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Student Impact on the 1970 Utah Nominating Conventions

WAYNE AULT* AND J. KEITH MELVILLE**

Student protest erupted all over America in May 1970 as a result of the United States invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State tragedy. Harsh voices were heard around the land condemning the college youth of America when some protests resulted in violent confrontations with police. Some feared America was on the brink of serious civil strife and demanded hard-line, punitive measures. However, some students sought alternative ways to express the widespread dismay over this new American involvement in Southeast Asia. One such alternative received practical testing at the University of Utah.

After some tension on the University of Utah campus and insistence by a large segment of students that the University be closed, a referendum was held. The students voted to keep the school open and return to class. This did not constitute a vote to do nothing but, for many at least, was a vote against what they perceived to be a destructive and fruitless means of protest. Instead, a responsible political action program was developing at the university.

The seminal idea for this activity had been suggested at a College Republican meeting in 1968, that students be mobilized for the election, but it was discarded as unworkable.

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The idea, however, remained alive in the mind of Vice-chairman Suzanne Dean. She presented a plan to student government officers in the spring of 1970 which would enable the students to work for change through the political party of their choice as an alternative to protest. Miss Dean urged that a telephone survey be conducted to determine political preferences of university students. The interested students would be encouraged to attend their party's neighborhood mass meetings and run for delegate positions. Later, students could group together in caucuses at county and state conventions of both parties and influence candidates and platforms by voting as a bloc.¹

One of the major tasks was to quickly find the politically motivated students out of a 22,000 enrollment and give them specific instructions about their particular voting districts in time for the mass meetings in May. At this point, the work of Dr. William Viavant, a professor of computer science and an expert in using computers to process voting data, became invaluable. During a meeting of the leaders of the College Republicans and the Young Democrats with the Salt Lake County chairmen from both parties, Dr. Viavant explained a computer program which could match the students from Salt Lake County on the registrar's list with their individual voting districts.

The university regents and the local officials of both parties approved the project, the computer printout was obtained, and the real work began. As chairman of Participation '70, Miss Dean, with her staff of four, set up operations in some unused offices on campus donated by the university. A political "boiler room" was organized with student volunteers. Telephone canvassers called students and determined their political preferences. The most politically interested student in each voting district was then sent a letter urging him to run as a delegate at his mass meeting. The letter also contained a list of other students on whom he could call for support. Over 1,000 students attended mass meetings on 18 May, electing approximately 400 students to party offices. More than 200 students won delegate positions.

A joint Republican-Democratic caucus of student delegates preceded the Salt Lake County conventions. Following an

¹Suzanne Dean, private interview held at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 1970.

opening session where general goals were considered, the respective party delegates caucused separately and outlined their specific strategies. Resolutions written and sponsored by students were passed at the Republican County Convention calling for (1) increased youth participation in county politics, (2) more responsible environmental policies, and (3) a code of ethics for county officials. There was evidence at the convention that the youth movement did not please all adult politicians. One candidate for the state legislature circulated a handbill among delegates entitled, "Participation '70: Its Real Purpose?" The sheet said:

Is it possible the (University of Utah) Administration has launched a personal vendetta against conservative candidates who have opposed the policies of the Administration? The cat was let out of the bag when it was revealed that prime conservative candidates have been picked as targets by this group (Participation '70), not to be helped in their election campaign, but to be knocked out of the running. . . .²

This fear was unfounded, as there is no evidence that students worked only for liberal and against conservative candidates.

The student delegates to the Democratic County Convention caucused and decided to vote as a bloc for candidates. Although the balloting at the convention is secret, most students made a pledge to vote the decision of the caucus. The pledge apparently held, because in every case the candidate endorsed by the student caucus not only gained a place on the primary ballot but came out first in conventional balloting. The student caucus, holding 100 of the 600 delegate votes, undoubtedly had a deciding impact in six county races. Student resolutions dealing with lowering the voting age, electoral reform, civil rights, and ecology were passed. A platform amendment calling for the involvement of youth in government was adopted.

