



NOT a Threat
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an Asset



How Politicians View Young Voters

by Kate Kompas

I SU IN SPRING 1967. A HIPPIE FROM ROCKWELL CITY, IA. BY THE NAME OF DON SMITH RECEIVED A RECORD NUMBER OF VOTES IN THE ISU GOVERNMENT OF THE STUDENT BODY (GSB) ELECTION.

With his girlfriend as his running mate and armed with a campaign promise to turn the conservative atmosphere of the university upside down, Smith, who was a write-in on the GSB ballot, won 46.9 percent of the vote in an election where 7,014 ISU students voted. There were only 15,000 students at the university at the time, compared to today's highest-ever enrollment of more than 26,000.

In last year's student-government election, about 3,000 ISU students in total turned out to vote. That number seems paltry when compared to the Smith election, which was revolutionary in many respects — not only by the numbers but also by the look of the sockless candidate. That election turnout was unique, but what will it take for another massive student turnout at the ballot box?

Today, there are still hip huggers, but they're paired with Abercrombie and Fitch instead of love beads. Rage Against The Machine is what passes for political commentary in the world of rock. GSB isn't seen as a venue for a revolution but a campus trivia question — as in "What does it do?"

College students don't vote at the rates they used to. Not for local candidates or for national candidates. Not by a long shot. In the past few years, GSB elections have brought out only a few thousand ISU students despite increased publicity and heavy coverage by the Iowa State Daily and other student media. In 1999, with two slates running, only 1,480 students voted.

The presidential election is a few weeks away. Vice President Al Gore and Texas Gov. George W. Bush have been in a statistical dead heat, but the country couldn't be more bored. Election pundits are predicting a squeaker of an election, but with an extraordinarily low turnout. Come November 7, the results may be different than what anyone expects. Will students show up?

Political science professor Steffen Schmidt has been ISU's authority on politics for years. Schmidt hosts a radio show on

WOI called Dr. Politics. He has a saying about how politicians think about young voters: "Not a threat, not an asset."

Schmidt says there's something distinctive about the race between this year's Republican and Democrat nominees: They don't seem different to the American people. And that, Schmidt says, is why voters will be watching the tube on November 4 instead of entering the voting booth.

"They're both hugging the center in some respect," Schmidt says, noting that Bush's

Clinton in 1992, his first election, when highlights of his campaign including his appearances on MTV's "Choose or Lose," talk-show format programs where teens and young people could grill the candidate on various issues and "The Arsenio Hall Show," where he jammed with the show's band on his saxophone.

But the point, Schmidt says, is the young voters didn't stay. "Clinton was something new, someone who was younger and organized, but they weren't permanently recruited into the process. Young people don't relate to people in blue suits and red ties," he says.

Schmidt sent some of his political science students to the Iowa caucuses. They hated it. "They said, 'We don't have money, and it was a boring process that only a bunch of political nerds would think was fun,'" he says.

Schmidt also doesn't buy the idea that young people will start turning to third parties, despite wrestler-turned-Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura's high youth turnout in 1998 or the tattooed and pierced set that's volunteering for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. The two-party system is so dominant, he says, nobody's going to win a national election who isn't supposed to. "Why should they vote for a [third-party] candidate, even if

they love a candidate, when the system is so stacked?" Schmidt asked.

So young people aren't socialized to the political parties, not enough will vote for a third-party candidate to make a difference, and students don't have enough money to make most major-party candidates care about them, Schmidt says. "There's a constant demand to donate to campaigns, and it turns off adults and turns off younger people even more," he says.

Jim Hutter, associate professor of political science, has seen a different trend in his students. The poli-sci department opened up a half-semester course on the campaign season, and 15 students signed up.

Hutter says the reason students might not be



mantra has been "compassionate conservative" and Gore, like President Bill Clinton, is a New Democrat. "These two candidates are very similar; the differences between them is in degree and flavor. The differences are not radical."

Trying to appeal to all people isn't what will get voters to pay attention, Schmidt says. "In a way, the winning strategy is also the losing strategy." Schmidt rejects the notion that President Clinton made that formula successful in the 1996 election, nearly two years after Republicans took over Congress and the president chose to move more toward the center on political issues. Schmidt points out that Clinton had an abysmal voter turnout — about 49 percent, less than half of eligible voters.

Teens and young adults were attracted to

voting has to do with the fact that it's a new experience. For most of them, Hutter says, becoming a voter is an enjoyable rite of passage. Once the milestone has been achieved, Hutter says, voting isn't a mystical process where people disappear into voting booths at city halls and churches. It becomes something natural, and it's then that young people get socialized to the process.

"You vote once, you know where to go, you think, 'I know when to go,' and it's okay. It's not a big deal," he says.

Even ISU students who aren't apolitical aren't sure they're going to show up to vote. Aaron Fishter, producer of the campus television's "Politics Unlimited," is a self-described political junkie, but by late September, he still wasn't sure if he was going to cast "a protest vote" because none of the candidates suits him.

