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A librarian run's for political office (or Cincinnatus looks outside the Ivory Tower)

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Abstract

Librarians have long been activists for social and political causes outside of their profession; however, few take the crucial step and actually run for political office at the local, state, or national level. In March 2014, after being involved in local and state politics for over ten years and volunteering for political campaigns at the local, state, and national level, and with some encouragement from individuals I knew in political and academic circles, I threw myself into the political realm by registering to run as a (moderate) Republican for a House seat in the Utah Legislature. Little did I know that, as an academic librarian, this would be an incredible learning experience. I wish to emphasize that this is not an article on how to run for office (there are numerous articles and books that discuss this subject). Rather this is an overview and case study of an academic librarian who became involved in the political process and exercised his right to run for office to represent the community in which he resides.

“I am fortunate to have two jobs I genuinely love...and when the politics gets too bitter and the back stabbing becomes more than I can take, I leave the University and come down to the State house” – Eugene Watts, Professor of Political Science at Ohio State University and former State Senator (Schwarz, 6)

The Decision to Run

In undergraduate political philosophy classes students learn of Cincinnatus, the Roman leader, who left his farm to serve as a leader in the Roman Empire and then returned home to labor as a humble farmer (Moncrief, Squire & Jewell, 4). The story of Cincinnatus has become ingrained into American political philosophy and is followed in a majority of states in the United States, which have a part-time legislatures. American political thought has long given credence to citizen legislators who serve part time and yet support households with other employment and remain active in the social and political fabric of their neighborhoods and communities, carrying the values and interests of their constituents to the state house (Moncrief, Squire & Jewell, 4-6).

On a crisp March day in 2014, I found myself walking up the steps of the Utah State Capitol to the Lieutenant Governor’s office to register as a candidate for the 2014 election for House Seat 40 in the Utah State Legislature. My motivations for running were simple; broadly, I felt (as many do) that politics had become too extreme on both sides of the political aisle, and at the local level, ever-increasing property taxes were a concern to many residents that fell on the deaf ears of elected officials. My background in politics includes serving on government relations committees during my time as a academic librarian at The Research Libraries of The New York Public Library and, currently, on the faculty senate committee for community and government

relations at the University of Utah. I have volunteered in political campaign efforts in Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County for several candidates for city, county, state, and federal offices. I also served an uneventful and disappointing two-year stint on the Utah Humanities Council, where I advised (though was not always listened to) on state political issues for funding. What I learned over the next nine months running for state office would open my eyes to conditions in my legislative district and, ultimately, make me better librarian and an informed citizen, more aware of the community in which I reside and the politics that impact people's daily lives.

Whereas I had known of other academics who ran for state office to make the general public aware of specific issues without a realistic chance of winning (Noble & Wagner, 8), I genuinely believed I had a long shot of winning this race. After the incumbent representative stepped down in March 2014, the race was wide open on all sides of the political spectrum. Over the years I had become aware of academic and public librarians who ran for state office in New York, Illinois, Wyoming, and North Dakota (B.G, 909), with librarians being elected in Wyoming (Kinney, IV). and New York (Black Americans in Congress, 536). In the recent past faculty and staff members from various public and private universities and colleges in Utah have run for state and local office as Democrats, Republicans, and Independents from the academic fields of chemical engineering, medicine, political science, business, theater, history, and development/fund raising. During the 2014 election, a former college president (whose academic background is in English) from Northern Utah ran (successfully) as a Republican for the State Senate and, more recently, a history instructor from a small school in southern Utah served in the statehouse and is now an aide to the Governor of the State of Utah. In addition, the year before I read the book *Blue State Blues: How a Cranky Conservative Launched a Campaign and Found*

Himself the Liberal Candidate (And Still Lost) by David R. Slavitt, a faculty member at Harvard University and nationally renowned poet. As the title suggests, he had run for the Massachusetts State Legislature as a (moderate) Republican from Cambridge, Massachusetts, one of the most staunchly Democratic strongholds in the United States. Aside from being an excellent and humorous read, Slavitt's observations and experiences in running for the statehouse in Massachusetts yielded valuable and learned advice for an academic running for office for the very first time.