Following the county conventions, Participation '70 leaders mobilized student delegate power for the state conventions. Student state delegates were identified, including those from other counties; party caucuses were held; candidates were invited to speak to the students and respond to their questions; and seminars were held for student party officers. Both parties agreed to seat students on their platform com-

²"Participation '70: Its Real Purpose," *Utah Independent*, 11 June 1970.

mittees, and Democratic students were seated also on rules, credentials, and resolutions committees. The Republican students at the state convention agreed in caucus to certain platform changes which the platform committee would not accept without compromise. The changes to which the committee agreed increased the role of youth in the youth and republicanism plank, strengthened the individual rights section on equal opportunities for decent housing and employment, and softened the law and order proposal dealing with student and faculty conduct. The Republican platform with these student modifications was accepted without objection by the convention.

The Democratic students resolved to make several major changes in their party's state platform. The two student delegates on the platform committee chaired the plank on Indo-China and Military Spending, which called for the "immediate withdrawal of all military personnel from Southeast Asia. . . ."³ Student members of the rules committee were able to block the original rules, which would have required that the entire document be presented and debated as a whole, substituting the rule that the platform be considered plank by plank.

The students engineered significant revisions and additions to the platform concerning draft reform, higher education, human rights, basic freedoms, consumer affairs, and drugs. They also proposed six resolutions: (1) On Senator Moss, (2) The Quality of Life, (3) Higher Education, (4) Party Organization, (5) Indo-China War, and (6) Dissent and Freedom of Speech—all of which passed.

One of the most provocative student insertions in the plank on education called on the "Utah Legislature to enact legislation guaranteeing that police, military, or vigilante groups will not be permitted on campuses of higher education unless and until the heads of those institutions specifically recognize in writing the existence of a 'clear and present danger which cannot be remedied by a campus security force.'"⁴ This position was supported with the passage of the resolution on dissent and freedom of speech which condemned "the passage of any legislation which is designed to curtail legitimate dissent," and reaffirmed "the right of an individual freely to

³Preliminary Draft of 1970 Utah Democratic Platform.

⁴1970 *Utah Democratic Platform: Government in a Changing America*.

express his thoughts and convictions, no matter how unacceptable they may be to others in our society. . . ."⁵

A general statement on civil rights was replaced with a series of specific provisions on the needs of Indians, Blacks, and Mexican-Americans, which called for better educational opportunities for minority groups, including bilingual instruction; the end of discrimination in employment and housing; protection of migrant workers; and the extension of civil liberties and citizenship rights to all regardless of race, creed, national origin, or sex.

The plank on drugs, urging that "anti-drug police forces, both federal and state, be strengthened in numbers and training" was completely rewritten by the students so that it included a section indicating that the times demand "new thinking and new approaches to the drug problem. Imaginative educational programs should begin at the grade school level. . . . Treatment and rehabilitation programs need strengthening and diversification. . . . The enforcement of our laws must be strengthened, not by heavier penalties and more laws, but by more realistic and consistent laws."

Possibly the convention's most liberal and controversial proposal was the resolution on the quality of life which addressed environmental and population problems:

WE THEREFORE RESOLVE, in order to check the excessive population threat:

1. To promote education about family planning and the problems that are generated by unregulated population growth.
2. To support legislation permitting birth control, abortion, or sterilization, the effect of which would be to allow each family the option to limit the size of the family unit.

The resolution on the Indo-China War supported the plank on immediate withdrawal from Southeast Asia and further resolved: "That this Party calls upon the Legislature of the State of Utah to enact appropriate legislation to prohibit the federal government from sending abroad a citizen of this state to fight in a foreign war which has not been constitutionally declared by Congress." The students also inserted

⁵1970 Utah Democratic Party Resolutions.

an original plank urging the adoption of an all-volunteer army before July 1971.

The student amendments caused little reaction by the regular Democratic state delegates at first. All were anxious to get on with the business and move to the voting on primary candidates which was the last order of business. But, with each additional amendment, tension built up until the convention erupted in disorder. Quick tempers and heated debate, however, gave way to a shortage of time when student delegate Ludean Robson moved that the convention shut off debate and vote on all proposed resolutions together. The chair ruled the "ayes" have it; the students carried the day.

