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The Deciding Factor: Liberty students make an impact at the polls

December 01, 2009 | Mitzi Bible

“Tuesday, Nov. 3 marked the beginning of a new era for Liberty University,” Chancellor Jerry Falwell, Jr. told students at convocation three days later. “Since its founding in 1971, Liberty’s dorm students have not been permitted to vote in local elections while dorm students in other universities across the United States and across the state of Virginia have been allowed to vote.”

Falwell said many people go through life without ever seeing a direct impact of their votes, and Liberty students had that opportunity this year.



With about 3,200 students eligible to vote locally, Liberty cancelled classes on Election Day and arranged for buses to take students to the polls at regular intervals throughout the day. Most students voted in Lynchburg's Heritage precinct, where republican Scott Garrett unseated democratic incumbent Shannon Valentine by about 200 votes in the state House of Delegates 23rd District race. Valentine was winning by 1,400 votes until the votes from Heritage came in — where about 2,000 Liberty students voted, Falwell said — and the results quickly turned around.

As an article on Christian Newswire reported, “the stunning victory [for Garrett] is attributed solely to the voting bloc of the students, faculty and staff at Liberty University.”

Falwell said he had many reasons to celebrate while attending governor-elect Bob McDonnell's victory party in Richmond, Va.

“As Becki and I celebrated with the new governor in Richmond on Tuesday night, I received word that the LU student vote was responsible for Scott Garrett's victory,” he said. “I shared the news with the speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates and my wife snapped a picture of him giving me a high five. I was elated, not because of who won and who lost the race, but because LU students were the deciding factor in their first local election.”

Falwell expressed the significance of the event to the student body.

“As I greeted our students at the polls on Tuesday I knew I was witnessing history in the making,” he said. “My father dreamed of the day when Liberty students would be treated as first-class citizens in this community, and now that day has finally arrived.”



LU senior Caleb Mast, chairman of the College Republicans at Liberty, said LU's voter turnout was a cooperative effort. On Election Day, he and his board members set up a table with refreshments at the precinct while other members of LU's administration showed up to encourage students, including campus pastor Johnnie Moore and LU co-founder Dr. Elmer Towns, dean of the School of Religion.

Mast said he saw a steady turnout of LU students, up until 3 p.m., when some of his board members, along with Dr. Ergun Caner, president and dean of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, rode back to campus in a truck decorated with campaign signs and carting a huge animal made of chicken wire, and rallied more students to go vote.

"They said it was pretty effective; they got to see a lot of people on campus who hadn't voted yet," Mast said.

Mast said he was proud of the administration for helping get the word out to students to vote in this election.

"They've done a wonderful job. They've been very innovative. They've sent campus alerts, messages, they've helped in convocation, sponsored a panel discussion on why it was important to register. They stressed that it's important for our [Liberty's] future growth and the positive impact we can have on this community."

"I think it's clear — if Liberty students hadn't come out, if Ergun Caner and my board members hadn't gotten out, the election, especially for the House of Delegates race, could have had a different result," he added. "Liberty had a direct impact on that."

Earlier in the semester Falwell began encouraging students to register to vote locally because issues before local government could have an impact on tuition and the taxes students pay while residents here, as well as the university's plans for the future.



In a letter to students, faculty and staff the eve of Election Day, Falwell said a large voter turnout from Liberty “will send a message to the city that it is not OK to impose exorbitant taxes on LU students or impose expensive requirements on LU when the school grows.”

Falwell said Liberty students accomplished that task.

The local newspaper, The News & Advance, cited Lynchburg Mayor Joan Foster and City Councilman Michael Gillette as saying LU would now be recognized as a “significant factor” and a “force” in local government.

Falwell said the turnout was indeed monumental for LU “because never again will Liberty be required to spend tuition monies to fund city-mandated projects and never again will Liberty’s students and their families be targeted with staggering meals, lodging and sales taxes without representation in local government.”

“The Lynchburg, Va., region has benefitted greatly from Liberty University economically over the decades. Now, Liberty University students will have a voice in local politics,” he added.

Liberty University made national headlines last year when the school recruited about 4,000 students to register in the state of Virginia.

The school set a goal of 1,500 new registrants this academic year, but surpassed that at 1,729.

Political candidates made their way to campus this fall, including McDonnell, republican Bill Bolling (who was re-elected Virginia’s lieutenant governor), republican Ken Cuccinelli (Virginia’s new attorney general), republican Garrett and democrat Valentine.

All candidates from both parties in this year’s election were invited to speak at Liberty University.

