

In-class election teaches 'candidates' to frame issues for voter interests

More than two weeks after the national midterm elections, one class will head to the polls Thursday in a political science simulation.

Three student candidates will face off for the first 30 minutes of lecture Tuesday afternoon in a pre-election debate put together by Political Science 324: Political Parties and Elections.

The debate and Thursday's election mark the end of a project the class has been working on for the last several weeks: an attempt to simulate a real election.

Brian Harrison, a political science graduate student and teaching assistant, decided to use the project to transform discussion sections. Each of the three sections was assigned a political party and charged with doing issue research to create a realistic policy platform.

Similar to the general election two weeks ago, Thursday's mock election will include candidates representing the Democratic, Republican and Tea parties.

"It's thinking about how (the issues) can be related in a totally successful way to the electorate, which in this case is the class," said SESP sophomore Zach Glasser, whose section is taking the role of the Republican Party.

A comparable project was done in last year's Congress class, Harrison said. Because 2010 is an election year, students were supposed to analyze their party's platform and design a campaign.

"So they develop their party platform, but the other part of it is getting students in to vote for them," he said.

That's been particularly challenging for some of the sections, Glasser said, whose group has had the difficult task of turning the Republican platform, which traditionally attracts an older demographic, into something that can appeal to college students.

"The challenge is how to frame those issues to appeal to a relatively liberal group of students," Glasser said.

If that was a challenge for the Republicans, it could have been a political nightmare for the Tea Party section.

Michael Kurtz, the appointed candidate for the group, joked that if he were running as Sarah Palin he wouldn't get a single vote.

But that's where his personal proposed platform differs from the research his section has done.

"It's their job to articulate our principles, but it's my job to marry our principles to electoral necessity and try to win a majority," the Weinberg sophomore said.

Kurtz said his campaign could be described as socially semi-tolerant, non-interventionist in foreign policy and fiscally very conservative.

To prevent a harsh negative reaction from student voters to a right-wing social agenda, he said he decided

instead to incorporate the Tea Party's stringent interpretation of the Constitution. It would provide for issues such as gay marriage and marijuana legalization to be settled at the state level, he said.

"That's somewhat tolerant, but intelligently you could also fathom a Tea Partier taking that stance," Kurtz said.

And that demonstrates what he said he learned the most about through the project.

"You have to remember that within any party there's a spectrum," Kurtz said. "There's more than this left-right dichotomy."

The class will vote during Thursday's lecture after the debate Tuesday. Harrison will ask the three candidates questions from a list of topics and audience members will also have the opportunity to pose their own.

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