. I have rarely heard candidates for Rhode Island’s Governor or General Assembly mention senior programs as one of their priorities. That certainly has been the case so far during this election cycle.

Secondly, Binstock noted that most candidates run based on their positions on myriad issues: jobs, education, taxes, the environment, abortion, and many more. His research showed that older people, like everyone else, respond to one or more of a variety of issues in our voting decisions. Very few voters, including seniors, are truly single-issue.

This isn’t necessarily a negative. It confirms that as seniors we are not only interested in increasing our government benefits like Social Security. Many of us care about our grandchildren’s access to quality public education, about issues of war and peace, and about preserving the environment for future generations, just to name a few salient issues. Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, urged us as seniors not to allow the media to pigeonhole us as “greedy geezers” who only care about ourselves. She led Gray Panthers in protests outside the White House against the Vietnam War.

As seniors we need to transform our potential power into a movement to build a better system that promotes “aging in the community.” I believe that we can build a powerful voice that demands major improvements in our state’s senior services system. That’s why we worked

hard, in collaboration with other groups, to mobilize three hundred people for a gubernatorial candidates' forum on senior issues on August 4. If that helps us push senior issues onto the next governor's policy agenda, it will be a good start.