



Cicilline, David (b. 1961)

by Linda Rapp

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In November 2010 David Cicilline won election to the United States House of Representatives in the First Congressional District of Rhode Island. Although he is a relative newcomer to Washington, he has a long record of public service.

Cicilline has worked as a public defender in the District of Columbia; he served four terms in the Rhode Island House of Representatives, and he completed eight years as mayor of Providence, the state capital and largest city of Rhode Island.

The smallest state in the union, Rhode Island is culturally diverse, as is Cicilline's own family; his father John F. Cicilline, is a Catholic of Italian descent, and his mother, Sabra Cicilline, is Jewish.

As a child, David Cicilline, born in Providence on July 15, 1961, participated in the religious traditions of both his parents. He was baptized and became a communicant at St. Bartholomew's Roman Catholic church, but he also attended services at Temple Torat Yisrael. As an adult he has embraced the Jewish faith.

Cicilline took an interest in politics at an early age. As a young teen he attended town council meetings in Narragansett, the city to which his family had moved shortly after his birth, and he was appointed to a spot on a town advisory council. In high school he participated in a simulated legislature for state students and won election as its governor.

Cicilline attended Brown University in Providence, from which he graduated magna cum laude in 1983 with a degree in political science. He continued his studies at the Georgetown University law school, where he earned his degree in 1986.

In choosing to study law, Cicilline had followed in the footsteps of his father, but their careers would be markedly different: whereas the elder Cicilline was known for representing reputed Mafia figures, his son first worked as a public defender in the District of Columbia before coming home to Providence and establishing his own practice, in which he did criminal defense work but also took on civil rights cases.

David Cicilline made his first foray into politics in 1992, running for the Rhode Island Senate but losing in the primary. Two years later, however, he won election to the state House of Representatives.

Of the political neophyte, H. Philip West, Jr., Executive Director of Common Cause of Rhode Island, commented to David S. Broder of the *Washington Post*, "I was initially skeptical, because his father was a mob lawyer for a long time," but the young legislator proved to be a courageous champion of political and ethics reform— even standing up against others in the Democratic party—and earned a top ranking from West's group.

In 2002 Cicilline declared his candidacy for mayor of Providence, a city then suffering from a massive budget deficit, deteriorating infrastructure, and a widespread perception of public corruption. West stated



David Cicilline in 2010.
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to Broder that he "thought [Cicilline] was crazy" to oppose incumbent mayor Vincent A. "Buddy" Cianci, Jr., an extremely charismatic figure, though one reputed to be unscrupulous.

Cianci's conviction on federal racketeering charges later that year led to a tough primary contest among Cicilline and three other contenders. Emerging as the victor, Cicilline won the general election with relative ease.

At the beginning of his candidacy Cicilline announced that he would not accept contributions from Providence city employees, a signal of his desire to work as a free agent for the good of the people and not the beneficiary of the entrenched political machine.

Once elected mayor, Cicilline faced daunting challenges, but he had a vision and a program that garnered a great deal of support from the citizenry by offering a welcome return to accountability. Charles Francis, Chairman of the Board of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, stated to Broder, "The mayor has been a breath of fresh air. He has brought stability to the city and confidence to city government."

Cicilline's initiatives as mayor included improving the public transit system, instituting reforms to the school system and demanding adequate state support for their implementation, and reducing unnecessary posts in city management. The city of Providence thrived under his administration. The downtown was revitalized, the crime rate declined, and, in 2006, the city earned a grade-A bond rating for the first time since the 1980s.

Among Cicilline's inherited problems was a labor dispute with city firefighters, who had not had a contract since 2001. In his initial run for mayor, Cicilline vowed to end the impasse but instead he found himself entangled in a morass of legal suits and arbitration hearings going back a decade involving wages, pensions, and employee contributions to health care costs.

A deal was finally reached in March 2010, but before then the negotiations were frequently acrimonious, and the repeated threats of picketing of public events by the firefighters cost Cicilline—and probably also the city of Providence—a place in the national spotlight.

In 2004 John Edwards, the Democratic candidate for vice-president, forewent a campaign fundraiser in the city rather than cross the firefighters' picket line. Three years later Cicilline chose to withdraw as Hillary Clinton's Rhode Island campaign chairman so that an event could proceed without disruption.

Another threatened demonstration in July 2009 caused Vice-president Joe Biden and approximately one hundred other top members of the Obama administration to cancel their plans to attend the annual meeting of the U. S. Conference of Mayors, a prestigious event that Cicilline had succeeded in winning for Providence.

