



## Chafee, Whitehouse hit familiar themes in 1st TV debate

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WARWICK, R.I. (AP) -- The candidates for U.S. Senate stuck to familiar themes Thursday in their first televised debate, with Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse saying Washington needs a change from Republicans, while incumbent Lincoln Chafee tried to highlight what he called his own "honesty, courage and foresight."

"I've not actually been in sync with the president's agenda," said Chafee, frequently bringing up his vote against authorizing the war in Iraq. He was the only Republican senator to do so.

Whitehouse repeatedly brought up the Republican Party, calling it fundamentalist, right-wing and partisan. He said that while Chafee often votes against the party on issues such as the environment and Iraq, the senator enables the party to advance policies that he, and many Rhode Islanders, oppose.

"He votes to put that leadership in place, and once that leadership is in place, the die is cast," Whitehouse said.

The hourlong debate on WPRI-TV before a live audience at Toll Gate High School was the first of three televised debates.

Democrats see the Rhode Island seat as key in their bid to retake the Senate, and a new WPRI poll released Thursday night showed Whitehouse apparently leading Chafee. The poll of 402 voters taken Oct. 11-14 showed Whitehouse with 46 percent, Chafee with 42 percent and 12 percent undecided. The margin of error was plus or minus 5 percentage points.

Whitehouse has based his campaign on one consistent message:

Washington is broken, it's Republicans' fault, and voting for him will help the Democrats take back a majority in the Senate and fix things.

The message has caught on with many voters in Rhode Island, where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans more than three to one and where President Bush is exceedingly unpopular.

Chafee said it was important for the state to have members of both parties in the U.S. Senate, and said he had a record of bipartisanship.

"When there's any kind of close vote, Sen. Chafee's right in the middle of it," he said, adding, "If Mr. Whitehouse is elected, he'll be a back-bencher and fall into the vast pool of go-along, get along."

Chafee repeatedly hammered Whitehouse for what he said was failing to go after public corruption when he was attorney general and U.S. attorney. Whitehouse said he had been a leader in the state's move toward "separation of powers," which removed legislators from state boards and commissions. It was supported by clean government advocates but opposed by many leaders in the Democrat-dominated General Assembly.

"I think I paid a price for that. It probably cost me the endorsement when I ran for governor," he said.

Whitehouse failed to make it through the primary when he ran for governor four years ago.

Chafee has struggled to recover from an expensive and vicious primary against Cranston Mayor Stephen Laffey. Whitehouse, whose only serious primary challenger dropped out months before primary day, had more than twice as much money as Chafee going into the final weeks before the Nov. 7 election.

With the backing of national Democrats, Whitehouse and his supporters have been able to send out nearly a dozen ads since the Sept. 12 primary. Chafee has sent out just three and national Republicans didn't step into the race with an ad until this week.

Also Thursday, the Republican Main Street Partnership said it planned to send help for Chafee next week in the form of radio ads, direct mail and volunteers. The moderate Republican group, based in Washington, ran TV ads in support of Chafee during his primary against the more conservative Laffey.

Sarah Chamberlain Resnick, the group's executive director, said about two dozen "average Americans who care a great deal about independent Republicans" plan to do things like hand out brochures highlighting Chafee's positions and his independence in the Senate.

She said the group hopes to shore up Chafee's campaign.

"The latest polling we have seen is not as positive as we would like it to be," she said.



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