



9-1-1976

### Combining education and politics

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#### Recommended Citation

Levine, Jonathan (1977) "Combining education and politics," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 4: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2039>

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Hunter College has a new program giving students the opportunity to learn campaign techniques and get college credit for it.

# Combining education and politics

by Jonathan Levine



Jonathan Levine is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Foundations at Hunter College of The City University of New York. He has taught social, historical and political foundations of education as well as methods courses. He has also supervised student teachers. He received his Ed.D. from the University of North Dakota in 1972 in teacher education. His current research interest is in the field of politics of education and New York City school board elections.

On May 6, 1975, New York City held its Community School Board Elections. At stake were 288 seats in 32 Community School Districts. Of the nearly 800 candidates in the races, seven were running not only for a chance to serve their community, but also for academic credit.

These seven were enrolled in a special interdisciplinary program at Hunter College of the City University of New York. The program involved education and political science, and offered the students a chance to combine real life experience with academic credit. The program, perhaps the first of its kind in the country, was developed by the author in collaboration with Professor Norman Adler of Hunter's Political Science Department, who shares with the author an interest in school politics.

The goals of the program were to provide an opportunity for the candidates to learn campaign techniques and to better understand the problems of education through involvement in a real life situation rather than lectures or simulation.

Anyone interested could enroll in the program for either three or seven credits.\* Undergraduate students could earn three credits in education and four in political science; graduate students were restricted to three credits in education. Attendance at Hunter was not a requirement, and one of the students was, instead, enrolled in New York State's external degree program, Empire College. Course announcements were sent to every major organization with an interest in the elections, as well as all education and political science classes. The program was the subject of a feature story in the college press.

Both faculty members screened students for their firm commitment to run and their estimated ability to complete the task. During the screening process, students were advised that the program would entail about 20 hours per week. Several students were counseled out of the program because they did not have the time or inclination to run an effective race. Other prospective candidates could not run because they taught and lived in the same Community School District, a violation of the election requirements.

Seven students in six different districts survived the screening. Of these seven, only one had prior school board experience, another had been a nominal third party candidate for the City Council in 1973. Two of the remaining five had participated in their community's political or civic organizations, and three had had no previous political experience.

Since the program was an academic one, stressing insight and observation as well as participation, the following was required of all students:

- a. Maintenance of a daily log.
- b. A scrapbook of campaign efforts.
- c. Note cards on two books read for the course.
- d. A final paper covering some aspect of the campaign.
- e. Conferences.
- f. The actual race itself.

Elections were scheduled for early May, which left ample time for preliminary work on educational issues and campaign techniques. The class met once a week for five weeks, during which time guest speakers addressed a variety of problems involved in the forthcoming elections, focusing on necessary background information relating to the issues they would face. The first session sketched the background of the New York decentralization movement and outlined basic campaign strategies. The next two focused on practical campaign techniques; targeting, literature design, fund-raising, and petitioning, with a professional fund-raiser on hand for one evening.

The next two sessions were devoted to the duties and responsibilities of Community School Boards (CSB), including their relationship to the New York City Central Board of Education and their budgeting procedures. Speakers included a past President of the Central Board of Education, the Director, Division of Community School District Affairs of the Central Board of Education, a former Superintendent of one of the local Community School Boards and a member of the Bureau of the Budget of the Central Board of Education. A sixth meeting to summarize the semester was held on May 20th, after the election was over.

### The Campaign

In order to understand the individual campaigns run by our candidates, it is necessary to understand the environment. Three major elements influenced the elections. One was dominance of the United Federation of Teachers and other major slates which made it difficult for an independent candidate to win a seat. The second was widespread voter apathy as demonstrated by only a 9.4 per cent turnout of eligible voters. Though this is not abnormally low when compared to other cities, it does tend to permit well-organized groups who can get out the vote to dominate the elections. Finally, the use of proportional representation for determining the winning candidates confuses many voters and favors slate candidates who have second and third round strength at the expense of independents.

In the first CSB election, held in 1970, candidates backed by the Catholic Church won a plurality of the seats, with United Federation of Teachers (UFT) candidates taking the second largest block. In the two subsequent elections, UFT backed candidates have won a plurality of the seats. The exact number of candidates who owe their primary allegiance to the UFT is difficult to calculate because in some districts the UFT and parent groups formed alliances, while in others they were bitter enemies. A city-wide group called the "Alliance For Children" was formed in February 1975 to organize anti-UFT sentiment, but they never became the potent force they hoped to become. Because the UFT keeps its campaign organization alive between elections, and com-

mands considerable resources, it is difficult for a group that organizes at the eleventh hour to defeat them.

