



## First governor forum resembles spring training

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Sloganeering and sound bites trumped specific policy recommendations as the six announced candidates for governor sparred tonight at a well-attended candidates forum \_ the first in the gubernatorial sweepstakes\_ on women's issues held at the Lincoln School on Providence's East Side.

About 375 people thronged the all-girls school auditorium for the official opening of the campaign to succeed Governor Don Carcieri. All of the invited candidates showed: Atty. Gen. Patrick Lynch and General Treasurer Frank Caprio, who are battling for the Democratic nomination; Republican combatants John Robitaille and Victor Moffitt; Moderate Party candidate Ken Block and independent Lincoln Chafee.

The event was sponsored by The Women's Fund of Rhode Island and the Poverty Institute at the Rhode Island College School of Social Work. Lisa Churchville of Channel 10 was moderator and she kept the forum moving along.

As is the case with all cattle-call debates, six candidates make for an unwieldy discussion. The questions were open-ended and there was no real chance for follow-up inquiries. So the pols got away with slogans and speaking in code. The tone was reasoned and civil; call it the un-talk radio debate.

Chafee received the biggest applause of the evening with a riff on running as an independent and by reminding the crowd that he voted against the Iraq War and the George W. Bush tax cuts when he served as a U.S. senator. He was also the only candidate to tell people things they don't want to hear, such as that the state's income tax and sales taxes are not overly onerous, compared with the nation's averages, but that property taxes are too high. Most credible research bears this out.

Chafee also repeated his pledge that if taxes have to be raised, it should be a one-percent levy on items that are currently exempt from state sales taxes. He was better than he was in his last campaign in 2006, a losing effort to Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse for senate. But he still has a tendency to drift into Washington-speak, even on issues he knows well, such as special education funding and transportation matters.

Democrats Caprio and Lynch used examples from their personal lives to make points; both cited their children. (Both hail from household names in Rhode Island politics.) Caprio came off as

either smarmy or astute, depending on one's interpretation, by spending so much time speaking about his wife and child. But the general treasurer did connect when he was asked about teen pregnancy and recounted his own youth, when he fathered a daughter in high school. His daughter, Ashley, graduated from Lincoln School so Caprio was able to mention that in a riff on how seriously he takes the issue of teen pregnancy.

But on the abortion issue, Caprio fell into sound bites too, echoing the famous Bill Clinton line that abortion should be "legal, safe and rare."

The abortion issue was a primary example of where the format was unfortunately rigged to prevent any meaningful follow-up. Lynch mentioned that he supported the Roe vs. Wade abortion rights standard, the same position as Caprio. But Lynch said abortion rights advocates should look at a candidate's record and consistency on the issue, a shot at Caprio who voted for anti-choice initiatives when he was a state legislator representing a district anchored by Providence's Federal Hill neighborhood.

All of the candidates said the economy was issue number one, which is no surprise, but they didn't draw distinctions on why their plan would be the best. Block, Robitaille and Moffitt underscored their private-sector business experience. Robitaille looked passionate and polished, but didn't offer much beyond the usual conservative nostrums about getting government out of the way of business and not raising taxes.

Block did try to use examples from his software business in an attempt to show that he understands the problem of business in the state. An example he mentioned was the soaring cost of health insurance for his employees.

But Robitaille, Block and Moffitt were perhaps the debate's winners just by being on the stage with the better-known and better-financed candidates. Robitaille said he will take the state matching campaign fund money because he is not wealthy enough to finance his campaign. Moffitt came across as earnest and sometimes even goofy, but he did the best of any candidate to propose a specific plan on education; splitting the state's 36 school districts into four state regions of the state. He said that would save money and provide a path to put students from low-performing communities such as Central Falls into classrooms with higher achieving pupils.

All of the candidates said they favored affirmative action and pointed to examples in their own careers and lives when they said they stood up for gender equality. Moffitt had the best line here, drawing applause for noting the irony of an event on women's issues where the only candidates for governor in Rhode Island so far this year are men.

In the end, the format and performance of the candidates was disappointing for voters seeking to draw differences among the candidates. For example, there was nary a word about how the state should move out of its current budget deficit, the topic that overshadows everything other issue at the State House these days.

But as is the case in baseball, there will be plenty of such events in this election season as the campaign progresses. There are about 4 months left before the Sept. 14 primary. Opening debates rarely mean much; none of the candidates made any major gaffes. And voters will likely have plenty of chances to compare these aspirants again, starting this morning with a forum on the economy sponsored by the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce.