

# To Hold Senate, G.O.P. Bolsters Its Most Liberal

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Robert Spencer for The New York Times

Senator Lincoln Chafee, left, with Barry O'Brien on Saturday in Warwick, R.I., faces Stephen Laffey in Tuesday's primary.

By [ADAM NAGOURNEY](#)  
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WARWICK, R.I., Sept. 9 — With a barrage of television advertisements and the mobilization of its get-out-the-vote machine, the national [Republican Party](#) has lined up in Rhode Island to beat back a conservative primary challenge to the most liberal Republican in the Senate, [Lincoln Chafee](#). The outcome on Tuesday could help determine whether [Democrats](#) have a shot at taking back the Senate.

### Race Profile: Rhode Island Senate

In an extraordinary pre-emptive announcement, the National Republican Senatorial Committee has said it will concede Rhode Island to the

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Democrats should Stephen Laffey, the mayor of Cranston, defeat Mr. Chafee in the primary. Citing poll data, Republican leaders said they saw no way someone as conservative as Mr. Laffey could win in a state as Democratic as this; as it is, they are increasingly worried about Mr. Chafee’s hopes in a general election.

The result has been the striking sight of the national Republican Party, dominated by conservatives, using resources to save the seat of a Republican who said he voted against Mr. Bush in 2004. He chose instead to write in the name of the first President Bush.

Mr. Chafee has opposed many centerpiece Republican policies, from the war in Iraq to tax cuts to most restrictions on [abortion](#). This week, he helped force a delay on the confirmation of [John R. Bolton](#) as the United States ambassador to the [United Nations](#).

For all that, Republicans said they expected to spend more than \$1.2 million on advertisements attacking Mr. Laffey, saturating the television stations of this state, the nation’s smallest. One advertisement lifts a line Republicans have used in countless attacks against Democrats, mocking the mayor as “tax-and-spend Steve Laffey.”

Mr. Laffey’s supporters, led by the Club for Growth, an organization advocating tax and spending cuts, have countered energetically with advertisements that have hammered the senator as a Washington insider and a Republican reprobate.

The [Republican National Committee](#) has rolled out its 72-hour get-out-the-vote program — used to great effect in 2002 and 2004 — against one of its own this year. More than a dozen trained party turnout specialists are encamped at a local motel.

“If Laffey won, on Day 1 of the general election, it would be over for us,” said Brian Nick, the communications director for the Republican Senate campaign committee. Asked if his committee, run by Senator [Elizabeth Dole](#) of North Carolina, would then concede Rhode Island to the Democrats, Mr. Nick responded:

“No question about it. Would you play somewhere where you were down by 30 and you couldn’t move the

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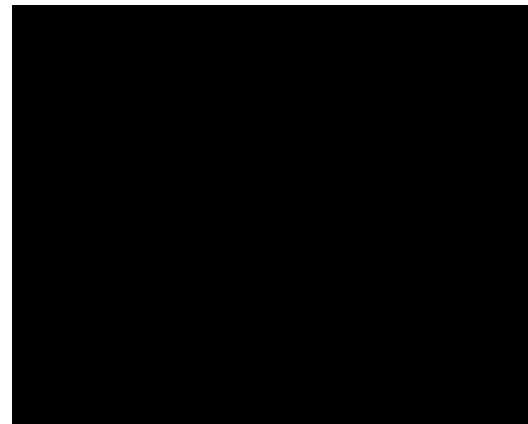


Robert Spencer for The New York Times  
Stephen Laffey campaigned Saturday in West Warwick, R.I., where he talked with Jane D’Ambrosia.

numbers?”

The fight has laid bare the ideological divisions in the Republican Party as well as the difficult road it faces in the fall . The Senate seat, which Mr. Chafee took over from his father, John H. Chafee, after he died in 1999, has been held by Republicans since 1976.

Mr. Laffey, standing on his front lawn before a Saturday morning of door-to-door campaigning, said Washington Republicans were coming after him because they viewed him as a threat to their power.



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“It is really incredible to watch,” he said. “Senator Elizabeth Dole and [Karl Rove](#), and all those people down in Washington, they are just about power. The last thing anybody wants down in Washington — whether it is the Democratic National Party or the Republican National Party — is somebody there asking questions.”

The contest in Rhode Island, where fewer than 15 percent of registered voters are Republicans, is one of several primaries on Tuesday that will begin to set the final cast for the fall elections. It comes as President Bush has sought to shape the midterm campaigns with a new emphasis on national security.

To win the Senate, Democrats need to capture six seats, and Rhode Island is high on their target list. Both sides see Democrats as having a better shot at winning the 15 seats they need to seize the House.

Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#) of New York, the head of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, said he was confident that the Democratic challenger in Rhode Island — it is likely to be Sheldon Whitehouse, a former state attorney general — could defeat whoever wins the Republican primary.

“We have the inverse of what is usually true,” Mr. Schumer said. “The Republicans are beating each other up in the primary, and our Democratic candidate has had two months to get to know the voters.”

Mr. Chafee said in an interview that he appreciated the reinforcements from Washington, but that it could hurt the complicated juggling act confronting him in the primary and in the general election: appealing to both independent and Democratic voters. Independents, who outnumber Democrats but lean Democratic in their voting habits, are allowed to vote in the primary here.

“It’s a double-edged sword because I need Democratic-leaning unaffiliated voters,” he said. “This is a very Democratic state.”

Still, Mr. Chafee appeared heartened, if slightly bemused, at the image of Washington Republicans riding to his rescue. He said he thought that was because he had taken care in how he positioned himself as a red senator from a blue state.

“I’ve taken an extra step in my rhetoric not to go over the line, so to speak,” he said. “I have walked a fine line in how I vote and not taking it too far to alienate some people who could be helpful.”

Mr. Chafee spent his Saturday morning at a barbeque with supporters here, where he warned that a Laffey victory on Tuesday would lead to a Republican defeat in November.

“Everybody knows who has the best chance to win in this very, very Democratic state — Rhode Island might be the most Democratic state in the country,” he said. “My chances of winning are much, much greater than Mr. Laffey.”

In many ways, what is happening in Rhode Island is a mirror of what happened in neighboring Connecticut last month: an ideological challenge from the wings to an established senator who is seen as out of step with his party. In that case, a Democrat, Senator [Joseph I. Lieberman](#), lost a primary to Ned Lamont, who attacked Mr. Lieberman for his support of the war in Iraq and his dalliances with the White House.

The difference is that there was no serious Republican challenger in the Connecticut race, so the Democratic Party invested relatively minimal resources in Mr. Lieberman.

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And the sheer intensity of the attacks in Rhode Island — both in tone and the amount likely to be spent per voter — was described by party leaders and others as unlike anything they could remember.

“I’m searching for the right word — vicious,” said Victor L. Profughi, a retired political science professor at Rhode Island College and a pollster who has studied the state’s politics for 40 years. “I’ve never seen a race that was anything like this in Rhode Island.”

In one advertisement, which critics have called racist, an announcer says that as mayor, Mr. Laffey agreed to accept “Mexican ID cards” as proof of citizenship, while an ominous blur of dark-skinned faces flashes across the screen. “Mayor Steve Laffey accepts Mexican ID cards that can threaten our security,” the announcer said. “Will he put our security at risk in the Senate?”

The Republican attacks on Mr. Laffey have been met by attacks on Mr. Chafee by the Club for Growth and other groups. One advertisement belittled Mr. Chafee as “a Washington politician so out of touch he votes to waste \$200 million on that Bridge to Nowhere in Alaska.”

Mr. Profughi conducted a poll for Rhode Island College at the end of August that found that Mr. Laffey would easily beat Mr. Chafee. But this is proving to be a particularly tough primary to poll because independent voters are allowed to participate, and aides to both candidates say they expected the race to be much closer.

With both sides saying the outcome would be determined by turnout, the Republican National Committee’s vaunted turnout operation could prove crucial in countering the anti-Chafee sentiment that has energized Mr. Laffey’s supporters.

“There’s no doubt that if the primary was held only among Republicans, Chafee would lose,” said Nelson Warfield, the Republican consultant who produced the advertisements for the Club for Growth. “He would be repudiated by the Republicans who he has constantly repudiated.”

Mr. Laffey’s supporters said they were hopeful that should he win, Republicans would reconsider, the way Democrats have rallied around Mr. Lamont.

“Hopefully, it’s just campaign bluster,” said Pat Toomey, the president of the Club for Growth. The National Republican Senatorial Campaign, Mr. Toomey said, “would not be that irresponsible.”

Mr. Laffey said he did not care what Washington Republicans did if he won. “Let them stay out,” he said Saturday, huffing and puffing as he ran up a hill toward a voter’s house. “We’ll do it without them.”

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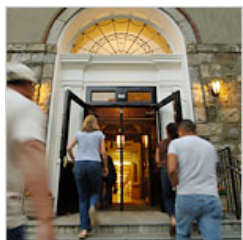
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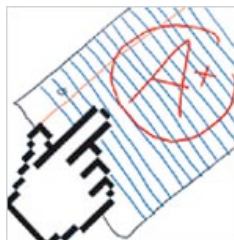
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