

A large, stylized graphic on the left side of the page. It features a dark blue semi-circle at the top containing a white five-pointed star. Below this are three horizontal stripes: a red stripe, a white stripe, and another red stripe. The graphic is partially cut off by the right edge of the page.

## **From the Horse's Mouth: A Dialogue Between Politicians and College Students**

**Christopher Beem**  
The Johnson Foundation

**CIRCLE WORKING PAPER 27**

**JANUARY 2005**



**CIRCLE**

The Center for Information & Research  
on Civic Learning & Engagement

In January 2004, college students from postsecondary institutions across Wisconsin were invited to join U.S. Representatives Tammy Baldwin and Mark Green at The Johnson Foundation's Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The purpose of the discussion was to engage students' attitudes regarding politics, and their understanding of connections between community service and involvement in the political process. In this report, I lay out our reasons for developing this event, recount the exchange, and consider its ramifications for increasing youth civic engagement.

## RATIONALE

As part of its mission, The Johnson Foundation has a longstanding interest in condition of civic life. Over the last few years, we have held conferences on election reform, judicial elections, and the role of philanthropy in fostering civic engagement. We have also held a number of conferences on the role of higher education in addressing civic engagement among its students and within the broader community. One of these conferences brought together 33 juniors and seniors from around the country. Their deliberations resulted in the publication: *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement*.<sup>1</sup>

This document ably captures the attitudes of today's students regarding politics. It condemns what it calls "conventional politics" and passionately defends the decision of many students to concern themselves with community service—not only in *place of* politics, but as a more agreeable and effective form *of* politics.

We discovered at Wingspread, however, a common sense that while we are disillusioned with conventional politics (and therefore most forms of political activity), we are deeply involved in civic issues through non-traditional forms of engagement.... While we still hope to be able to participate in our political system effectively through traditional means, service is a viable and preferable (if not

superior) alternative at this time.<sup>2</sup>

What accounts for this disillusionment? Like many Americans, the students find conventional politics "distasteful" and "unresponsive" to their concerns. Most relevantly, perhaps, the students also fail to see that politics has an impact on their lives, and the life of their community.

Take, for example, the leading issues that were debated in the 2000 presidential campaign: taxes, social security, health care, prescription drug costs, educational testing, campaign finance reform, the death penalty, gun control, to name a few. The effect of these government programs is dissipated and amorphous at the level of local community life.<sup>3</sup>

Students feel more confident that their service work is making a difference, and they are therefore content to invest themselves in this arena.

The manifesto of the *New Student Politics* is passionate and articulate. It was presented as part of an ongoing conversation and has succeeded admirably in that regard. But some of us at The Johnson Foundation were convinced that the document offered an impression of both the realities and effects of politics that was incomplete at best, and romantic at worst. Of course, there is much that is distasteful in contemporary politics, and indeed, in any politics. There are large, ongoing problems associated with political institutions, with bureaucracies and with campaigns. But that is not the whole story. There are many politicians and bureaucrats who devote their lives to public service and who work hard for their constituents and for the welfare of the larger society. More to the point, the importance of politics obtains regardless of how distasteful it is. Whether the effects are immediately apparent or not, federal policies have a profound impact on the condition of American communities. Likewise, the prospects for making politics better and addressing the demands of social justice outside the bounds of conventional politics are dim. Indeed, to the

degree that students with a passion for community service choose to opt out of politics, the status quo is to that degree left unchallenged, and prospects for meaningful positive diminish. We felt that these arguments needed to be part of the discussion of students and civic engagement.

Shortly after this meeting, the Foundation held a consultation on the status of American politics more broadly. Bringing together a prestigious, bi-partisan group of representatives from the academy, the media and politics, we asked them to reflect on the condition of American politics and on how we might best use our conference center to address it.<sup>4</sup> A number of issues emerged, but one central idea focused directly on efforts associated with youth civic engagement and echoed some of the concerns raised by the *New Student Politics*.

