

Political Science Goes to College: Demystifying the Electoral College Through Observation

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Many, if not most students are turned off by politics today. Low voter turnout and political involvement among young people strongly suggest this, as does the decline in their enrollment in political science courses (Bennett 1997). On the other hand, no matter how mysterious and misunderstood, the Electoral College rarely fails to spark student interest (Adkison and Elliott 1997). Sensing an opportunity to engage students in politics, the office of the Connecticut Secretary of State, the Connecticut Consortium for Law and Civic Education, Inc., and area professors decided to take political science to the Electoral College.

The Electoral College is arguably the most complicated institution in American government. Who are its members? When and how are they selected? When and how do they meet? How do they vote? While texts will help answer these questions, the authors thought students should see the process first-hand: Attend a background seminar, meet the electors, and witness the voting. Better yet, why not attack student cynicism before it reaches college classrooms by directing this workshop to high school students and their teachers?

Two hundred and fifty high school students and teachers gathered at the Connecticut State Capitol in Hartford December 16, 1996, for a morning workshop and observation of Electoral College voting procedures. After the Secretary of State greeted students and introduced them to Connecticut's eight electors, background materials on the history and purposes of the college were distributed.

Students were assigned to hour-long workshop groups led by area political-science faculty, who provided an analytical background of the college, answered questions, and encouraged students to give opinions about the process. The sessions were noteworthy in that the good, basic understanding of the mechanics of the college helped to serve as a foundation for student-faculty discussion, which in turn revealed that students, once motivated, are energized by questions of politics and democracy. They asked incisive questions about theory and practice and were intellectually stimulated by exposure to the realm of political science.

At the conclusion of the sessions, each group made its way to the State Senate chamber to witness casting of the ballots. Eight individuals who were to serve as electors were sworn in, organized

themselves as a body, and cast their official ballots. Students were exposed to a lesser-known and relatively rare aspect of the process when they watched electors choose a replacement for one of their number who could not be present due to illness. The secretary of state oversaw the voting and sealed the final vote record with his official seal and hot wax.

This real-world experience generated a great deal of enthusiasm among students in the gallery. Students conducted informal debates about the merits of the system within and outside of the gallery; the experience was an intense intellectual and educational experience.

Benefits of the Program

Experientially, this program provided the students and teachers with direct exposure to an often confusing and misunderstood part of the U.S. political system. The procedures of the college demonstrate the long-standing role of ceremonial rituals and traditions in politics, even if practice has moved far from original theories which motivated the creators of this constitutional device. At the same time, the ability to view this institution firsthand removes part of the "elite mystique" surrounding the college's rituals. Student attendance of this public and democratic event demonstrated for them that electors are not a secret and conspiratorial group, but fellow citizens translating the public voice into the final voting stage of presidential selection. This program may have significantly dispelled some of the students' cynicism about public officials and involvement in politics, demystifying and redefining the college in each person's mind.

The workshop portion of the day's proceedings served another educational function: Giving high school students, teachers, and college faculty a chance to interact in an academic setting that spoke to citizenship as a public activity. In addition, many students considering college who did not understand "political science" had a better idea of how college faculty approach learning, and more knowledge of what a political scientist does. Sessions like these can convey the understanding that political science is not simply "current affairs," but a field of study that contributes to the understanding of how people develop governing institutions for their communities and the recurrent issues that underlie the history of political community building.

It is important to distinguish this workshop from a field trip. This workshop's unique aspects included:

- It was co-sponsored by an executive department of the state government and a private group.
- It brought together students from across Connecticut, giving each student a chance to have an educational experience at the high school level apart from the normal cues and trappings of the more traditional classroom.
- It enabled students, high school teachers, and professors to share the experience of educating citizens. Political science teachers could look past their own world and "outreach" to the wider

community, while also viewing the efforts of colleagues in the secondary school system. The high school teachers, in turn, could observe what college faculty do.

• It built background information and a question-and-answer period prior to witnessing the actual event. Therefore, full attention could be focused onto both the proceedings and the students' concerns in their own appropriate time and place.

Despite the time commitment required of faculty to conduct such workshops, few of them should forego the opportunity to show the relevance of college teaching to an audience composed of state officials, parents, high school teachers, and students. This is especially true in this era of budget austerity in many states, where legislators and governors are peering over the walls of academia in search of budget savings, college enrollment is declining.

Finally, and most importantly, this type of event benefits the entire political community of a state by transforming a political institution from an abstract concept to a real-life, functioning entity. This makes politics less mysterious and intimidating for students, and can encourage them to feel they can play a part in their own government. This type of educational/participatory event can give a fuller and more realistic picture of political activity, suggesting that active citizenship is not just for the elite or the corrupt. Reinvigorating the U.S. democratic system may be furthered by making political science a more understandable, relevant, and attractive field of study for future college and university students — by reaching out past the walls of the classroom to observe the community of the capitol address real-world challenge affecting us all.

References

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Editor's note: Author photos were unavailable.