To meet the UFT's challenge, local groups must combine and form slates around local issues, further reducing the chances of an independent or of a candidate who does not enjoy the support of a strong local group or parent slate. UFT support, however, is no guarantee of winning the election, as one of our students found out the hard way.

A number of other factors increase the importance of identification with an organized slate. In an attempt to remove school board elections from politics, they are separated from the general election in November, which contributes to the poor turnout. Because most candidates operate on a minimum budget, publicity, except that provided by organized slates, is at a minimum. Major media coverage of the election usually focuses only on those districts deemed the most controversial, though local weekly newspapers do provide election coverage and our students tried to take advantage of this whenever possible. (The *New York Daily News*, the country's largest newspaper, did a feature story on the Hunter program prior to election day, but did not identify any of the seven candidates.)

The early weeks of the semester were spent on targeting, petitioning and fund raising. Students identified those voters whom they felt would be most likely to vote and would be the most receptive to their campaign, and records of past school board and primary elections were studied. All students collected the 200 valid signatures needed to get on the ballot, but two of them had their petitions challenged.

During the early weeks our students worked at raising the necessary funds for their campaigning. None of the seven spent more than \$500 on their election—the average spent was less than \$300—but all were successful in raising the funds they felt necessary from family or friends, and no campaign severely suffered from a lack of money. Those of our candidates endorsed by one of the major organizations also received support from the endorsing group.

The students had to decide if they wanted to run as an independent or with slate affiliation. All of them tried to obtain the endorsement of at least one of the two major city-wide organizations who endorse candidates, and additional support from local parent, civic and political groups. Two of the students received UFT endorsement, a third was backed by the Alliance for Children, and a fourth candidate was on the so-called "Church Slate" in one of the community districts. The other three ran as independents. All of the candidates received endorsements from some group, whether parent, political, civic or fraternal. Each candidate prepared and distributed his own literature, though those who had slate backing also received some of their literature from the endorsing group.

The literature that was prepared was as distinctive as the individuals involved, one student issuing a broadside with actual "scare" headlines from the local papers. Others took a more conventional format. The instructors, when asked, helped the students with ideas and layout of the literature.

Besides appearing before groups to obtain endorsements the students spoke at public forums sponsored by PTA, church, political, civic and fraternal organizations. Attendance at these meetings depended

on the district; in some areas the speakers outnumbered the audience. One student didn't speak at any gatherings, preferring to spend his time on a door-to-door campaign in targeted areas. Another who had previous board experience, didn't feel he had much of a chance to win but was trying to make sure some incumbents were not re-elected, and his campaign strategy was to attack them to the point of abrasiveness, at the public forums.

Some of our students had never before spoken publically. Their growth in this respect proved to be one of the most important non-cognitive outcomes of the program. Those who had not previously engaged in public speaking developed self-confidence, poise and a better awareness of their capabilities. In developing debate and public speaking skills the college classroom is probably not an adequate substitute for this real life experience on the campaign trail.

When the votes were in, one of our seven had won in his district. Both of us had expected two winners, but the one student we felt had the best chance lost due to over-confidence. He had the backing of every major organization, except the Alliance For Children, in his district, including endorsements by political clubs and a popular state legislator. Furthermore, the number of votes he needed to win was less than the number of people who signed his nominating petitions. As a result, he neglected to organize a vote-pulling operation on election day and wound up in eleventh place when the final count was taken. The one victorious student, on the other hand, had a small but well-organized group of supporters, and they worked hard on election day to get the vote out. With all candor, the others never had much chance to win.

The reasons for their defeat are clear. Four of the five, whose ages ranged from 17-23, were seriously handicapped by their youth and had little prior visibility in their community. Many voters must have felt that they lacked the experience required for school board membership. Furthermore, four are single, and many voters seem to feel that only parents should be elected to school boards. In communities with strong parent groups, their non-parent status was a considerable handicap to obtaining vital endorsements.

Lack of organizational support was probably the major reason for their failure. In an election where only a small number of voters go to the polls solid organizational backing with its financial and personnel resources is vital. The fifth losing candidate, though neither young nor single, also suffered from a lack of organized support. He had previously served on his community board when board members were appointed and was active in other community groups including his political club; furthermore, his children had attended schools in the community, though they are now out of school. In previous years his support had come from the union. However, in 1975 in his district, the UFT and parent groups agreed to support a joint slate of candidates; one criterion for inclusion on the slate was to have a child enrolled in the district's public schools. Denied UFT endorsement, he ran as an independent.

### Course Evaluation

While only one student was victorious, we feel that the program was a success in other ways. In the cognitive area, the results were obvious. The students came to understand both the political process and educational issues at a level that classroom lectures are unlikely to

reach. Less obvious, but equally important, are the affective gains. All of the students came to a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, we also observed growth in self-confidence, self-esteem, and poise. In one student this growth was truly remarkable. While the results were quite dramatic in one case, all students showed growth in this vital area.

