

An UnConventional

How two political science students from Canisius found themselves

E L E C T I O N 2 0 0 4
may go down in history as one of the most important presidential elections in modern times. Whether it was the war in Iraq, the economy or the closely contested 2000 presidential race, people, who were never before interested in politics, paid closer attention to the issues under debate. They read newspapers, tuned in to the evening news and surfed the Internet for the latest information.

But learning the latest on the campaigns from the media isn't quite the same as seeing it unfold, firsthand. Just ask **Timothy J. Partyka '06** and **Daniel R. Centinello '06** who, this past summer, witnessed two of the most exciting spectacles of American politics: the national political conventions.

These unconventional opportunities came from The Washington Center for Internships & Academic Seminars. During presidential election years, the center hosts two-week educational programs that combine academic learning with fieldwork experience at the Democratic and Republican conventions, and literally puts students at the center of American politics. Participants are placed in positions where they may actually meet the candidates, as well as the people who manage their campaigns, and report and analyze the convention news.

"Unlike a formal classroom setting, this program emphasizes leadership development in an actual political setting," states Eugene Alpert, PhD, senior vice president for The Washington Center for Internships & Academic Seminars. "Participants are

Opportunity

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provided with a variety of opportunities to become fully involved in the many aspects of a national convention. Some activities are highly structured; others are designed to let students engage in independent learning and exploration.”

No matter which degree of involvement students pursue, all are required to complete assigned reading tasks, participate fully in the scheduled activities and seminars, and document their experiences through in-depth academic journals, which reflect their personal activities, observations and analyses.

The pages that follow include the abbreviated versions of Tim Partyka’s and Dan Centinello’s experiences at the Democratic and Republican conventions (respectively).

The Washington Center for Internships & Academic Seminars has organized academic programs at both major national political conventions since 1984. This was the first time Canisius College was invited to participate in the program. The Washington Center does not grant academic credit to students who attend the conventions, however, the college’s Department of Political Science will award Tim Partyka and Dan Centinello internship credit (three credit hours).



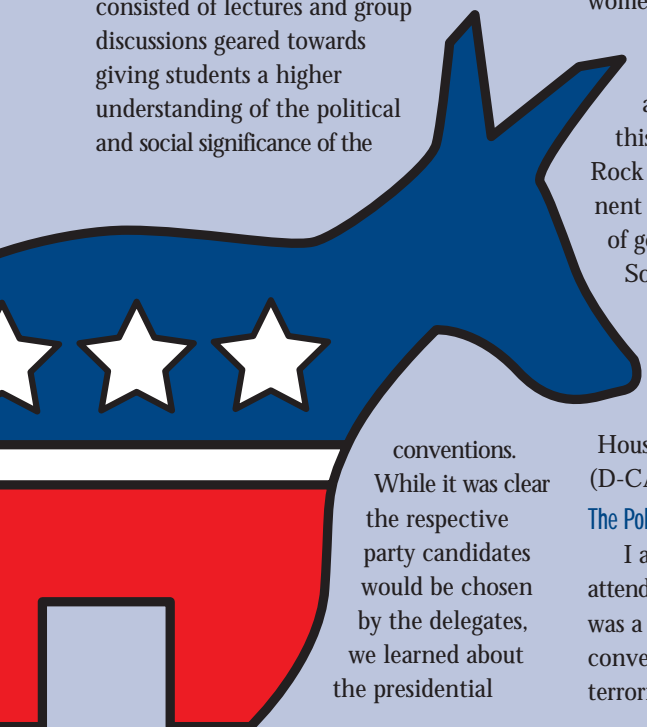
Timothy J. Partyka '06

Democratic National Convention ★ Boston, MA ★ July 18-30, 2004

The opportunity to attend The Washington Center Program at the Democratic Convention arose quite suddenly. One afternoon in June, I received a call from Dr. Michael Haselswerdt, professor of political science at Canisius College. He explained that a student who was scheduled to attend the program canceled and he needed another student to go. I jumped at the opportunity for several reasons: it would place me in the midst of one of the most important elections of my lifetime; I would be able to experience the social and political atmosphere of this campaign; and it would be a great chance to meet other people who shared my political beliefs.

The Purpose of Political Conventions

Once I arrived in Boston, I quickly learned the academic and fieldwork requirements. The coursework consisted of lectures and group discussions geared towards giving students a higher understanding of the political and social significance of the



conventions. While it was clear the respective party candidates would be chosen by the delegates, we learned about the presidential

nomination process, as a whole. We learned that, nowadays, party conventions do not hold much technical importance but instead are organized to give the public and members of the parties a sense of unity. Conventions provide an opportunity for both parties to have their messages portrayed to the public and can help sway undecided voters. Conventions are also extremely important in energizing political parties. One of the special guest speakers included in the academic seminars was former presidential nominee Michael Dukakis (D-MA).

Rocking the Vote

The fieldwork placements were geared toward engaging students in the actual events surrounding the convention. I was placed with the Revolutionary Women Convention, a new, non-profit membership organization that helps advance the leadership role of women in society. My responsibility was to help run one of the organization's inaugural events at the convention, aimed at engaging young voters. For this seminar, representatives from the Rock the Vote program and other prominent women spoke about the importance of getting youth involved in voting.

Some of the important speakers at the Revolutionary Women Convention conference included Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA).

