

Prologue

Student Government¹

For most Americans the major news event on November 5, 1996, was Bill Clinton's reelection as president of the United States. Clinton's victory was historic. For the first time since Franklin Delano Roosevelt won his fourth presidential contest in 1944, voters had chosen the same Democratic president for a second consecutive election. Clinton's triumph was especially significant in the nation's capital. It meant that residents of Washington, D.C., could avoid the upheaval that often accompanies a change in the presidency. White House aides and other executive branch officials could start working on Clinton's second-term agenda. Members of Congress and various Washington-based interest groups could set their own legislative priorities with knowledge of who would have the power to sign or veto bills. National print and television media outlets could begin reporting on the new faces and new policies that might appear in a second Clinton term.

But in one corner of the nation's capital, the big story of the November 1996 election was not the presidential contest but

¹In addition to contemporaneous news accounts from such sources as the Associated Press, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, *New York Times*, *The Hoya*, *Georgetown Voice*, and *Washington City Paper*, the preparation of this case study would not have been possible without the generous assistance of former Campaign Georgetown leaders James Fogarty, Chad Griffin, Dan Leistikow, and Rebecca Sinderbrand.

one with historic meaning of its own. Voters in one of the city's Advisory Neighborhood Commission districts—ANC-2E (www.anc2e.com)—elected two new members who were barely old enough to cast ballots for themselves: James Fogarty and Rebecca Sinderbrand, both nineteen years old and students at Georgetown University. That these new commissioners were precocious was newsworthy in itself. But the events that led to and followed their election were even more significant. For good or ill, Georgetown University student leaders had determined that the ANC did not represent their interests and decided to influence the commission by electing new members. Whether one agreed or disagreed with the movement to elect Fogarty and Sinderbrand, the effort was an indisputably powerful example of effective citizen participation in the democratic process.

THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA AND NEIGHBORHOOD DEMOCRACY

The District of Columbia, which comprises the city of Washington, is by design more than a typical city but less than a sovereign state. Its governance has long reflected that unique status. From the District's official organization in 1801 until the last quarter of the twentieth century, the federal government held strict jurisdiction over D.C. government. During that time, citizens who lived in Washington did not have the power to vote in presidential elections, elect representatives to the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives, or choose local governing officials. For most of this time the District was governed by a board of commissioners appointed by the president and overseen by Congress.

The wall of federal control over the District began to crack in the 1960s and 1970s in favor of more self-government. In March 1961 the constitutionally required number of states to amend the U.S. Constitution voted to ratify the Twenty-Third Amendment, which permits D.C. citizens to cast ballots in presidential elections.

Twelve years later, in 1973, Congress passed home-rule legislation for the District, which allowed for the direct election of a mayor and a thirteen-member council—eight elected from individual, geographic-based districts, or wards, and five elected at-large from the District as a whole.

The layers of citizen involvement in the administration of Washington did not stop there. The fledgling D.C. government established a network of thirty-seven Advisory Neighborhood Commissions to give citizens a greater voice on issues related to their specific communities. Each ANC is responsible for a certain bounded section of Washington. For example, ANC-2E covers the neighborhoods of Georgetown, Burleith, and Hillandale. Additionally, each commissioner represents a specific part of the ANC territory called a Single Member District (SMD). Each commissioner serves a two-year term and is accountable to approximately 2,000 constituents in his or her SMD. Commissioners are not paid, but they control a small annual budget for supplies and neighborhood grants. The D.C. government describes the role of ANCs as follows:

The Advisory Neighborhood Commissions consider a wide range of policies and programs affecting their neighborhoods, including traffic, parking, recreation, street improvements, liquor licenses, zoning, economic development, police protection, sanitation and trash collection, and the District's annual budget.

In each of these areas, the intent of the ANC legislation is to ensure input from an advisory board that is made up of the residents of the neighborhoods that are directly affected by government action. The ANCs are the body of government with the closest official ties to the people in a neighborhood.

