

## Opening Town Government to Independents

About 40% of North Haven's registered voters are registered as unaffiliated, that is, as independents instead of party members (despite losing the right to vote in party primaries). Yet only 8% of the voters who sit on our town's boards and commissions are independents, and none of them sit on the most important boards.

I believe that there are many highly qualified independents in town who would like to serve their community through its boards and commissions. When independents are so under-represented in our government, it is hard to believe that the most qualified individuals are always being chosen to run our government.

Nominations for elected and appointed positions come almost exclusively from the Republican Town Committee and the Democratic Town Committee. They do not generally publicize openings or upcoming openings. Appointments are made by the Board of Selectmen after only 24 hours' notice exclusively at the Town Clerk's office, hardly enough notice for interested residents to put their names up for nomination.

Party leaders and selectmen would likely respond that everyone is free to let them know that they would be interested in serving on a particular board or commission (although the chairman of the Republican Town Committee has an unlisted phone number). But which party would an independent choose to contact? And why would any independent expect that he or she would be preferred over loyal party members? No, the fact is that independents are either not offering their services, or their offers are being ignored.

There are alternatives that would provide our town with the best possible candidates and appointees. The parties and the Board of Selectmen could send out a press release, asking people to send in their names and the boards and commissions they would like to serve on. In conjunction with this request, an application form, information about each of the boards, and the required qualifications for each, could be placed on the town website and made available in the town library and at the town clerk's office.

If the parties and the Board of Selectmen are unwilling to do this, or if they do it and the situation does not improve, then I believe we need an independent, nonpartisan commission to nominate candidates and appointees. This sounds like a radical solution, but it is no more radical than the town's ignoring the skills of nearly half the town's residents.

There is no way to determine the loss to the town of its partisan selection process. This loss is a principal reason that the great majority of towns our size

throughout the United States have nonpartisan governments, where no one needs party approval. North Haven is in the minority, and yet the matter is not even publicly discussed.

Please send me your opinion of what should be done (and please let me know your party affiliation, if any), and I will include your opinions in another piece on this issue. I can be reached at 16 Windsor Road, North Haven, CT 06473-3015, [catbird@pipeline.com](mailto:catbird@pipeline.com).

Robert Wechsler, an Independent, is Director of Research for City Ethics, Inc., and a member of the board of Common Cause Connecticut, a nonpartisan good government group.