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Dispatch From Deep Within 'The Youth Vote'

By Tim McNabb

One of my occasional self-imposed acts of civil duty is to work as an election judge. There is nothing very sophisticated about it. Typically, it is a test of one's ability to cope with tedium.

Occasionally they get exciting, if you find fear of having a riot on your hands exciting, but for the most part an election official checks voter identification, asks them to sign the registration book, and offers the voter a ballot. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

I am genuine Republican in a very blue city, my beloved home town of St. Louis. I tend to get sent to problematic polls either by design, or by sheer luck. Under the best of conditions, working as an election judge is a great way to make 14 hours seem like 14 weeks, but if one believes that free and fair elections are the cornerstone of Western civilization and that America is the Last, Best hope, one is compelled to endure.

This election season, Saint Louis University (SLU) had a student-only polling site. Student leaders registered hundreds of members of the student body to vote in the November 4th election. These students, in conjunction with faculty and staff, negotiated with the St. Louis Board of Election Commissioners to have a precinct station right on campus.

The election judges present were all students. I was the Republican poll manager, and we had an alternate poll judge who was sent in case we needed backup. I arrived at 5:00 AM to get things set up and was greeted with eight fresh, chipper faces ready to do the heavy lifting of democracy. At least three members of the SLU faculty or staff were around, all lending hands and help to make sure things went smooth. The polling place was brightly lit, comfortably conditioned and just a few steps away from the restroom and a nice cafe.

Students were in line outside the poll to vote like they were hoping to score concert tickets. Inside the poll, my young crew lined up, raised their right hands and took the election judge oath about 20 minutes to showtime. We opened right on time with folks waiting in a queue that led all the way down the lengthy hallway and out the door.

Despite long lines, nobody crabbed, fussed or complained. The young judges

cheerfully accepted instruction, faithfully fulfilled their duty and executed their tasks flawlessly. The voters listened intently, showed their student IDs, chose the optical scanner ballot or touchscreen machine (paper or plastic!) and quietly exercised their franchise.

I am used to the occasional confrontation with someone on election day. In one primary a voter demanded to be able to vote on both the Democrat *and* Republican primary, and only after threatening to call the police and have him hauled off did the man relent, but first he felt compelled to tell me about all the conspiracies rampant in the world. I have had self-appointed election "experts" declare that a common voting practice would create a spoiled ballot. A rush of upset voters demanded that I take their punch card ballots out of the box and let them re-vote. Defusing that one took more than just clipping a the red wire. Elections are often not pretty.

This time I watched as young Americans clicked along like clockwork, excited to be part of the democratic process. We laughed, cracked jokes and had a wonderful time doing our civic duty and enjoying hot pizza at lunch and tasty sandwiches for dinner provided by a doting member of the faculty. I went for fourteen hours on an election day without helping a judge with oxygen, tripping on a walker or fitting someone for a tinfoil hat.

It was as if I had died and gone to election judge heaven.

The university really outdid itself. The student voters and the university representatives running the precinct reflected extraordinarily well on the school. The faculty associates obviously took great delight in their students, and the respect and appreciation was mutual. I can say without equivocation or fear of contradiction that as an election judge I cannot imagine a nicer environment or a more pleasant experience on Election Day serving as a small cog in democracy.

Unfortunately being a conservative it is not in my nature to simply bask in the genuinely pleasant glow of a textbook example of how democracy ought to work and leave it at that. I cannot help myself, and must dwell on the cloud behind the silver lining. As wonderful the experience was, and despite the real affection and appreciation I have toward both the judges and the voters I must confess I am not keen about the whole idea.

This city is my home. On November 4th, hundreds of people marked ballots on races and initiatives that will have repercussions long after this class has graduated and begun to call other places home. A number of students asked if it was OK to leave some parts of their ballots blank since they did not know anything about the measure, but I have a feeling that many votes were cast in favor of or against propositions and amendments that I and my more permanent fellow citizens will be stuck with.

I believe strongly that my local, state and Federal representatives ought not be

This is Frank Wilmer's Testimony on HB 30, Youth Election Judges that she gave in the Senate hearing in 2009. I transcribed this testimony from the LAWS web site.