This group maintained that while the disengagement of young people from politics was a critical issue, efforts to address it often started with the admission that politics is distasteful and even dirty. Their appeal was rather the "eat your peas" variety; there was little suggestion that politics is fun or interesting, let alone ennobling. Perhaps, they suggested, this approach might account for some apparent ineffectiveness among ongoing efforts. The group at Wingspread suggested that The Foundation consider developing a new approach to the issue of youth disengagement, one that presented a fuller, less negative account of politics.

The similarity between this group's conclusions and our own gave us the impetus to explore this idea. As we did so, we developed the hypothesis that the relationship between politicians and young people reflected a downward spiral of low expectations. Young people feel that politics is unproductive and distasteful, so they spurn it and concentrate on service. Since young people do not express interest in politics—because they vote less often and give less money than other generational groups—politicians are inclined to ignore them. Young people view that inattention as disrespect and draw even farther away. And thus, the cycle continues.

We decided to develop an informal, candid

discussion that would give both sides a first-hand exposure to the world of the other. For the politicians, we wanted them to hear student's reasons for disliking politics, and to recognize that their disconnect did not mean they did not have strong opinions and values. For the students, as well, we wanted to offer them a more complete picture. We wanted them to see that in spite of the portrayal of politicians by late night talk show hosts and the like, politicians can be smart and decent people. Finally, we wanted them to see that political debate is not always a shouting match; again, despite the many counter examples, people who disagree strongly on an issue can do so with respect and civility. In short, we wanted to expose the students to a more realistic, yet less pessimistic account of American politics. Both sides needed to hear directly from the other; we therefore decided to call the event: "From the Horse's Mouth."<sup>5</sup>

## SELECTION

Our first task was to select the politicians. We started with a broad outreach, but quickly learned that they would need to be from the Wisconsin delegation. Politicians we approached from outside the state simply had insufficient incentive to meet with college students from Wisconsin. We also wanted to make clear that the issue of youth civic disengagement is not a partisan problem, but a problem for our democracy; we therefore also needed to find representatives from both parties.

We chose Tammy Baldwin, a 42-year old liberal Democrat from Madison, and Paul Ryan, a 34-year old conservative Republican whose district includes the Foundation. Both of these politicians represent the edge of their parties, but they are also young, idealistic, candid and articulate. After setting the date, Paul Ryan had to drop out. Mark Green (43 years old Republican from Green Bay with similar politics) generously agreed to "pitch hit."

We also needed to figure out how to select the students. In order to have a genuine conversation, we needed a manageable number. We also wanted a group that reflected the full diversity of students within the state. Working

with Wisconsin Campus Compact, we asked the Campus Compact representative on each member campus help us find students who would be good candidates for this event. Here is the text from our announcement:

This discussion is not for students who are already interested in, let alone active in, politics. We are **NOT** looking for members of the Young Democrats or Young Republicans. Instead, we are asking college representatives from throughout the state to help us find students who are frustrated with and disillusioned by politics. Ideally, we are looking for *students who are engaged in community service*, or who have a demonstrated interest in local, national or international issues, *but who have rejected politics as a way of addressing their concerns*.

We are also looking for students who reflect the diversity of the state. That is to say, we want a group that is diverse with regards to race, ethnicity, class, religion, political knowledge and ideology. Each campus may nominate up to three students.

Each student wrote a brief essay in which they said why they wanted to come to this event. We selected students based on diversity and on these essays—that is, their attitudes about service and politics, and their ability to articulate them.

Many of these essays expressed a deep sense of alienation from contemporary politics: One student confessed that while politics is important, “all the official mumbo jumbo turns me off.” Another said “it is very hard to believe anyone in politics anymore.” Many were skeptical that they would hear anything at this event that might change their minds, but the essays frequently expressed a desire to start a conversation. Students wrote of their desire to begin “an open dialogue;” to “bridge the gap;” to “educate both sides.” After the selection process, we were confident that these students could well represent their peers.

We decided that in order to ensure the greatest impact, we would record the event. Wisconsin Public Television filmed the exchange and ultimately created a 25-minute video that captures the dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we needed a moderator who could be engaging with students and politicians, and who had a reputation for evenhandedness. We chose Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne (who was part of our politics roundtable in 2002) to moderate the event.

