

Civic Engagement

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE DAN HOFRENNING OFFERS STUDENTS A FRONT-ROW SEAT IN PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS.

By Kari VanDerVeen PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

As Dan Hofrenning watched the presidential primary elections in 2000, he wondered why he and his political science students were in Northfield rather than New Hampshire.

The small New England state holds the first primary in the presidential election cycle, and Hofrenning saw an opportunity to give his students a hands-on learning experience in one of the most exciting events in American presidential politics. So in January 2004 he led a group of students to the east coast for the first “New Hampshire Primary and American Presidential Politics” Interim, where they interned with the presidential candidate of their choice while taking Hofrenning’s political science class. As students distributed campaign literature and made phone calls, they also analyzed and discussed the political process.

The Interim course was a hit, and this year — because the primary schedule was moved up — students worked on presidential campaigns in both New Hampshire and South Carolina. The experience gave them a wide range of perspectives, which they shared in a blog hosted on the *Minneapolis Star Tribune’s* website.

“Students must do more than understand a diverse world, they must engage it,” Hofrenning says. “My favorite moments are when students challenge conventional wisdom. When they can look at the way other scholars and people in the media understand politics and ask that critical question: ‘Is this right?’ That’s the important question, whether students want to become political scientists or politicians or work in other fields. We have to always think critically.”

Hofrenning, whose father was a pastor and a religion professor at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., grew up in a household where politics and religion were regular topics of conversation at the dinner table. After graduating from Concordia, Hofrenning attended seminary on a scholarship designed for students who were unsure of their career path. He found the studies interesting but realized his real passion was politics. Hofrenning, who has written several articles and a book on religious advocacy in American politics, did his graduate work in political science and public policy at Duke University and the University of Minnesota before joining the St. Olaf faculty in 1990.



How did your interest in politics begin?

When I was in grade school, I memorized the names and order of all the presidents. I was particularly interested in the 1968 presidential campaign, and I made my parents take me to see every candidate who came to town. I was in fourth grade at the time.

What about the 1968 campaign interested you?

It just seemed very exciting. There were all these tumultuous battles going on. I remember seeing Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller and Robert Kennedy come to my hometown. Robert Kennedy in particular had this certain kind of energy. I've seen Barack Obama this year, and he evoked memories of that capacity to connect with people about what's really important, to connect with people's inner passion. I remember as a young kid going to this place where Robert Kennedy was scheduled to appear, and he was late, but no one left. And when he arrived, he was in this red convertible and the crowd mobbed him. The sleepy town of Fargo, N.D., was never the same.

"I think students have to experience the drama and passion of politics as well as the academic study of it."

What intrigues you about the American political system?

Its capacity to make life better, to shape the direction of a community, and to address fundamentally important issues like the environment, education, economic prosperity and our relationship to other countries. It's that combination of addressing important issues in a context in which you're constantly trying to persuade people to join your cause. I think the persuasion is really interesting. Of course, it's more than just a process — it takes place within a particular institution among competing interests. And that's where political science comes in, to try to make sense of the institutions and the rhetoric.

You've written about religious advocacy in American politics and the politics of American clergy. What influence do you think religion has had on American politics?

I think it's had a big influence. People's religious identity frames the way they view the world and politics. It's interesting that when pollsters ask citizens if they would ever consider voting for an agnostic for president, three-fourths of them say no. But if they ask if they would ever vote for a member of the clergy for president, they say no to that too. They want a leader to understand the complexities of the world and understand that religion is part of that mix. If we look throughout American history, all of our presidents have in some way been religious. And all of them, with the exception of John Kennedy, have been Protestant. That says

something about the American mosaic. Now I think we're moving into a different era. We can see that in Minnesota. Keith Ellison, a Muslim, was elected to Congress. Lots of Norwegian Lutherans and German Catholics in Minneapolis — among many other citizens — supported him. The times are changing.

What do you think is the most valuable thing students get out of the Interim course that has them working on presidential campaigns?

They get a front-row seat in a marquee event of American presidential politics. When students are there, they do a whole range of things, from canvassing neighborhoods and putting up lawn signs, to organizing events and phone banks. At the end of the day, it's that sense that we're right at this seminal moment in American history. Many of these students are still working on campaigns. Two were national delegates to the Democratic convention, and three others are working with John McCain.

How do you encourage students to develop an interest in or passion for civic engagement?

I make the case to get involved because politics is a way to help shape the future direction of our community. The beauty of the Interim course is showing students the emotions of politics, that it can be exciting to be involved. I think it happened with all of the candidates [in January], from Ron Paul to John McCain to Barack Obama to Hillary Clinton. In different ways, each had a very exciting message. Having students experience the drama of politics is valuable. When we were there it was a close race, and we sort of got the feeling that every phone call we made may have made the difference.

Are you planning to do this Interim course again?

I hope to. This only happens every four years, though. I'm also working to include more experiential learning in my courses. I think there should be more of that type of learning in political science courses. This fall, for example, I want to get students involved in registering voters. There should be plenty of traditional research and learning as well, but I think students have to see the passion of politics as well as the academic study of it.

Is it possible to maintain political neutrality in the classroom?

I think it's possible to do it in different ways. A political science course is not "This is what it means to be Democrat or Republican," it's about understanding the way in which the political world works. We're preparing students for decades of civic engagement among shifting views and ideologies. My hope is that a St. Olaf political science education prepares students for that changing world and gives them the kind of imagination and intellectual tenacity they'll need to face the important issues. I think that's what a liberal arts education should do — it should lead us to take a stand, to get involved, but to also be willing to rethink our assumptions, to think critically about where we're going. 🦁

KARI VANDERVEEN is a communications specialist at St. Olaf College.