The ANCs present their positions and recommendations on issues to various District government agencies, the Executive Branch, and the Council. They

also present testimony to independent agencies, boards, and commissions, usually under the rules of procedure specific to those entities. By law, the ANCs may also present their positions to Federal agencies.²

District of Columbia law requires that the D.C. Council and various appointed bodies, such as the Zoning Commission, give “great weight” to ANC resolutions and decisions. In 1997 Councilman Jack Evans said that he and his colleagues on the council “really take them [the ANCs] seriously. We look to them to get their advice. Ninety-five percent of the time, we follow the lead of the ANC.”³ Although others questioned the influence of ANCs, Evans’s opinion had real significance for Georgetown University students: Since 1991 he has represented the district that includes Georgetown, Burleith, and Hillandale—all neighborhoods where students live and park, and all within ANC-2E.⁴

TOWN VS. GOWN

Conflicts between town and gown date back to the Middle Ages. Back then, differences of opinion between local community members and university residents were not to be taken lightly. In 1355 an argument in a tavern near Oxford University exploded into a two-day battle between townspeople and Oxford scholars that left scores on both sides dead.⁵ Although bloody disputes are uncommon today, universities and their surrounding neighborhoods still have heated clashes. The tension between residents in Washington’s

²Advisory Neighborhood Commissions, <http://anc.dc.gov/anc/site/default.asp>.

³Todd Beamon, “Even After 2 Decades, ANCs Fall Short of a D.C. Dream,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 1997, B1.

⁴Jack Evans, Ward 2, www.dccouncil.washington.dc.us/EVANS/about.html.

⁵Oxford City Council, “Top Ten Astonishing Facts,” www.oxford.gov.uk/community/interesting-facts.cfm.

storied Georgetown neighborhood and the highly regarded Jesuit academic institution of the same name is a classic example.

Georgetown University (www.georgetown.edu), founded in 1789, sits on high ground north of M Street N.W. and west of Wisconsin Avenue. The university's elevated topography, which offers breathtaking views of the Potomac River, the nearby Virginia suburbs, and parts of the D.C. skyline, matches its towering heights in the academic world. But unlike most university communities, where the college is the undisputed center of attention, the surrounding neighborhood has a rich history all its own. Georgetown, which was established as a municipality in 1751, when the area still belonged to the British colony of Maryland, was an early hub of commerce and shipping. It was incorporated into the District of Columbia in 1871. Today, Georgetown's cobblestone streets and brick townhouses, convenience to downtown Washington, noted restaurants, and high-end shopping have attracted many of Washington's most prominent and affluent citizens as residents.⁶

For much of their recent history, the two Georgetowns—university and neighborhood—have experienced a rocky coexistence. Neighbors have long griped about the university's expanding footprint in the community. In August 1990 residents appeared before a Washington zoning board meeting and asked the members not to approve a university development plan until the university agreed to cap enrollment and require that students live on campus. As one citizen leader complained, “[s]lumlords are willing to stuff six or eight students in a house. Late at night they will come pouring out of the houses, drinking beer and screaming at each other.”⁷ In the early 1990s forty residents formed a group called Residents for a Safe Georgetown to pressure some of the neighborhood's most popular bars—largely frequented by

⁶ Georgetown Historic District, www.nps.gov/history/nR/travel/wash/dc15.htm.

⁷ “Campus Life: Georgetown, Neighbors Fight Student Housing Off Campus,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1992.

students—into meeting several demands, including more aggressively cracking down on underage drinking and refusing service to intoxicated customers. In 1994 a flood of complaints about student renters making loud noise, littering, leaving lawns uncut, increasing traffic, and taking up parking spaces throughout Northwest Washington led three D.C. Council members to introduce legislation that would have limited the formation of group houses. Neighborhood activists also fought the university over its desire to build a campus power plant.