## THE EVENT

We scheduled the event for early January, when both Congress and many students were not yet back in their post-Holiday routine. The students gathered first, and spent the morning talking with Nick Longo from the National Campus Compact office—discussing their attitudes about community service and politics. The first term brought out words like “reciprocity,” “helping,” “making a difference,” “connecting.” Politics, in contrast, conjured up words like “big money,” “red tape,” “hypocrisy,” and “waste.” More than once, students mentioned that the satisfaction gained through community service was immediate and concrete; with politics, even when the victory is clear cut, the effects of one’s efforts were unclear, and often aren’t apparent for months or years. At the same time, a number of students noted that this disparity was too simple, and to some degree represented “what we’re taught to think”—by their peers, the media, and by their parents. By the end of this session, there was widespread agreement that neither community service nor politics were sufficient unto themselves, and that meaningful social change really required both.

After lunch, they met with Tammy Baldwin and Mark Green. By way of introduction, the two of them talked about their personal histories and what drew them to politics. Both said that they get most satisfaction from constituency work. Green said that contrary to what most people think, he wasn’t as interested in committee hearings or legislative debate. He likes helping people with their problems, and saw his work in Congress as an extension of being involved in his community. They also agreed that they voted the same way

on the vast majority of votes that they cast; they maintained that media and politics often play up the votes where there is disagreement. Yet even in these disagreements, they both said that the differences were not over goals, but over methods; Tammy Baldwin said that politicians all want to help people; they just disagree about how best to get there.

Both acknowledged that there were many disagreeable aspects to contemporary politics. They admitted that some members on both sides of the aisle were "mean-spirited" and interested in personal power. They agreed that fundraising was uncomfortable and took up too much of their time. Importantly, they also acknowledged that politicians spend their limited time and money where it might make a difference in terms of votes. They did however insist that they put their constituents—including college age constituents—ahead of lobbyists and anyone with money.

After these opening remarks, the student discussion began. If there was one major theme to come out of this dialogue, it was the dissatisfaction students felt with the two party system. One student said, "The two major parties. . . are so very interested in maintaining the status quo that they have, that they are not ...comfortable letting other people in." Another asked, "How we can make structural changes to include [third parties]?" And yet another suggested non-partisan elections for federal offices. The politicians were sympathetic to the students, acknowledging that 3<sup>rd</sup> parties frequently have a political impact, even if they don't usually get people elected; but they said nothing to suggest that they either foresaw or supported any structured change that might open up American politics.

Speaking to their dissatisfaction with politics, students echoed a point brought up in the *New Student Politics*. Namely, that many of the issues that are featured in the media and in campaigns (social security and prescription drug benefits were mentioned) do not directly affect them. Baldwin said that because most students have parents or grandparents they do have a link to these issues, even if they are also interested in more global issues. For Green, the

student's complaints underscored a political reality. Politicians have limited time and money to invest, and they will spend it where they think it will have the most effect. In other words, if young people are not voting, it is no wonder they don't get the attention.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that these students who were involved in community service and disconnected from politics repeatedly said that they hadn't received an education in politics. While there are ample and readily accessible opportunities for community service, they do not know how to find out who their assemblyman was, or how to get involved in a campaign, or even how to register to vote. The Politicians admitted that adults had done a very poor job preparing young people for their roles as citizens. Green said that it was as if a light was supposed to go off when someone turned eighteen. He said that expectation was unfair and highlighted a failure on the part of politicians.

We as members have perhaps done a bad job. We need to do a better job of demystifying what it is that we do and what we go through every day. I blame us. We're obviously not doing the job we need to do, reaching out, letting you know what's important to us and how you can get involved. . . ."

## DEBRIEFING

The discussion with the politicians lasted a little more than 90 minutes. After a break, we had the group split in half, sent half off with E.J. Dionne and half with Nick Longo, to have them discuss what they had heard and whether any of it had changed their minds.

Some students were impressed. One young woman referred to "the huggable politician." She felt, for the first time, that these politicians were "well-rounded" persons not that different from her. Another said that she "clicked with them." One student was impressed with their accounts of their life histories, and felt that in both cases, it gave more credence to their claims that politics

is another form of public service. Some were motivated by the invitation to go and meet with their representatives, and tell them their views. One student said that after this experience, she would not be intimidated.