Another long-term result of the program was that the students gained the visibility in the community needed for future forays into the political arena. Several have indicated interest in the 1977 CBS elections, and at least one, denied UFT support, has been promised strong UFT backing the next time around. This offer of support was given after he had proved his sincerity and interest to the local UFT officials. It is possible that if others maintain their visibility, their chances for victory in 1977 will be greatly improved.

Two of the candidates have been elected to the executive committee of their tenant association since the elections; it is likely that the experience and visibility they gained in running for a school board seat was a contributing factor. One of the seven started a campaign to win a seat to the 1976 Democratic National Convention.

Although the program resulted in a successful learning experience, we learned some things ourselves, which we pass on as recommendations to others who might wish to undertake a similar program.

It is not sufficient to permit the students to arrange for conferences on their own. Students must be scheduled for conferences with some firmness, or the involvement of the campaign will blot out the educational goals of the experience. Each student was required to have at least two personal conferences with either of the instructors, prior to the spring recess in March and one before the election was over. We hoped that these conferences would provide individual attention for those students who needed it most. Assuming that the students would take the responsibility for scheduling conferences, we were flexible about them, which proved to be a mistake. They were helpful to those who took advantage of the opportunity, but our reluctance to insist on meeting with us resulted in problems that we could have prevented. One example of this occurred when the students' petitions were challenged. In both cases the challenge could have been prevented and the advice of either instructor would have stopped the time-consuming and debilitating challenge from taking place. Students tend to "go native," a danger that anthropologists learn to be wary of when they involve themselves in a strange setting or society. The instructors must constantly press time to be thoughtful and to see the implications of what they are doing: Conferences can provide the vehicle to accomplish this. Introspection is not a principal ingredient of the personality of most political candidates and our students adopted the attitudes and garb of the "natives" all too easily. We had to draw them back to the other side of participant—observation, that is, to observation.

Second, it is not always possible to anticipate the specific needs of the individuals involved in the program. The preparatory sessions we arranged sometimes failed to work because students from diverse backgrounds brought different ideas, needs and resources to the program. Some of the information provided during the early sessions proved to be of little use since successful campaign techniques in other political races are all but useless in school board elections, where money is scarce

and campaign personnel are at a premium. Much of the academic learning occurred after the campaigns were launched rather than in the classroom setting prior to the petitioning period. Furthermore, policy issues differ from community to community, and many of the general theories and approaches we described turned out to be not particularly relevant to some areas in which the students campaigned.

These observations are not intended to suggest that all preparatory sessions should be eliminated and replaced by personal conferences and monitoring sessions, but that early sessions must take into account such factors as district variation. One must, above all, not lose sight of the fact that most of the students are amateurs with little knowledge of the educational system or of campaign techniques.

Our original idea of bringing the class together to share experiences never worked out. During the campaign period the students were too busy, too involved in their own affairs, to think about—much less find time to meet with—the other candidates. As a result of a natural post-election let down, the final session became an ineffective sort of “show-and-tell.” We recommend the creation of additional post-election opportunities to reflect on the politics of school board selection, possibly by assigning some of the readings to be done after the campaign. This might give the instructors an opportunity to focus at-

tention on common problems and issues.

Though the scrapbook assignment helped students reflect on their experience and provided us with a sound way of judging achievement as well, the daily log was a failure as a monitoring device. Students had neither the strength nor patience to reflect on the day's events after shaking hands and speaking at meetings for 10 or 12 hours. Some of the daily logs read like some teachers' plan books when two months' worth of lessons are filled in the day before the books are due. Perhaps some less frequent tool, such as a weekly essay, might have proved more realistic and more beneficial to the students.

In summary, as we look back on it, we believe that the program accomplished its objectives; the students gained new insights in education and politics. The interdisciplinary approach provided them with a real-life experience, as a sort of living classroom, enabling the students to grasp the complex relationship of educational politics to political strategy in the context of a campaign experience. Their desire to win created an intense involvement that ensured learning in a way no lecture or text could match.

\*Professor Adler's time was donated and was not part of his scheduled program. It is also important to note that students should be advised to take a light course load during the semester they run for office.

## Schooling Teachers

The argument for teachers being schooled to a professional level is based on the assumption that mere rule-following technicians will not be flexible enough to meet the complex and shifting demands of the learning situation. How can the modern teacher take account of the individual differences of his pupils and of the cultural and economic factors in the learning situation? How can he manage the vast increase in knowledge by mechanically following rules of practice? The standard answer is that he cannot.

**The Real World of the Public Schools.** Harry S. Broudy. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1972. p. 54.