But it was not until the eight-member ANC took direct action against students that they decided to flex their civic muscles. In the summer of 1996 the ANC endorsed a proposal to limit student parking privileges in the neighborhoods around campus. The limitations were to take effect on October 1, 1996. The ANC also supported a rezoning plan that would limit each home to no more than three unrelated residents—a move that would make it very difficult for Georgetown students to rent nearby houses and apartments. Since more than 1,200 students lived off campus in surrounding neighborhoods, the ANC plan would have affected a large section of the student body. Faced with the threat of the ANC taking action to deprive them of parking and housing options, Georgetown student leaders decided to fight back at the ballot box. They figured their best opportunity was November 5, 1996, the next time that all eight ANC seats would be up for reelection.

CAMPAIGN GEORGETOWN

The entity through which students fought back was not originally intended to mobilize voters for particular candidates. In early 1996 approximately two dozen Georgetown students formed a nonpartisan organization called Campaign Georgetown. Their primary goals were to register Georgetown students for the fall presidential election and to foster conversation about local issues. But when the ANC voted for the parking restrictions and

supported a crackdown on group homes, Campaign Georgetown leaders made a last-minute decision to compete in the ANC election.

It would have been overly ambitious for Georgetown students to try to win all eight seats on the ANC. The map made it impossible. In 1991, when the District redrew ANC political boundaries as part of the reapportionment required every ten years, the Georgetown ANC had grown from six seats to eight. The new lines spread student housing across all eight districts—an effort to dilute the potential impact of student voting.⁸ But Hoya students didn't need all eight seats on the ANC. Some of the commissioners were open to student participation in neighborhood affairs.⁹ If students could organize and elect one or two commissioners, they might have a chance to recruit allies and prevent anti-university policies from seeing the light of day.

Although it was pressed for time—like most jurisdictions the District of Columbia required candidates to put their names on the ballot several months before an election, and the deadline was fast approaching—Campaign Georgetown paid close attention to details when selecting its candidates. The group decided that each candidate should be someone who had lived at the same address for a significant period of time; who had been registered to vote at that address for a similar period of time; and who would be

⁸Shaun Sutner, “New Boundaries to Redefine ANC Politics,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 1991, J1; Tracy Zupancic, “ANC Districts Redrawn,” *The Hoya*, August 31, 2001.

⁹In October 1996 two ANC-2E commissioners—Judith Dollenmayer and Jonda McFarlane—wrote a letter to the *Washington Post* in which they distanced themselves from anti-university forces on the ANC. Dollenmayer and McFarlane, “Education with Representation,” *Washington Post*, October 5, 1996, A21. McFarlane repeatedly encouraged student participation on the ANC. See Linda Wheeler, “Student’s Election Riles Some in Georgetown,” *Washington Post*, November 14, 1996, J1; and Julie Goodman, “Some Say College Aggravates Area’s Decline,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 1997.

able to serve the full, two-year ANC term if elected. With those restrictions, Campaign Georgetown selected two candidates from its leadership: James Fogarty, a junior from San Francisco, and Rebecca Sinderbrand, a junior from Brooklyn. Because Fogarty and Sinderbrand could not qualify for the ballot unless each secured the signatures of at least twenty-five registered voters in their respective ANC districts, the two candidates canvassed the Georgetown campus and the neighborhoods until they found enough signatories. Sinderbrand's effort was hampered by Mother Nature but saved by divine intervention. With only a couple of days to gather signatures before the filing deadline, and a tropical storm bearing down on Washington, it appeared that she might fall short. But, at the last minute, Sinderbrand's campaign team visited a convent in Burleith and found enough nuns to put her over the top.

With two candidates on the ballot—Fogarty in district ANC-2E05 and Sinderbrand in ANC-2E03—Campaign Georgetown next resumed its effort to register as many Georgetown students as possible. This was no easy task. At nearly every campus in America, students are often reluctant to give up their home registration. Most employ the same reasoning: College is just the place where I am staying for the next four years; home will always be there. Campaign Georgetown faced another challenge. In a presidential election year, on-campus political organizations, such as the College Democrats and College Republicans, wanted students to cast their ballots where they would do the most good for their preferred candidates. Since the District of Columbia's vote is historically conceded to the Democratic candidate even before the campaign begins, a student from a swing state, such as Florida, Ohio, Michigan, or Pennsylvania, would help President Clinton or his chief opponent, Sen. Bob Dole, more by voting at home.