I mean they're people. I won't be all afraid, you know. 'They're some big powerful person who's not really real'. They're people and I can go talk to them and tell them what I think face to face and they'll listen to me or pretend to listen to me, but they're not going to bite my head off.

Others felt more motivated to research issues and find out who their representatives were.

On the other hand, some students only felt that their suspicions had been confirmed. For all their talk about wanting to connect with the people, one student noted how few politicians he had seen in his life, and another said that even at college, they had seen few politicians face to face. One even suggested that the main reason the politicians had come to this came to the event was so that they would be able to say that they were here: either in campaigns, or in the media. Another student said that he felt that Tammy Baldwin overstated her interest in students, calling her comments "a line." He also doubted that the exchange had affected the politicians in any meaningful way. Another suggested that the conversation was too brief; any change in the relationship between students and politicians would require a number of conversations over many days, if it were to happen at all.

The event ended in the early evening. Before the students departed, we gave them one more assignment: we asked them to write short reflection paper. We wanted them to answer the same question—how was your mind changed by the event?—but to do it after the drive home, after they had had a few days to reflect. About half the students completed this task. Of those, the opinions once again varied wildly. A number of students wrote comments that fell directly in line with our hopes. One student "left with a

much more positive feeling of how this country works." She was also convinced that the "greater participation" was the best way to effect the changes that she and other students wished to see. She also felt that there was a consensus among the students that "civics education must be returned to the curriculum." Several students said that because of the event, they had a better understanding of how politics really worked, and they were more motivated to become involved.

Negative opinions expressed in the essays were more related to the format of the event than to politics or politicians generally. A large minority of students said that they felt there was not enough time to really delve into the questions. Relatedly, two students said the conversation didn't seem to have any direction. One student even said that our event mirrored the problem with politics in general: a lot of talk, but nothing gets resolved. Finally, two students felt that the group was not as advertised. They felt that contrary to the organizers wishes, a number of students were very interested and knowledgeable about politics and that they tended to dominate the discussion.

## ASSESSMENT

This was a unique opportunity for most of these students. As I noted, many students complained that they had had little direct contact with politicians, and that they had received insufficient instruction regarding politics and little invitation to participate in it. Indeed, one of the most important themes to emerge from the event was that students felt that they had received much more encouragement and opportunities to get involved in service, but hardly any into politics. These students were arguing that they needed more formal civics education. But they were also advancing a position similar to that outlined by Campus Compact and others: that in order for service learning to be done correctly, it should include a pedagogical element that connects service to issues and politics.

Many have speculated that one reason why schools are reluctant to connect service to politics is because of the fear of appearing partisan:

advancing one side of an issue, one party, one candidate and so forth. That is, having students work at a soup kitchen is benign for a school board; having students work to oust a politician who has gutted food stamp funding, e.g., is not. The easy solution to this problem is therefore simply to ignore politics entirely. But these students felt that this approach left them ill prepared for their roles as responsible adults. This event points to the need for more models that allow students the opportunity to engage the realities of politics, including partisanship, without advancing one side or the other.

Another aspect of partisanship that merits attention is the student's dissatisfaction with the two-party system. These students were unhappy with the condition of American politics, and they felt that fairly radical changes were necessary. They were dubious, at best, about the prospects of that change coming from Democrats or Republicans. One student in his essay noted the inordinate time spent on third parties, and he speculated that this "skewing of the issue" [that is, the undue emphasis on third parties] was due to the fact that "We are so disconnected that we don't even know where to start some times." Perhaps so. A glance at American history confirms the notion that prospects for a viable third party in American politics are not good. (In our conversation, Mark Green made a similar point.) Nevertheless, this event ought to give succor to Greens and other third party representatives that colleges are ripe for organizing. And for the purposes of introducing students to politics, third parties ought to serve as well as any other method.

