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Whether or not Exeter, New Hampshire, is the bona fide “birthplace of the Republican Party” — Ripon, Wisconsin, and Jackson, Michigan also claim this birthright — this much is indisputable: Every four years presidential candidates descend on the town as they rush to get that all-important party win in the nation’s first presidential primary. And that means that Exonians — Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians and everything in between — can get an up-close-and-personal look at the democratic process in action.

It’s a unique learning opportunity and, for at least some students, can help shape the way they think about citizen participation in general and politics in particular. “Exeter itself fosters a great deal of intellectual discussion,” says senior Lucy Weiler, who made some headlines herself at the Donald Trump rally in Exeter Town Hall right before the primary (more on this later). “Having an ability to assemble and the administration [willing] to let that happen makes a difference.”



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LIVING CIVICS THE EXETER WAY

BY JANET REYNOLDS

(Above left) Exeter Political Union adviser and History Department Chair Bill Jordan. **(Left)** Democratic Club members with Hillary Clinton at Water Street Bookstore last summer. **(Above right)** Exonians getting a taste of the primary season at a Marco Rubio rally this winter.

Alexis Simpson, a dorm parent, a former Religion Department teacher, and herself one of four state representatives for the Town of Exeter, also sees Exeter’s temporary place in the epicenter of the presidential primary universe as a wonderful learning opportunity. “It can be an all-consuming life for all who live here,” she says, “so the challenge is for the students to engage beyond the Exeter community. Their work in the political process gives them a chance to do that.

“The boundaries are fluid. They can be citizens of the Exeter community and citizens of the state,” adds Simpson, whose husband, Tom, teaches in the Academy’s Religion Department. “They can begin to grow into their power as part of the democratic process. They are living civics.”

Eager to proclaim their views from a place whose history is steeped in politics, most candidates include the town on their whistle-stop tours. This year alone, Exeter Town Hall hosted Republican candidates Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, George Pataki (who announced his doomed candidacy in the town hall), Carly Fiorina, Rand Paul, Ted Cruz and Donald Trump. Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders and former President Bill Clinton, campaigning on behalf of his wife, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, have also graced the stage.



CHERYL SENTER

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—Lucy Weiler

Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign got a boost after she lost in the Iowa caucuses to Barack Obama and John Edwards.

The Academy has benefited as well from candidates’ eagerness to orate in the town. Many major presidential candidates have spoken at the school over the years, starting in 1860 when soon-to-be president Abraham Lincoln visited his son, Robert Todd, while he was a student. Lincoln, who was sworn in days later, gave a speech in Exeter Town Hall during the visit.

The school’s location just a short walk from the town hall makes it easy for Exonians to join the many rallies held at the hall. And with a presidential race that at one point included 17 Republican hopefuls alone, the rallies and opportunities to participate in the 2016 political process have been higher than perhaps ever before. Say what you will about the 2016 presidential race, it has not been dull.

Weiler, who will vote in her first general election in November, organized a protest against Trump, gathering 25-30 students and providing resources to make signs. The idea was to stand outside with the signs, which, Weiler says, denounced “Trump’s hateful rhetoric more than Trump himself.” At a certain point, however, Weiler decided to go inside. And that’s when things got interesting for Weiler and a couple of other Exeter students, one of whom was prep Gillian Quinto.

After Trump spoke for a while, he opened the floor to questions. Trump called on Quinto, who is from California. “It was the first question,” she recalls. “I started by saying I was from Southern California. He cut me off. ‘Are you one of those liberal Democrats?’ he says. The whole crowd laughed.

“I tried to continue. I am friends with illegal immigrants. I know what impact they have on our economy,” Quinto says, noting she wanted to ask him about how he would handle this economic reality if he actually followed through on his promise to deport people living in the country illegally.

“He cut me off,” Quinto continues. “I think I know what you want to ask,” he says.” Trump accused Quinto of being a Sanders plant. “Who told you to be here? Bernie?” he can be heard asking her in one of many YouTube videos that recorded the event.

“Then a girl behind me yells, ‘Immigrants are the backbone of our economy!’” Quinto says. What she didn’t realize was that the girl was Weiler.

At that point, Trump turned his attention to Weiler, asking her what she yelled. “Immigrants are the backbone of our economy,” she repeated. Trump quickly denounced her comment, adamantly distinguishing between legal and illegal immigration while referring to

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—Lily Friedberg



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Weiler a few times as “darling.”

Trump moved on to other questions. But the civics lesson is very much alive for Weiler as she recounts what she learned from attending this event. Trump’s attitude toward her aside, Weiler recognizes how fortunate she was to participate so fully.

“It changes the game for students to engage in the political process,” Weiler says. “It made a difference in my confidence.”

Quinto agrees. In addition to the Trump rally, she also attended Cruz and Rubio rallies at Exeter Town Hall. She had wanted to get into the Sanders and Clinton events as well but had scheduling conflicts. “I thought it would be interesting to see the differences between each of the candidates in person and in their rallies,” she says.

Quinto, who is a member of the Democratic Club at Exeter, contrasted the Trump rally to those of the other two then-leading Republican candidates, Cruz and Rubio. “Rubio really played off the audience,” she says. “He was very in tune with his audience which I thought was amazing. He’s a great public speaker.”