While the travails with the firefighters' union were clearly an impediment to Cicilline's progress in his political career, his sexual orientation has apparently not been a significant factor.

Out to his own circle since his days at Brown, he publicly acknowledged his homosexuality in reply to a direct question from M. Charles Bakst of the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* in April 1999.

In a follow-up interview with Maria Miro Johnson of the same newspaper, Cicilline responded to concerns of the editors, who had been leery of including the fact of Cicilline's homosexuality in the article by Bakst: "I refused to buy into the fact that this is a really bad thing and I had to give them special dispensation" to allude to it.

In a 2009 interview published on the web site *Matthew's Place*, Cicilline stressed that it is vital for glbtq people to have a public presence, stating, "I think it's very important for our community because the more we stop being invisible and we are represented in important positions—where policies are made and where resources are allocated—I think the easier it will be for the next generation of [glbtq] young people to think about a career in public service." He added that openness is "also an important way to educate the non-gay and non-lesbian community about the important contributions that our community can make."

Cicilline stressed the necessity of not being a single-issue candidate when, in a 2002 interview with Mubarak Dahir of *The Advocate*, he recalled meeting an elderly Catholic man who was considering supporting him and even volunteering to work on his campaign but wanted to know what Cicilline's "gay agenda" was.

Cicilline's reply to the constituent was "My gay agenda is government reform, improving neighborhoods, and strengthening schools."

Cicilline called the exchange "a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate that gay people have the same dreams and desires as other citizens," adding, "That's why I always ran as a candidate who happens to be gay rather than a gay candidate. During my campaign the gay issue was irrelevant."

The last may not be entirely true since during his first run for mayor he was perceived as "not gay enough" by the Rhode Island gay group Voices 4 Equality, who criticized him for "not talking about our issues" —although he had a solid record on domestic-partner benefits and support for Rhode Island Project AIDS and was a co-sponsor of the state's glbtq rights bill.

The group endorsed one of Cicilline's opponents, former mayor Joseph Paolino, in the primary. Once Cicilline was elected, however, the organization came out in support of his administration.

Because of his success in reforming Providence, it was expected that Cicilline might run for higher office, possibly the governorship of Rhode Island. Family troubles intervened however when, in 2009, his elder brother John M. Cicilline, was sentenced to federal prison for shake-downs of drug dealers.

Despite the distraction of this family drama, Cicilline ran a successful race to represent the people of the First Congressional District of Rhode Island in the U. S. House in 2010, winning by a margin of 51 to 46 percent over his Republican opponent.

Again he ran as a candidate who happened to be gay rather than as a gay candidate. However, he did not back away from gay issues. He included a section on glbtq rights on his official campaign website, where he declared "Ending discrimination against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community remains one of the most important civil rights issues of our time."

Not only did he pledge to support a gender-inclusive non-discrimination bill and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, but he also unambiguously endorsed marriage equality. Moreover, in August 2010, when Judge Vaughn Walker issued his decision declaring California's Proposition 8 unconstitutional, Cicilline hailed the decision as an important step toward equal rights.

Even before his victory in that campaign, Cicilline commented to Steve Peoples of *Roll Call*, "to the extent that qualified good candidates who happen to be gay or lesbian are elected to positions of responsibility in government, and do a good job, I think that it is good not only for them and the LGBT community, but good for society because good, qualified people are in office, and . . . any time that happens, it is one more step toward equality."

As the 2012 general election approached, Cicilline found himself in a contested primary battle in

September. He prevailed over challenger Anthony Gemma, but the cost of that contest left him with fewer funds for the November race against his Republican opponent, Brendan Doherty, and with depressed approval ratings in the polls.

The campaign became what Michelle R. Smith described as "one of the ugliest races in Rhode Island in years." Attack ads put out by the Republicans included ones that called attention to some of the more unsavory clients that Cicilline had represented in his years as a criminal defense attorney.

On November 1, 2012, polls showed the race to be "a statistical dead heat" according to Randal Edgar of the *Providence Journal*. The Republicans, thinking that they might be able to pick up a Congressional seat from a heavily Democratic state rush more money into the state to finance more attack ads.

With support from the national Democratic Party, including a radio ad in which former President Bill Clinton stated his support for Cicilline, the congressman worked to counter the negative ads, and on election day he succeeded in retaining his seat in the House, defeating Doherty by an impressive margin of 53 to 41%.

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