The Politics of Protests

I admit, I was a little apprehensive about attending the Democratic Convention. There was a heightened security alert because the convention site was considered a possible terrorist target. There was even a military



Tim Partyka '06 poses with Tom Merino, the mayor of Boston, MA.

presence outside the convention hall due to the elevated threat. And every day the streets of Boston were filled with the presence of protestors, media and police. To the average person this is quite a lot to digest but I think the lessons I learned in my political science classes at Canisius helped me better understand the environment. I understood the importance of the role of the media and public opinion, and I understood how the chaos that unfolded in Boston was extremely relevant to the election.

Opportunity of a Lifetime

The greatest personal experience I had was attending the convention itself. To hear the historic speeches of Illinois State Senator and U.S. Senate nominee Barack Obama (D-IL) and Teresa Heinz Kerry were special moments I will always remember. I will also always remember the many experiences I shared with students from across the nation.

Conventional Wisdom

I believe whole-heartedly that my experience with The Washington Program gave me a profound understanding of the political system, which will be invaluable to my continued studies of politics at Canisius, as well as my professional and personal goals.



Daniel R. Centinello '06

Republican National Convention ★ NYC ★
August 22 – September 3, 2004

I was working up on the seventh floor for the Political Science Department when Dr. Michael Haselswerdt called me into his office and said sternly, “Have a seat.” I must say, my heart stopped and every Bush sticker I stuck somewhere, every ‘support our troops’ rally I organized and every article I wrote for *The Griffin* went stampeding through my head. I wondered, “What had I done wrong?” But Dr. Haselswerdt just looked at me and said “Do you want to go to the Republican Convention?”

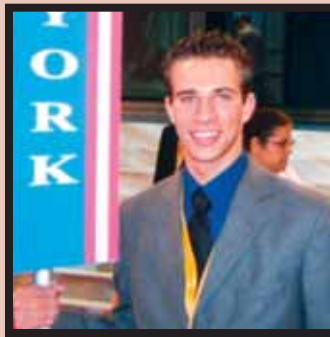
Taking It All In

That is how the ball got rolling for me to attend The Washington Center Program. I can not say I was hoping to accomplish something specific from my participation at the Republican National Convention; just being invited to attend was an accomplishment in itself. It meant Dr. Haselswerdt recognized the hard work and time I am willing to invest in that which I believe. Part of what makes the program such a success is that it gives participants the flexibility to be at ‘the right place at the right time.’

Right Place at the Right Time

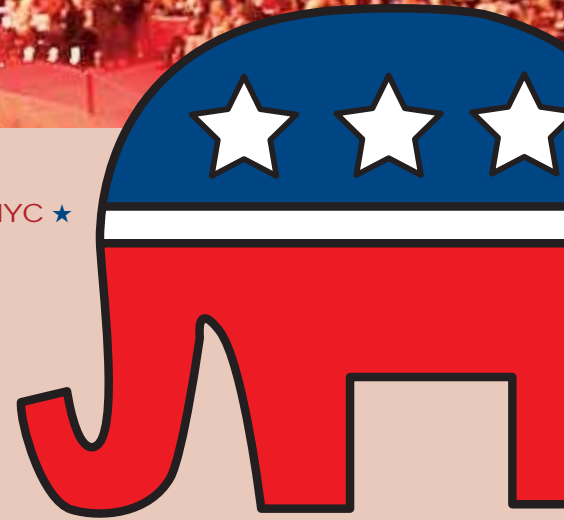
I personally had no preference as to what type of fieldwork I was assigned to do; I was there to learn, obtain memories and help ensure the convention was a success. The Washington Center first assigned me to the South Carolina delegation, for which I assisted with a couple of its receptions. Through those receptions, I met South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford and U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham. But it was because of my position as state chairman of the New York College Republicans State Committee (NYCRSC) that I received many other invitations and opportunities. (I oversee every College Republican Club, statewide.) The flexibility of The Washington Center Program enabled

me to engage in these opportunities as independent learning experiences, and so for the rest of the convention, I participated in and helped organize events for Congressman and chair of the National Republican Congressional Committee Tom Reynolds (NY-27th Dist.), New York Governor George Pataki, the Republican National Committee and the College Republican National Committee. My participation in these events enabled me



Dan Centinello '06 stands with the New York delegation at the Republican National Convention in August.

to meet the Bush twins, Jenna and Barbara; third-party presidential candidate Ralph Nader; former Oklahoma Congressman J.C. Watts; Governor Pataki; Sean Hannity of “Hannity and Colmes” (FOX News); and many others. It was also as a result of my position with the NYCRSC that I obtained credentials for every night of the convention. I even made it onto the floor the first two nights and was approached for several interviews with media outlets such as CNN, ABC News, *The Washington Post* On-line, WABC, MSNBC and an NBC appearance broadcast to a Pennsylvania affiliate. I was interviewed about the significance of the youth vote in America and NYCRSC’s efforts to encourage more youth to vote.



Defining Moment

The most powerful moment for me happened while I was seated in a section at Madison Square Garden that put me directly across from President George W. Bush. The defining moment was preceded by a video, which outlined the role President Bush took on to bring the citizens of the United States together immediately after the September 11 attacks. It did not illustrate him as George W. Bush, our President, but rather as George, another American, and included heartfelt stories of all the ways he assisted families, New Yorkers and American citizens through the most devastating time in our history.

At the conclusion of the video, two waving flags began to drop from either side of the stage. They were enroute to intersect and as the spangled displays passed one another, out came our leader. These 10 minutes will always be replayed in my head, consistently repeated to others and never forgotten.

Convention Confirmation

While I am aware of my constant regression to my experience with the convention as ‘a whole,’ it is difficult to highlight just one aspect. The convention was a personal highlight in itself. I will say, however, that the greatest thing I took from the convention is that I realized I do not like politics at all. I love it!