Fortunately for Campaign Georgetown, the loss of parking and the threat of losing prime housing proved much more powerful than the presidential election. But Campaign Georgetown

was fighting more than home-state loyalty and strategic voting. It also had to contend with an aggressive effort from some ANC incumbents and their allies to discourage students from voting. In September 2006 an anonymous flier appeared in dorms and student houses. As one newspaper reported, “[t]he flier told students that registering to vote in the District could cause them to lose grant money from their home states.” The fliers also stated that students must pay D.C. income taxes and obtain D.C. driver’s licenses.¹⁰

The flier turned out to be a stroke of good fortune for Campaign Georgetown. When the document was traced back to an ANC commissioner who opposed the student candidacies, students reacted with anger at what they saw as voter intimidation and misleading advertising. Dan Leistikow, the chair of Campaign Georgetown, filed a complaint with the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics, and student voter registration gained new momentum in the critical days before the deadline. By the time voter registration closed in October 1996, Campaign Georgetown had registered more than 1,000 students living on campus and in the nearby neighborhoods—including one-fourth of all undergraduates.

As Campaign Georgetown focused on the task of registering voters, Fogarty and Sinderbrand each embarked upon their campaigns. Both candidates ran on a platform of change. Fogarty expressed concern about the parking and housing restrictions and the failure of the ANC to include students in the decision process. “We didn’t get to say anything about that,” he told the *Washington Post*. “We should be included in these decisions because we, too, are residents.”¹¹ After both candidates attended their first ANC meeting in the fall of 1996 and were met with

¹⁰ Julie Goodman, “Residents Decry Georgetown Students’ ANC Bids,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 1996, J1.

¹¹ Wheeler, “Student’s Election Riles Some in Georgetown.”

indifference, Sinderbrand observed that “[t]he debate seemed to take place around students, but not including them.”¹²

The candidates worked hard to communicate their message to individual voters: Students should be included in decisions such as parking and housing that affect their lives. Sinderbrand and her supporters went door-to-door throughout her ANC district, asking for votes from students and nonstudents alike and placing signs in supporters’ yards. But Sinderbrand wanted to do more than just build up her name recognition. She wanted to show that she had specific policy ideas on a number of neighborhood issues, not just those affecting students. As a result Sinderbrand’s team produced and distributed a detailed campaign brochure, and she spoke at candidate forums. Those efforts paid off—literally. Despite low individual contribution limits, the campaign found it very difficult to raise money from students. But some local residents, who agreed with Sinderbrand’s positions and were disillusioned with the neighborhood activists who opposed her, provided enough resources to help her make it to Election Day.

While the campaigns worked to win a few votes at a time, Campaign Georgetown raised voter awareness of the overall ANC election through the news media. Former Clinton campaign and administration staffer Chad Griffin, who had joined the White House press staff in 1993, when he was only nineteen years old, later matriculated at Georgetown and became one of Campaign Georgetown’s leaders. Griffin’s experience and media savvy helped to attract coverage from campus newspapers—the Georgetown *Hoya* and *Georgetown Voice*—and national news organizations, including the Associated Press, *Washington Post*, and *Washington Times*. With the onslaught of this mass communication and the contact efforts of the individual campaigns, a voter would have

¹²Goodman, “Some Say College Aggravates Area’s Decline.”

had to work very hard to avoid information about the ANC election.

Registering voters, recruiting strong candidates, raising money, and communicating the message are only part of the battle in a political campaign. If many registered students and other supporters failed to cast their ballots, Fogarty and Sinderbrand would have had little chance of winning. But Campaign Georgetown leaders and volunteers used four strategies of their own design—and one inadvertently handed to them by the opposition—to ensure strong voter participation.