The success of the Utah Democratic student delegates was aired nationwide when the Associated Press carried a story about the students and their resolutions. Even the conservative Paul Harvey was impressed when he stated that "young people are asserting themselves politically right now in a manner unprecedented in our country. Last [summer] a bunch of young Democrats in Utah decided to overthrow the establishment in the American way, within the framework of the democratic process."⁶

Significant student influence was evident in both state conventions, although the most volatile action occurred in the Democratic convention. In an attempt to gauge the significance of student participation, questionnaires were sent to (1) student delegates, (2) regular state delegates, and (3) to Congressional and Senatorial candidates and their key campaign workers. The entire group of 245 student delegates was surveyed. Fifty-seven percent (140 students) responded. Of the 33 candidates and campaign workers surveyed, 19, or 58 percent, returned their questionnaires. The candidate survey did not determine political affiliation because of the limited number surveyed. A stratified random sample was used to survey the regular state delegates, proportionate to the number of delegates from each county. It was determined that a sampling of 100 delegates from each party would be representative of the entire group. Sixty-two percent (124 state delegates) responded.

The Democratic students surveyed overwhelmingly believed they made a significant contribution at their state convention.

⁶Paul Harvey, "Young Democrats Set National Pattern," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, October 7, 1970.

While a very large percentage of the Republican students felt they also made a significant contribution, the majority concluded that they contributed as much or slightly more than other delegates. (See Table 1.)

Table 1
*Students' Self-Image at the State Convention
in Relation to Political Affiliation*

Impression	Democrat		Republican	
	(Percent)	(Number)	(Percent)	(Number)
Made significant contribution	83	68	41	24
Contributed slightly more than other delegates	1	1	5	3
Contributed as much as other delegates	7	5	46	27
Contributed but were disruptive	4.5	4	0	0
Other	4.5	4	8	4
Total:	100	82	100	58

Chi-square: 38.1760 $\rho < .001$

The majority of the regular Democratic delegates felt the students made a significant contribution at the state convention. In contrast, less than 14 percent of the Republican delegates believed the students made a significant contribution. However 19 percent of the Democratic delegates thought the student contribution was somewhat negative or disruptive. (See Table 2.)

Table 2
*State Delegates' Impression of Students at the State Convention
in Relation to Political Affiliation*

Impression	Democrat		Republican	
	(Percent)	(Number)	(Percent)	(Number)
Made significant contribution	59	34	13.5	9
Contributed slightly more than other delegates	5	3	6	4
Contributed as much as other delegates.....	17	10	70	46
Contributions were both good and bad	9	5	1.5	1
Were a disruptive element	10	6	1.5	1
Other	0	0	8.5	5
Total:	100	58	100	66

Chi-square: 48.7454 $\rho < .001$

Sixty-three percent of the candidates and campaign workers surveyed believed the students made a significant contribution at the conventions, and an additional 26 percent felt they contributed as much as the regular delegates. (See Table 3.)

Table 3
*Candidates and Campaign Managers' Impression of Students
at the State Convention*

Impression	Percent	Number
Made significant contribution	63.1	12
Contributed as much as other delegates	26.3	5
Lacked political experience	5.3	1
No impression	5.3	1
Total:	100	19

The student delegates were probably the most significant bloc in the 1970 conventions. This was especially true of the Democratic Convention. They were able to turn the two parties to a more youthful perspective and address the significant issues facing Utahns as part of the whole American scene.

Confrontation politics of our day is characteristic of political activity in which students lack legitimate channels of communication to authority. Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California at Berkeley, has "observed that political groups turn to activist demonstrations when they find themselves ignored by the adult power structure."⁷ A significant number of Utah students became aware that the legitimate channels of communication to authority were open. A student-initiated project let the students know that there was an alternative to protest through Utah's "mass meeting" system; and for those who were dissatisfied with the policies of government, there were avenues for change more productive than demonstrations.

No one should think that political action is an easy road, but the Utah experience shows it can be done with substantial effect. Students should be encouraged to carefully formulate goals, develop strategies, and apply programs of action to help solve the urgent problems facing America today. And the students themselves will be the most significant beneficiaries as the world they help to build will be theirs tomorrow.

⁷Seymour Martin Lipset, "Students and Politics in Comparative Perspective," *Daedalus*, No. 1 (Winter 1968), pp. 15-16.