HB 30 – It is my great pleasure to bring HB 30, a bill to allow Montana to employ youth election judges to work with & under the supervision of adult elector election judges. A number of states including Minnesota, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Colorado, Pennsylvania & the state of my youth, Maryland have had great success with similar programs sometimes called the ultimate civics lesson. There are several good reasons to support this bill. First, if you know anything about voter demographics & I'm sure you all do for having run for election. We know that 18 to 25 year olds have the lowest participation rate. This program would certainly stimulate interest & engagement among young people. I think, in fact, it already has today, who are just a year or two away from being able to vote. Getting young people involved early will create a lifetime habit of good citizenship & appreciation for the election process & the appreciation for the work the county election administrators do. Second, as we all well know our county clerks & recorders, our election administrators are coming up short often on Election Day for election judges. This is one way to give them a broader pool from which to recruit the people that they need to help on Election Day. Finally, there is what I call the baby boomer problem. Members of the committee we are getting old, I am too. I have four grandchildren. Our election administrators in many areas are having increasing difficulty finding people willing and able to serve just for one day as election judges. For some older and experience election judges the travel to and from the polls and the long day at the polls is just getting too physically taxing. Some people will tell you that 16 to 17 year olds are too immature to do this work but in this bill they will be supervised with at least one to one ratio with adult elector judges & their High School administrators are involved in screening them before they are even allowed to apply to appear on the list. Finally, the list is ultimately under the control of the election administrators, unlike the elector judges who come through political parties & approved by the county commissioners. The list of youth election judges is directly under the control of the county clerk & recorders or elections administrators. If they don't need a larger pool of election judges, they don't need to take applications from the youth election judges if they do, they can hire them or not. Since, I guess we have a little time, I thought I would read to you, I thought, a fun & insightful excerpt from one of the articles I read.

If you know the American Thinker, very good conservative online & hard copy magazine, political magazine, an article appeared there from an experienced Republican poll manager. And he describes his first experience working with youth election judges and he starts out, "One of my occasional self-imposed acts of civic duty is to work as an election judge. Nothing very sophisticated. Typically, it is a test of one's ability to cope with tedium.

"Occasionally elections get exciting, if you find the fear of having a riot on your hands exciting, but for the most part an election official checks voter ID, asks them to sign the registration book, offers the voter a ballot." He says it is kind of like "Lather. Rinse. Repeat."

He's an election judge in his hometown of St. Louis. "I tend to get sent to the problematic polls. Under the best of conditions, working as an election judge is a great way to make 14 hours seem like 14 days, but if one believes that free and fair elections are the cornerstone of Western civilization and our Last, Best hope, than one is compelled to endure those 14 hours."

So we move forward to the election judges with students. This day the election judges present were all students. I was the poll manager. We had an alternate poll judge who was sent in case we needed backup. I arrived at 5:00 AM to get things set up and was greeted with eight fresh, chipper faces ready to do the heavy lifting of democracy. Inside the poll, my young crew lined up, raised their right hands and took the election judge oath about 20 minutes into show time. Despite long lines, nobody crabbed, fussed or complained. The young judges cheerfully accepted instruction, faithfully fulfilled their duty and executed their tasks flawlessly.

He had described some problems he had in the past & estimate the youth judges would be well equip to handle some of the more difficult problems he'd face in his experience.

This time I watched as young Americans clicked along like clockwork, excited to be part of the democratic process. We laughed, cracked jokes and had a wonderful time doing our civic duty and enjoying hot pizza at lunch. I went for fourteen hours on an election day without helping a judge with oxygen, (no offense to Miss Bruck who is going to speak good favor of this bill) to tripping on a walker or fitting someone for a tinfoil hat.

chosen by folk who are by nature transient. For instance, a young voter with a Texas drivers' license was wearing a shirt supporting a "green power" initiative in Missouri (He politely took it off after being cautioned about electioneering within the poll). Why exactly should a kid from Texas be voting to create obligations on my public utilities when in a year or so he will be back in Dallas, Austin or Houston? Would it not be better for him to inform himself about the issues in his native Texas, talk it over with the folks back home and vote absentee there?

The issue obviously comes down to maximize participation through convenience. First, getting an absentee ballot requires more effort than filling out a registration form handed to you by a pretty girl or handsome young man in the student center while taking a break from studying. I do not begrudge a student who is smitten by this weird little River City their voice in our affairs if they see themselves living here after graduation, but a few blocks walk to a proper polling place is not too high a price to pay given the sacrifices made to secure that right. Moreover, students who voting as Missouri residents, though they do not plan to stay, are denying their kinfolk and friends back home their support in the issues facing them.

To the second point, voter participation is no fetish of mine. Obama will be our next president, and I wish him well, but how many of my young friends could say in their heart that if McCain had succeeded in getting more voters out, how thrilled would they be at the "participation" for the sake of participation? It is for this reason I would rather be governed by representatives chosen by a relatively small number of people who spent time considering and reflecting on the weighty matters before our cities, counties, states and nation than to have meandering tidal forces of voters who can be moved by 30 second commercials or a piece of literature thrust in their hand between the parking lot and the entrance to the polling station. Better these informed few make the decisions than have our dies cast by people who cannot muster themselves to request an absentee ballot and send it back.

I personally think Election day should April 15th, and the citizen should have to cast their ballot on the back of the check they have written to the Departments of Revenue. This will never happen, but neither should we make voting so damn convenient that the people become complacent and lackadaisical of it. If our beloved republic is worth the blood of patriots, it is worth an hour or two of reflection on election day while waiting for an open booth or a few postage stamps.