First, Campaign Georgetown cultivated a large number of young student registrants who were excited about voting for the first time.¹³ Many, if not most, Georgetown freshmen and sophomores had never cast a ballot in any election, let alone one that would decide a president of the United States and elect ANC commissioners who could affect their lives in very direct ways. Their enthusiasm helped both candidates, but especially Fogarty, whose district included a freshman dormitory. Second, campaign leaders continued to highlight the housing and parking issues that had a direct impact on a large number of student voters. Third, they appealed to students' civic pride. "Some people say students are transient residents and have no stake in the community," Leistikow told a local newspaper. "From our standpoint, if the trash isn't picked up, if there's crime on the streets, if there's traffic, it affects us. We're part of the community and want to be active."¹⁴

Finally, and perhaps most valuable in practical terms, Campaign Georgetown built an effective voter turnout program. Most campaigns refer to voter turnout operations as their "ground game"—a process at which Campaign Georgetown's leaders and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Barrington Salmon, "Georgetown Resident Tried to Keep Students from Voting," *Washington Times*, December 16, 1996, A14.

volunteers were adept. Before Election Day, hundreds of volunteers barnstormed common areas, classrooms, libraries, dormitories, and off-campus student housing to encourage voter turnout. The Election Day effort was especially sophisticated for a student-led campaign. Early in the morning, Campaign Georgetown leaders and volunteers e-mailed and telephoned every registered student with a reminder to vote. Because the ANC had not placed any polling sites on campus, the campaign arranged for shuttle buses that would depart every twenty minutes and provide students with transportation to their precincts. Each of the polling places had a student poll checker who monitored the list of registered voters to determine which students had not voted. Those lists were checked and rechecked throughout the day, and students who had not yet cast ballots were called and e-mailed until they voted.

Opposition leaders worked hard as well, but their messages and tactics often played right into the hands of Campaign Georgetown. Throughout the campaign, some in the opposition continued to question whether students were invested enough in the community to serve effectively or to deserve a say in neighborhood affairs. In late September, one opposition leader suggested that student commissioners would not care about or know how to address everyday challenges, such as sewer problems or tree removals: “The students’ concerns are different from the concerns of the people who live here year in and year out.”¹⁵ Although these arguments were clearly aimed at nonstudent voters, they helped Campaign Georgetown motivate students to participate at the polls.

Opposition actions on Election Day itself were also motivational, especially for certain nonstudent voters. Throughout the day, opposition leaders maintained a steady presence at the polls to challenge individual student voters as they went to cast ballots. Most if not all of these nearly 400 challenges were rejected, but they caused long delays and angered voters. As one neighborhood

¹⁵ Goodman, “Residents Decry Georgetown Students’ ANC Bids.”

resident described the challenges, “[i]t felt communistic. They singled out young people, looked at their driver’s licenses and took their names down.”¹⁶ The challenges were so sweeping that even some youthful-looking nonstudents were targeted—which made them more sympathetic to the student commission candidates. One thirty-five-year-old nonstudent voter, who was delayed ninety minutes, described herself as “so angry at the interference that was going on.”¹⁷ And, although the challenges could have been devastating had they succeeded, the failed tactic may actually have won votes for Fogarty and Sinderbrand.

The effectiveness of Campaign Georgetown’s work was clear on Election Day. When ballots were counted, Fogarty had swamped incumbent commissioner Beverly Jost by a margin of 401–162—giving him more than 70 percent of the vote. Sinderbrand’s victory, confirmed nine days later when absentee votes were tallied, was a narrow one over incumbent Patricia Sclaro, 259–256. More than 92 percent of the students Campaign Georgetown had registered had turned out to vote.

A PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

The two new commissioners-elect and their Campaign Georgetown supporters soon learned a difficult lesson about politics and government: Few victories are final, and few losses are irrevocable. In December 2006 the defeated incumbents and another 2E commissioner challenged the results of the election in court. On December 24 the D.C. Court of Appeals stayed the swearing in of Fogarty and Sinderbrand, pending further developments in the challenge. For more than two weeks the two students were in

¹⁶Barrington Salmon, “University Students Questioned at Polls,” *Washington Times*, November 8, 1996, C8.

¹⁷David Montgomery, “Heated Races, Emotions: Local Bids and Ballots Feed Turnout, Tempers,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 1996, B13.

limbo and had to watch from afar as the rest of ANC-2E took office on January 2, 1997. But five days later the stay was lifted, and Councilman Jack Evans swore in the new members just hours before their first meeting. Their triumph was official: For the first time in the twenty-year history of this ANC, Georgetown students were serving as commissioners.

The election of Fogarty and Sinderbrand was not the end of Campaign Georgetown. It was only the end of the beginning.¹⁸ Over the next five years, Georgetown students would widen their civic involvement, participation in neighborhood affairs, and influence on the ANC.

In November 1997 the university administration and students, including Commissioners Fogarty and Sinderbrand, persuaded the D.C. Zoning Commission to reject the proposal limiting shared housing to three unrelated residents.¹⁹ One year later, in the 1998 election, Campaign Georgetown helped Matt Payne succeed Fogarty on the ANC. Unlike the situation in 1996, Payne was unopposed and did not face a legal challenge about his right to run or serve. In February 1999 the D.C. Court of Appeals dismissed the challenge of two former commissioners, Beverly Jost and Patricia Scolaro, in the November 1996 ANC election results.

Momentum remained strong in 2000. In the fall of that year Campaign Georgetown convinced more than 750 students to register to vote in the District of Columbia. Co-chair Brian McCabe

¹⁸ Speaking in November 1942 after a critical Allied victory in North Africa, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill told his audience, “[N]ow this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=388#not_the_end.

¹⁹ Government of the District of Columbia, Zoning Commission, http://dcoz.dc.gov/orders/836_96-15.pdf.

attributed the large numbers to continuing student concerns about housing, the ten-year campus plan, and other community issues: “They are excited about voting, and they realize that local politics really does affect them.”²⁰ In November 2000 Justin Kopa and Justin Wagner became the fourth and fifth students elected to serve on the ANC.

From a governmental perspective, 2001 was the year that the continued efforts of Campaign Georgetown had the biggest payback. Ten years earlier the D.C. government had adopted an ANC redistricting plan that attempted to dilute student voters to the point of political nonexistence. Although neither Kopa nor Wagner supported the new plan adopted in 2001 (they had their own plan, which was defeated), Wagner acknowledged that the final product was an improvement over the status quo. The plan effectively guaranteed that students would hold one ANC seat. It also put enough student voters in two other seats to make them reasonably competitive.

But perhaps the strongest sign of how far the ANC had come in a short time occurred at the October 2001 meeting. In a unanimous, 8–0, vote, the ANC enacted a Student Bill of Rights. It proclaimed in part that ANC-2E:

affirms the right of university students to full participation in community and civic affairs and opposes illegal discrimination against all citizens based upon matriculation status. ANC2E encourages students to inform themselves about the surrounding communities and to actively seek ways to make a positive contribution to the neighborhood.²¹

²⁰Liz McDonald, “Campaign Georgetown Helps Increase Registration,” *The Hoya*, October 13, 2000.

²¹Yasmine Noujaim, “ANC2E Approves Student Bill of Rights,” *The Hoya*, October 5, 2001. For the full student Bill of Rights resolution, see www.anc2e.com/minutes/011002.html.

Just a few years earlier, Campaign Georgetown did not exist and students did not participate in ANC-2E. When they finally began to take part in the process, some ANC members questioned their commitment to community affairs. After Georgetown undergraduates joined the commission, served with distinction, and achieved results, students won respect as neighborhood leaders.

The lesson was clear: Effective citizen participation in democracy makes a difference.