The Utah House and District 40

When I registered to run, I was the lone Republican candidate in House District 40, which thankfully spared me the expense of a primary election. Five democrats had registered to run, and there was one candidate from the Libertarian Party and one candidate from the Utah Constitution Party (although she would later be deemed ineligible to remain on the ballot for failing to file financial disclosures for her campaign). Of all of the House and Senate legislative districts in the State of Utah that were up for election in 2014, House District 40 had the largest number of individuals vying for the seat.

The Utah Legislature is a part-time legislative body that meets for 45 days each year. Its membership consists of individuals serving in the model of Cincinnatus, including pharmacists, ranchers, farmers, bankers, homemakers, salesmen, property developers, and an art gallery owner, among others; so why not a librarian? The current composition of the Utah House is 12 Democrats and 63 Republicans. During the 2013 legislative session Utah was the first state

legislative body in the United States to have women lead both the minority and majority parties in the state House of Representatives (Koenen, np).

The geographic boundaries of House District 40 include parts of Salt Lake City and other municipalities of incorporated and un-incorporated Salt Lake County; its approximate population is 38,310 individuals. This House district had been held by Democrats for over 20 years, although in recent elections prior to redistricting, the difference in votes had come down to as few as 40 votes (never say your vote doesn't count). The demographics of House District 40 are fairly middle class with little ethnic diversity. The district is 88% Caucasian and 12% either Hispanic, African American, or Pacific Islander. Twenty-five percent of the population has a bachelor's degree and 12% hold a master's degree or higher; the largest employers for the district included public education, social services, and health care, although approximately 10% of the population lived in poverty (as defined by federal and state guidelines) with 9% of households receiving some form of public assistance. Median household income is approximately \$52,500, 15% of the population had incomes of over \$100,000 (Household Income in State House District 40), and 58% of the residents owned their own homes (Office of Legislative Research and General Counsel).

Diving Headfirst into Politics

“Seeking elective office requires...political awareness, organizational skill and just plain hard work” (Kleinkauf, 181); it also requires a willingness to open oneself to your potential constituents and to have a thick skin. Putting oneself on the ballot for political office exposes a great deal about your personal life. While I am a firm believer in transparency for financial

filings for political candidates and officeholders, I quickly realized that in a very short period of time, the general public was aware of who my wife was, where she worked, our home address and phone number, and had access to information such as the make-up of our stock portfolio (Utah election law requires financial disclosure of individual stocks worth more than \$5,000 dollars, although mutual funds, family trusts, investment property and exchange-traded funds are not included in this rule). To this day, regardless of whether I agree with a politician's stance on issues, I have the utmost respect for the courage of putting oneself out there to the general public and removing some layers of privacy that individuals and families expect to have in their everyday lives.

Unlike faculty and staff at some other universities that have in the past restricted political activities (Schmidt, A6-A7), I was fortunate that political activity is protected by the policies and procedures of the University of Utah, which state, "An Employee may become a candidate for elective office as a representative or senator in the Utah State Legislature without resigning from the University and without securing a leave of absence. If elected, the Employee shall be granted a leave of absence without pay for the period of time between the commencement and final adjournment of any regular or special session of the legislature of which the Employee is a member." (University of Utah Policies and Procedures, Policy 5-201). Common sense dictated that I never used my office or office computer or work email for campaign work. A majority of campaign events took place in the evening and weekends, so that with the exception of a single three-hour breakfast meeting with a public interest group for which I used three hours of vacation time, I missed no time at work.