Fishter, junior in management information systems from Churdan, Ia., says he hears the same things from students about voting. "As far as college students go, people are busy. A lot of students say, 'Frankly, I shouldn't be voting because I don't know the issues.' At this point, there are no issues that young people, that students really care about."

It's a recurring theme: The economy's good, there's no war, unemployment's low, and one of the biggest social problems is Hollywood raising America's kids. Because the country's not in crisis, people aren't inspired to vote, Fishter says. "Young people don't vote, that's true. But older people don't care about politics either."

Fishter believes something that many national pundits are saying: This election isn't about issues but about personalities. In terms of the major-party candidates, that means a Texas good ol' boy versus a vice president who's been lampooned since Day One as a wooden, unlikable stiff.

As for whom he thinks is more personable, Fishter says he agrees with Gov. Ventura: "Bush is the kind of guy you'd like to go fishing with." As for Gore, Fishter subscribes to the theory that Gore is imminently more likable than he appears in the media.

Andy Tofilon thinks Gore's a likable guy; he's met him more than 20 times. He has described Tipper Gore as an anybody's mother type, and the former president of "Cyclones for Gore" once was so excitedly flustered when he introduced Democratic adviser James Carville that he finally spat out "He's just the man." Tofilon is passionate about the Democratic Party, but he knows how trying it can be to get people to listen to your cause. "Every day was frustrating," he now says.

Tofilon, like the rest of America, has heard

that Gore's not a personable kind of guy, an assertion that he takes issue with. "I think that Gore is one of the coolest guys to talk to. He's not fake; he's exactly how he is. He acts like himself, which is somebody that's very intelligent but also a person with a good sense of humor."

Tofilon, junior in journalism and mass communication, reconsiders his choice of the word "frustrating" when describing what it's like to get students to get out the vote. "Discouraging" is what he picks instead.

"It's discouraging that my generation that has an abundance of opinions on every issue doesn't vote," he says. "If you are so outspoken, the first thing you do is vote. Everything else is secondary. Voting is how democracy works."

The lowest voter turnout for young people (18 to 24 year olds) in American history was in 1998. Tofilon says he doesn't see anything changing with this election, adding that it's probably "going to be decided by 10 percent of the population."

Because he loves politics, Tofilon has been involved in GSB for the past two years. Last

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year he was a senator, and this year he's director of intergovernmental affairs, which in layman's speak means he was one of the GSB officials who was working very, very hard to try and lobby the state Board of Regents for a reasonable tuition increase.

Getting ISU students interested in politics on a local level is easier than getting them interested on a national level, Tofilon says. "The issues are different, with tuition and appropriation and students' rights, they directly affect them."

Many Americans skipped this year's Democratic and Republican conventions, believing they were phony pep rallies or else sleep-inducing.

For Cynthia Schofield, it was a different sort of experience. The second-year senior in political science landed an internship with the Republican National Committee (RNC) in Washington D.C. this summer. The job took her to Philadelphia in late July to support the nominee Bush at one of the most diverse

Republican conventions ever, although some members of the media questioned whether the show was authentic.

Schofield didn't have cynical thoughts about the convention. She came back to Ames ready to take over as chairwoman of "Students for Bush," an ISU organization devoted to getting the Texas governor elected. "That [the convention] was amazing, to get to be in the middle of it," she says.

Unlike Tofilon, Schofield's never met the man whose campaign she's promoting to other ISU students. "I've been maybe two feet away from him," she says, adding she wished she had gotten to meet him during last year's Iowa Caucus, because now the closest she can get to him is 100 feet. "There's so much security around him now," she says.

Schofield has been heavily involved in the College Republicans since she transferred to ISU after spending two years attending the University of Northern Iowa. In late September, she was just getting ready to start heavily promoting Bush. Although she probably hasn't had much chance to become cynical

about trying to get people involved, she sounds enthusiastic about Bush's campaign.

Schofield knows students don't vote in the numbers they could. "Because we have such a large country, a lot of young people think their vote doesn't matter, and that's the reason you get some of the people in office that you do," she says.

She heard something about young people and voting during a briefing in D.C. this summer that she thinks rings true. "With kids our age, we're going out and

volunteering in the community more than any other generation, but even though there is more volunteering, there's a lower voter turnout rate, which may be because they think their civic duty is being fulfilled," Schofield says.

Volunteering's well and good, but Schofield doesn't think getting educated about the candidates and issues is that big of a commitment for college students to make. "Read the paper at least maybe once a week, flip on the world news or the national news or the local news at five for a half an hour," she says. "Voting is going to where your precinct is, and it takes maybe five or ten minutes."

It would take about five or ten minutes for ISU students to vote in GSB elections, too, but they never come out to the polls in droves. Except, of course, during the 1967 election.

Journalism professor Eric Abbott was editor of the Daily in '67 during the election season that brought Don Smith's name statewide

attention. He says all three slates, the two regular establishment ones and Smith's, which was out of left field, received about equal coverage from the paper.

