

Don't let the students know!

The Cranky Professor
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If what I read in last week's *Journal* is accurate, part of the story goes something like this:

A candidate for the Board of Directors of next year's Saint Mary's University Students' Association complained that other candidates for the board and a candidate for SMUSA President were running as a slate, under the tag "Students First." The candidate made his complaint to the current Board of Directors, rather than to the election's Chief Returning Officer. The board referred the complaint neither to the CRO nor to a properly constituted appeals committee. Instead, it created an ad hoc appeals committee consisting of four of its members, which then met to consider the complaint.

This ad hoc Elections Appeal Committee found the complaint to have merit, despite agreeing that running as a slate violated no existing election or campaign rule. The committee held that running as a slate would put at risk the president's accountability to the board, perhaps decrease the diversity of the board, and unfairly disadvantage candidates not on the slate.

These reasons seem to be the reasons behind a rule already on the books, the rule according to which candidates may not endorse each other or include endorsements in their campaigns. It's not clear to me how running as a slate didn't violate this particular rule.

Finding the complaint to have merit, the committee ordered candidates to remove references to Students First from their campaigns.

In a letter to students at Saint Mary's, the Chair of the Board of Directors expressed his regret at the board's having to violate its own policies in order to deal with the complaint.

Sadly, current members of the board will not have to face the voters over their behaviour in this affair.

But what about slates of candidates? Should there be a rule prohibiting candidates from banding together or endorsing one another? No, of course not. Such rules are attempts to deny voters information that voters might find relevant. As such, they are anti-democratic and authoritarian.

One sufficient reason against rules prohibiting slates is just that such rules are impossible to enforce, or impossible to enforce without disrupting the election process. Candidates who want to endorse each other will certainly find a way to do so under any

specific regulation. If to address this problem, regulations are left general and vague (“candidates may not explicitly or implicitly band together”), then they are open to abuse by candidates keen to find violations.

Let’s return, though, to the main critique of rules against slates, the critique according to which such rules deny voters information they might like to have. Suppose a voter agrees that the best board would be one that keeps the president in line. That voter would be worried about the independence of candidates for the board who are aligned with a candidate for president. Now banning slates does not remove alliances. It just makes them more difficult for voters to see. Rules against slates, then, deny to voters who want to split their votes information that would enable them to judge how best to do so.

They also, of course, deny to voters who want to link their votes information that would enable them to judge how best to link them. And that’s a good thing, says the Chair of the Board of Directors. Maybe so, but here’s where the rule takes on its authoritarian character. In giving this rationale for the rule, the Election Appeals Committee is promoting its particular conception of responsible voting. It is attempting to enforce on voters the concerns it deems legitimate.

It is the same thing with each of the other two reasons, diversity and disadvantage, that the board’s chair gave for banning slates. Each of them is about denying voters information that voters might want. And each has as its rationale ensuring that the board conforms to current board members’ ideals regarding SMUSA’s character and purpose.

SMUSA is notorious for this sort of thing. As I noted a couple years ago, candidates for SMUSA office are required to submit campaign materials to the CRO for vetting. Candidates, that is, are bound not only by rules regarding how big their posters can be, how many they can post, and where they can post them, but also by rules regarding their content and how they present that content. These rules deny candidates the ability to say what they want to say how they want to say it, and they deny voters information regarding candidates’ messages and judgement.

That these rules cannot really be expected to further their intended end—to keep out the riff raff—doesn’t make them any less noxious to those who favour openness and democracy.

Next year’s students’ council should make reforming the electoral process a top priority. Among other things, it should streamline the rules, making sure none of them prevent candidates from getting out any messages they want to get out. And they should make sure that no rule prevents voters from attaining whatever information they might want to have, whether board members think they should have it or not.

If SMUSA continues to oppose openness, free expression, and democracy, students should demand that SMUSA be dissolved and its functions assigned to Student Services. Better to have no students’ association than to have a corrupt students’ association.