Having been involved with the Masters of Public Administration program at the University of Utah for over 15 years, I had some name recognition with former students who worked in government and the nonprofit sector and found a fair amount of goodwill and interest in my campaign. I have always made it point to keep my political life and my academic career separate, rarely discussing politics at work. A number of my colleagues were surprised to learn that I was running and even more surprised that I was running as a (moderate) Republican. At the same time, I was surprised by the number of colleagues who confessed to me their political affiliations on both sides of the political aisle. My political views are socially liberal and fiscally conservative. I am pro-choice and a strong supporter of marriage equality for all, but at the same time, I live in a very fiscally conservative state and I sleep well at night knowing that the frugal nature of our state lawmakers has provided a fairly large rainy-day fund and a state with a AAA bond rating. I was a strong supporter of our former Governor Jon Huntsman (later Ambassador to China and a U.S. Presidential Candidate in 2014). I am also a supporter of our current Governor, Gary Herbert, for his views on education, for what he has done for economic development in the State of Utah, and for his willingness to listen to opposing points of view even when he disagrees with others. His collegiality and civility should be a model for all elected officials in the United States. I support the rights of undocumented individuals to gain legal status in the United States, while at the same time I fully support the deportation of undocumented individuals who have committed violent crimes or felonies. I support the rights of the children of these individuals to have access to the same scholarships and financial aid that all other students do. My views on this come from the fact that I am a first-generation American and the child of immigrants. Within the Republican Party of Utah, I was looked upon as somewhat of an outsider, and some would even venture to call me a RINO (Republican in Name Only) . Some

of my political cohorts in the Utah Republican Party have even referred to me as the last of the Rockefeller Republicans (Rockefeller, np).

Memorable Moments of the Campaign

The next nine months would be a whirlwind of evening and weekend meetings with community groups and campaigning at events like the Fourth of July fireworks and the local county fair.

Campaigning came easily for me. As Betty Card, a librarian at the University of North Dakota and a former Democratic candidate for the state House of Representatives commented,

“Librarians are a natural in politics...librarians understand public relations and working with the public” (B.G, 909). I believed that if I was elected, I could be a voice for literacy and education as well as a voice of reason for stable budgets, limited tax increases, and fiscal responsibility in government.

During the summer of 2014, when the Salt Lake Tribune described me as “...a librarian running for office” (Davidson & Whitehurst, B1), I smiled because I had to admit they had described me perfectly and I even joked with a number of people that I hadn’t been slandered by the press.

Before the article appeared several Republican state delegates told me there was no way I could run a competitive race because of the high number of voters in my district who are employed in county government and public education. They suggested that these individuals would not look past party affiliation. I would find when speaking with voters at community events that this wasn’t an issue; a number of teachers told me they found my views to be honest and refreshing, especially when it came limiting, but not calling for the abolition of, such federal initiatives as the Common Core and the No Child Left Behind Act. At the same time, my

Democratic opponent was employed as a Deputy Mayor for Salt Lake County and I found that mentioning my opponent's name and position to county employees who lived in House District 40 made them look at my candidacy in a positive light.

Utah, like most other states, has state political conventions for all registered parties in the state. As is often the case, those on the political extreme tend to dominate the party platforms at the state level. A few days before the quote about me appeared in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, I learned how unpopular I was with the far right (tea party and social conservatives) faction of the Utah Republican Party. At the state convention, I was asked to speak to a group of delegates from my legislative district. Questions regarding taxes, education, and the relationships between municipalities and the state were discussed in a collegial and relaxed manner; however, when the question of marriage equality arose, the mood shifted. Although the Supreme Court had not yet decided to hear cases about marriage equality, I noted that this would move from a states' right issue to a federal issue and was less important than the other issues we had been discussing. Marriage equality was a moral absolute for me—one about which I would not change my mind for the purposes of popularity. When I presented my position on marriage equality, the mood of the room turned decidedly angry, and I was criticized for being immoral and for not supporting “traditional families.” I responded that no one should be subject to losing a job or their home because of whom they chose to spend their life with. (At the time in Utah, it was legal to dismiss a person from their place of employment or to evict them from their rental property based on their sexual orientation.) Furthermore, I asked why my wife and I, who have no children, should be eligible for a reduced family membership at the county pool when a same-sex couple with children does not qualify for this benefit. After this tense exchange, during which I feared at one

point would turn violent, more than half the people left the room, and I know it cost me several political donations and endorsements. At the same time, a number of people at the event commended me for standing my ground, and several delegates acknowledged that only a (moderate) Republican like myself could be elected in this district.