Smith was only in office for about 40 days. There's never been a definitive explanation as to why Smith took off, although there was an article in the Daily at the time written by Abbott reporting on a pot party Smith admitted to having — although he later said he was misquoted and denied hosting the party. Smith, Abbott points, was always anti-establishment, and perhaps he ran for GSB president on a lark or to make a statement. Maybe when Smith got elected he realized he didn't want the job anyway.

Abbott says although GSB voter turnouts were higher in the mid to late '60s than they are now, "people always complained about apathy." He says Smith's appeal to ISU students, the majority of whom looked or thought nothing like him, was probably based on several factors. For one, the Vietnam War was a hotly debated topic on campus; Abbott recalls two ISU professors who regularly debated the war. Crowds of people would show up. Today's forums and debates on current issues, say Kosovo, barely attract any students.

Smith knew how to manipulate the media and scored plenty of attention for himself, Abbott says. He made some administrators nervous. He still has the least likely winning election in GSB history. When considering Smith's impact on GSB and Iowa State, Abbott says: "If you're looking at it [Don Smith's election] as creating a groundswell of support for GSB, it did, but it didn't last."

When asked if the radical Smith would be elected at ISU today, Abbott says he's not sure, but doesn't think so. "I think of it as a phenomena that occurred at a particular time. ... I'm not sure that another person would get that kind of attention."

Matt Craft was elected GSB president in spring 1999, with Garrett Toay as his vice president. Both men were active in politics: Craft of La Porte City, Ia., was a senior in political science before graduating from ISU and starting law school at the University of Iowa, and Toay, now a senior in agricultural business, is the former chairman of "Students for Bush."

When Craft and Toay won the election, the turnout was recorded as 1,480 students voting in the election — the lowest turnout in the last five years. Craft says winning was obviously his objective, but says he wishes more students had

voted. In 1999, only two candidates were on the GSB ballot, which Craft noted could have hardly helped increase turnout.

Craft says many students would "rather claim ignorance instead of taking the time to learn about something."

"You're not born with the knowledge of student government; it takes a lot of time to learn about, and there's a lot of other things students can do [instead of learn about GSB]," Craft says.

Many GSB presidents have pledged to reach out to the students to generate enthusiasm for student government. Craft made such campaign promises, but during one of he and his vice president's open forums, no students showed up.

"Students are really interested [in GSB issues] when they see tangible benefits; otherwise, it's going to be hard to capture their attention," Craft says. "I haven't met a GSB



Brian Wischmaier, senior in agricultural studies, was one of about 3,000 students to vote in last spring's GSB elections.

president yet who wasn't accessible to the students, but the student has to take the initiative.

"It gets kind of hard and frustrating when you're at the GSB office until midnight for five straight nights and you have two or three forums and no one shows up. It's pretty hard to get motivated for that fourth forum," Craft says.

Ben Golding, senior in construction engineering from Cedar Rapids, Ia., is this year's GSB president. His victory in last year's election was at the time hailed by GSB officials as a success because it doubled the previous year's turnout. Golding has several missions for this year's GSB. He promises "GSB will be a lot more available" to the students, and, with a smile, he guarantees interest in next spring's elections will be sparked.

Tofilon is also confident that GSB will receive a decent voter turnout, which for GSB

means a couple thousand students. He says next spring's election probably won't have a polarizing issue that will bring ISU students out to the polls. "If you got people voting other than the greeks and the very concerned dorm residents, there'd be different opinions and different issues," he laments.

Like every GSB president in recent years, Golding had the unenviable task, along with Tofilon and other GSB members, of lobbying the state Board of Regents to try to keep tuition affordable. Golding and Tofilon both say they consider the regents' proposal of about a seven percent increase a small victory compared to the 10 percent and 15 percent suggestions that were being thrown around last spring.

Students from Iowa's public universities turned out several times last year to protest the proposed tuition increases. However, Golding says the student voice "is weaker because of a low voter turnout."

Golding knows some might argue the reason ISU students don't participate in GSB en masse is because the organization has been seen as somewhat of a figurehead. Even Schmidt says: "The ISU student president doesn't affect much of anything; GSB is largely a mimic of politics as usual."

High-profile issues such as dry Vreishea and tuition increases are likely to be the issues that GSB deals with that students care about the most. Golding admits other entities like the ISU administration and Board of Regents have the final say, "but although they're not decided by students, how they're defined, students have a lot of say in impacting what the options are. The details are not beyond the power of the students."

As this article goes to print, the presidential debates will be wrapping up. They've been the subject of much media attention in the past few weeks, but it's impossible to know how many people are going to watch, if students are going to tune in or who will win the election. As they've proven time and time again, polls aren't necessarily the most reliable factor when it comes to predicting the outcome. Students might vote, but with no one specific issue to rally them, one thing seems like a given: Like most of the rest of America, young people are going to sit this one out.

Kate Kompas is a junior in journalism. She's managing editor of Ethos and has interned at the Montana Standard and the Des Moines Register. Pat Buchanan creeps her out.