

The Post and Courier's Election 2020 Candidate Questionnaire

NAME: Sam Skardon

OFFICE SOUGHT: SC State Senate District 41

PARTY (IF APPLICABLE): Democratic

INCUMBENT? No

EMPLOYMENT: Director of Development, Charleston LDC (a non-profit Community Development Finance Institution)

PREVIOUS OFFICES HELD OR SOUGHT: None

SC Legislature

1) Why are you the candidate who should be elected? Please be specific about your own accomplishments and what differentiates you from your opponent(s).

The three things I'm most proud of in life are marrying my wife Leslie, earning an MBA from Georgetown, and working for Congressman John Lewis.

Mr. Lewis' inspired me to believe bold progress is possible, and we can make it happen. A business degree, which I now use professionally to support Lowcountry small businesses, is about pragmatically delivering results. Starting a family instills urgency to address issues facing working people in our district, who don't have a voice in Columbia because many incumbents, like my opponent, benefit from politics as usual and don't see – or feel – the need for change.

2) What do you see as the state's greatest challenge, and how would you try to address it?

South Carolina needs to see itself as a leader. We respond to failing schools by trying to meet the southeastern average in most metrics, without ever striving to be a national leader. We're on the frontlines of climate change, but only seem willing to be reactive, never proactive. We have grown our economy by offering lower costs of doing business, not higher quality.

This is reflective of, and reflected in, a complacent legislature. They either don't see it as their responsibility, or aren't willing to take the risks. It's time for leaders with a vision for progress for South Carolina.

3) What are the three things the Legislature most needs to do next year? Please be specific. (200 words)

The legislature must pass meaningful education reform. It's extremely telling that no substantial education reform was considered until the last year of this Senate's term, and even then I'd argue that S.419 was merely a drop in the bucket relative to the major improvements necessary to get our schools off the bottom of every national performance list. We must immediately pass education reform that implements Universal Pre-K, recruits and retains great teachers, and directly addresses the shameful educational disparities that exist right now.

With the issue of Santee Cooper still looming, we should take the opportunity to make strides in increasing the state's production of energy from renewable sources. While this boondoggle is rightfully seen as a burden on the entire state, we can also turn it into an opportunity to reshape our energy future for generations to come. That's what I hope we'll do by adopting a solution that will substantially reduce our carbon footprint.

Finally the Senate should act immediately to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Especially amid a pandemic, with unemployment twice what it was last year, there are hundreds of thousands of South Carolinians who have no other options for accessible and affordable healthcare.

4) What is the most important thing the Legislature can do to improve public education in South Carolina?

The education of a child is an art, not a science. That makes it hard to know if a specific policy will create an objectively measurable improvement in student outcomes.

Universal Pre-K is an exception to that rule. Getting a child kindergarten ready is proven to make that child more likely to succeed in their academic career and throughout his or her life. Georgia and Florida have both enacted universal pre-k, but there are still 88,000 three and four-year-olds in South Carolina who aren't currently in an accredited pre-k program. The most important thing is reducing that number to 0.

5) What if any changes would you make to laws affecting the authority of city and county governments?

My experience as Director of the One Region Strategy opened my eyes to the many bridges (figuratively and literally) that need to be built between our municipalities. The Charleston Metro Area contains 30 cities, towns, and counties. That makes it extremely difficult to implement regional needs like transportation projects, master planning, or even providing basic services. Many of those municipalities have counterproductive conflicts with each other and

the state is largely absent from resolving the issues, or providing leadership to avoid them in the first place. I believe the state should play a more active role in fostering municipal cooperation.

6) What if anything should the Legislature do to help reduce flooding in the Lowcountry and throughout South Carolina?

For too long South Carolina has settled for treating the symptoms, not the disease, of climate change. I credit my opponent on a good idea in leading a flood task force to cut through bureaucracy in clearing roadside ditches. It's a practical and important constituent service, although systematic reform to reduce all that bureaucracy must be an equal priority.

That said, no amount of ditch clearing will hold back constantly rising flood waters. We need a state government that acknowledges and addresses climate change by increasing renewable energy, supporting electric vehicles, and reducing sprawl into environmentally sensitive areas.

7) What if any taxes or fees should the Legislature increase or reduce?

I believe we must repeal Act 388, which has chronically underfunded our public schools since its enactment over a decade ago. Shifting the tax burden for education away from property taxes to sales taxes has proven to be both regressive and ineffective. The limitations on each county's ability to raise its own funds has also hurt our students and teachers. We must ensure that Act 388 is replaced with a tax law that is actually effective at funding our schools, and ensures any increased tax burden is reasonable, fair, and only imposed on individuals and corporations who can afford it.

8) Under what circumstances, if any, is it appropriate for the Legislature to increase or reduce taxes or fees?

My opponent supported the 2017 gas tax increase along with many Republicans in Columbia. I bring that up not because I disagree with her vote, but I think its important to note that members of both parties acknowledge there are moments when tax increases are necessary.

As discussed in question 7 above, I believe we must put all options on the table to address the chronic underfunding of our public schools and resulting poor student outcomes. They must be addressed by any means necessary. It's a critical investment in the future of our state and will pay long-term dividends.

9) Describe at least one instance that shows your willingness to work across party lines even when that's at odds with your political base.

After business school, I returned to Charleston for a job as Director of the One Region Strategy, a regional economic development initiative sponsored by the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce and the Charleston Regional Development Alliance. Neither are traditionally Democratic organizations, in fact, far from it. However, the job entailed bringing people together throughout the Charleston area and forming coalitions among very diverse stakeholders to address some of the biggest challenges to growing a sustainable, equitable, and resilient Lowcountry economy. The experience allowed me to create working relationships with many major players in our local economy regardless of their ideology.

10) Please tell us anything else you think it's important for us to know about you or this election.

I encourage you to consider the rarity of competitive legislative elections. 39 of our 46 State Senators didn't face an opponent in their last general election.

Elections should be moments of accountability and opportunities for progress, but we rarely have those in South Carolina. That's how legislators – like our opponent – can get away with making millions in taxpayer dollars, creating countless conflicts of interest, all while our state is stuck at the bottom of too many important lists. In this election we can break that cycle, show politicians they'll be held accountable, and deliver progress for our district and state.