Despite moments like this, surprisingly, during my campaign, I never felt that my position as a tenured academic was a liability. I had known of other academics running for office who downplayed their employment and academic credentials, but my opponents never referred to me as being an elitist or “out of touch with life” or “up in the Ivory Tower” nor did the issue arise of there being a conflict of interest as a faculty member at a publically funded university (Schwarz, 6). Often voters would ask how an academic could run as a Republican, and one lobbyist went so far as to ask me, “didn’t all the granola-eating hippies at the University object to you running?” but I simply pointed out that a majority of academics are more political centrists (Glenn, A10) and that my colleagues were very supportive. This was despite the fact that I had heard stories of individuals running for office who were socially ostracized or isolated at work once they revealed their political stripes on either end of the spectrum (Moncrief, Squire & Jewell, 78-79) (Noble & Wagner, 21-22).

The discussions I had with voters and representatives of various interest groups were eye opening and covered a diversity of issues familiar to most Americans. Undocumented individuals worried whether their U.S.-born children would have access to higher education and the ability to climb the social and economic ladder of our society. I became aware of the unseen poverty caused by stagnant wages in my district, which would nevertheless be described as a

middle-class area. I met with students who could afford to pay college tuition but could not afford to pay for their text books. Recently returned war veterans described to me how they were still struggling to fit back into society and to find gainful employment. Yet in some cases, neighbors were more concerned with potholes and city parks than were with social or economic issues. Among my greatest frustrations on the campaign trail were nonprofit groups who advocated on the part of the homeless but could not agree with one another on the best policies to address the issue, thereby preventing coordinated efforts to help affected individuals in Salt Lake City and its surrounding areas. This is still a contentious issue in state and local politics.

I found that a number of voters, regardless of political affiliation, shared my opinions on property taxes and excessive bond issuances by local governments. The topic of fiscal restraint met with positive responses among the electorate. Many elderly voters feared losing their homes to excessive property taxation as home values in the district continued to increase at double-digit rates. Although I wouldn't support the measure, I gauged from speaking with numerous voters outside of Salt Lake City that a state law similar to Proposition 13 in California, which capped property taxes, would have some grassroots support if it were proposed.

Voters were always very interested in discussing their concerns with state government, but fundraising for the campaign was a constant struggle. In the beginning of my campaign, I loaned my campaign \$1,000 dollars from my savings to start the campaign fund. Several friends and academic colleagues generously wrote checks to my campaign (unsolicited) and the Salt Lake County Republican Party also provided support toward the end of my race, but at the end of the

day, “Fund raising is the one area of campaigning that consistently offers a steady stream of rejection, refusal and dismissal from friends, strangers and (political) associates” (Lewis, 30).

On the evening of election day in November, I watched as the closing numbers recorded the results of the three-way race for House Seat 40. My Democratic opponent had won with 5,484 votes, and I was the runner-up with 3,021 votes; the Libertarian candidate had captured 482 votes. I was later told by more than several Republican voters that they chose to skip my name on the ballot and not vote for anyone in the House District 40 race because all three candidates were strong supporters of marriage equality. Although I was disappointed by this, what was more depressing to me was that less than 53% of registered voters bothered to vote at all (Swensen, np). The day after the election I congratulated my opponent, and several friends and colleagues gave me some good-natured ribbing, congratulating me on not winning and getting back to what I do best, being a librarian.

Conclusion

While I am undecided as to whether I’ll run again for state office, I hope that my attempt to seek public office will motivate others in public and higher education to get involved in the political process on all sides of the political spectrum and at all levels of government. Political involvement is a positive way to make a difference in the communities in which you reside and work. I firmly believe that, regardless of which side of the political aisle, people enter local and state political races not for personal gain or influence, but because they truly believe they can make difference and make their own community a better place. This reflects many of the core

values of librarianship and is exactly why I am advocating for more librarians to become involved in the political process.

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