We were quite explicit about what kind of students we were looking for. We were worried that we would get students who were looking for jobs on Capitol Hill and did our best to discourage them from attending. Nevertheless, some were much more interested in and knowledgeable about politics than others, and surely the conversation would have been different had those students not been in the room. But there were advantages associated with their added knowledge as well. They could argue better, and come up with counter examples. However, some students did feel

intimidated and even shut out by these peers. If we were to do it over again, we would consider other ways of screening candidates. At the same time, it is difficult to make judgments with so little data. It would be interesting to see how different screening methods and objectives might change the nature of the event. Relatedly, while we are firmly convinced that limiting the number of students allowed for a more genuine exchange, it would be interesting to try the event with different numbers and see how that changes the results.

As is apparent, we viewed this event as an experiment, to see if we might develop a model that other states could try. For that reason, it was essential to film the event. But for future endeavors, this is a really a question of resources and outcomes. Changing the course of youth civic disengagement twenty students at a time is a daunting task. For one thing, we would run out of willing politicians long before we made a dent in the student population. Did the cameras lead to a different kind of conversation? Certainly. One student said that the conversation over lunch (without cameras or a moderator) was more open and direct. But because we filmed it, we were able to distribute over 1000 copies of the 30-minute video for this event, with the potential of reaching tens of thousands of young people. We filmed the entire event in order to lower students' discomfort regarding the presence of cameras. And we think that helped. But in any event, we think it better to consider other ways to moderate the interference of cameras rather than to exclude them all together.

Politicians are very good at disarming people and making them feel a human connection that trumps any potential disagreement they might have. We were worried that the students who would come to this event would not be prepared to deal with this, and might be distracted from the points they wanted to make, or would not challenge when they heard something they did not believe. We tried to prepare them in the morning to expect this. We were only marginally successful. Before the politicians arrived, the students were much more negative, and had many more issues that they wanted to bring up. Some

of us organizers felt frustrated that the students did not react to some of the claims the politicians made about the power of money or the role of lobbyists. In hindsight, we might have encouraged the moderator to ask the students follow up with questions—e.g., “did that convince you?”—during the event.

But it is also interesting in this regard to note that many students were *looking* for a personal connection with the politician; issues and partisan positions were not as significant. Recall that one student felt that these were “huggable politicians.” This question is worth exploring. Many people make a visceral assessment of a candidate during an election rather than identify him or her with any particular policy issue. Perhaps this event merely echoed this fact. On the other hand, perhaps this generation is for whatever reason more interested in this kind of connection. Most importantly, if these students were ignorant about politics and issues, perhaps this connection is a key entrée for them into politics. And if that is the case, that would affect judgments about what kind of conversation to hold, what questions to ask, and so forth. It would of course also greatly influence which politicians were chosen for such an event. The fact that our politicians were young, idealistic and personable obviously influenced the quality of the exchange.

This event, and the video we produced, was not likely to produce breakthroughs on either side. Getting students talking about why they are disengaged, letting them know that there are people who are interested in those reasons, and letting them hear that there is more to politics than they might be aware of still strikes us as necessary to turn around youth disengagement. The burden for us and for others who are interested in this model is to continue to refine it so that it might be as effective as possible.



**ENDNOTES**

1 This conference was co-sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and The Pew Charitable Trusts. The principle author of the document is Sarah E. Long. Ms. Long was a participant at the Wingspread meeting, and was, at the time of its writing, an undergraduate at Providence College

2 New Student Politics, 1.

3 New Student Politics, 5.

4 Gwen Ifill, David Brooks, E.J. Dionne, Tom Mann, Norm Ornstein, Jean Bethke Elshain, Tim Penny, Steve Skowronek, and Dan Evans.

5 This event was co-sponsored by CIRCLE, The Northwestern Mutual Foundation, The Davis Family Fund. We also received significant assistance from Campus Compact, and especially Wisconsin Campus Compact. Tom Schnaubelt, Executive Director, was intimately involved with planning and organizing this event.

6 Copies of this video, "Why Young Americans Hate Politics," are available free of charge from The Johnson Foundation. Please contact Kurt Wueker at [kwueker@johnsonfdn.org](mailto:kwueker@johnsonfdn.org) to request copies.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

**CIRCLE**The Center for Information & Research  
on Civic Learning & Engagement