While Quinto says her family discusses politics at home, this is the first time she’s attended rallies. Living in California limits her access to Republican candidates, she says, because so much of the state traditionally votes Democratic. “Being in New Hampshire at the beginning of the presidential race, it’s a very political atmosphere,” she says “And then having an opportunity to hear all these people speak, that’s a cool thing.”

Tan Nazer ’16, whose experience living in America began at Exeter, has found experiencing American politics firsthand fascinating.

Nazer, who started a new contemporary Middle East/Islamic club on campus this year called Baraka — it means blessing in Arabic — says the Trump rally, at which she also protested, was the first time she had participated in any political event. “I learned that democracy is very very messy,” she says. “I’m seeing how the process works, how it’s televised. Then to be part of a protest — it has opened my eyes to how this all works.” This opportunity, she says, is an extension of what she’s experiencing on campus. “There is a lot of discussion about politics at Exeter,” she says. “Lately people have been complaining about how it’s very liberal and those with other opinions don’t have a platform to express their views. But that’s changed [recently].” Nazer cites panels on diversity of free speech and more assemblies featuring conservative speakers as examples. “I think that’s important,” says Nazer, who will vote in her first general election in the U.S. this year. “I may not agree with what they have to say, but I think it’s nice to see a perspective different from my own.”

Quinto agrees that politics is a hot topic at Exeter in general. “The school itself is very politically charged,” she says. “We have an anonymous Facebook forum called Exeter Confesses where



“YOU CAN TELL A LOT MORE ABOUT [SOMEONE] IN PERSON RATHER THAN IN AN ARTICLE. ... I’M GETTING TO HEAR SOME OF THE CANDIDATES FOR THE FUTURE NOW.”

—Taylor Robertson

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people can post things. There are very heated political arguments on there. If you’re just walking around, you could hear people discussing politics at the table next to you. It’s omnipresent.”

While other Exonians may have had more traditional experiences at the rallies they attended, they echo Quinto’s thoughts

about the school’s overall opportunities to explore politics both on campus and in town.

Taylor Robertson ’19, a member of the Republican Club, went to both the Trump and Sanders rallies. He also went with the club to a meeting with Jeb Bush at a senator’s house.

Robertson, who calls himself more conservative than liberal, waited in line for two hours to get into the Trump rally. Two days later, he listened to Sanders. Both experiences were eye-opening.

“Hearing Trump say something in person is different. You can tell a lot more about [someone] in person rather than through an article,” he says. “There were things I didn’t realize Bernie had views about. It was great to hear him.”

And while many 15-year-olds are giving this year’s election only a passing glance, Robertson figures he’s getting a head start for when he will be eligible to vote. “I’m getting to hear some of the candidates for the future now.”

As co-head of the Political Union, the Political Review and the Democratic Socialists Club, senior Michael Shao is a bit of a political junkie. He’s attended a number of political events in his years at Exeter, including rallies for Trump, Bush, Paul, John McCain and Sanders.

“By living in New Hampshire and in Exeter, the town where the Republican Party was founded, all the politicians come here,” he says. “So if you live in New Hampshire, that is kind of a privilege. It’s a shame if you don’t take advantage of the fact to see these people.”

Shao loves the diversity of options Exeter has presented him while a student. “Exeter is openly political,” he says. “It allows kids to explore where they are in the spectrum. I’m a pragmatic libertarian, which is further to the right, yet I’m one of the co-heads of the Democratic Socialists Club, which has endorsed Sanders. That’s as far left as it can go. I can lead a club I don’t necessarily agree with.”

It’s a mindset that faculty like History Instructor Bill Jordan P’12, P’17, P’17 can appreciate. “One of the sad things is how people are increasingly disengaged in the political process,” he says. “Back in the day, in the 19th century, 80 percent of [eligible voters] voted. Parties organized fun things.” Some of those events, Jordan notes, probably shouldn’t be re-created; alcohol, for instance, figured heavily in many 19th-century political events. “But if you can make politics social and create fun things, that’s what people get engaged in. People come together around their candidate.”

At 19 years and counting as an Exeter faculty member, Jordan sees firsthand the value Exonians gain participating in presidential primaries. “Nationally, not many schools get this kind of a chance. We’re lucky Exeter has this town so concentrated around the middle. Kids can walk to houses [to drop leaflets] from campus.”

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Jordan has helped with the leaflet drop for years and loves the tradition. Students get up around 5 a.m. and gather at the alumni office. "We provide coffee and doughnuts and drive the kids to put leaflets on people's doors reminding them to vote," he says, recalling certain years when it was snowy and the roads were slippery. "It's an Exeter tradition. I'm not sure how far back it goes.

"All this stuff is so great," he continues, "because it's exposing kids to [it] and getting them involved in the political process."

Juggling the onslaught of student requests to miss class to attend the multitude of presidential candidate visits in the weeks before the New Hampshire primary can be challenging in a typical election year, says Dean of Residential Life AJ Cosgrove. This year's election, which has been high on spectacle, only multiplied that challenge.

"Every time we have an election cycle, it does present some challenges," Cosgrove says. "Trump raised the interest in politics more than you're accustomed to. It's been consistent with what's going around the country.

"Our decision to allow some of the students to attend rallies is not a variation from our normal policies," he says, noting students can petition to miss a required appointment for something that's a long-standing commitment or a unique educational opportunity. The petitioning process typically takes about 10 days. The challenge with a presidential campaign is that candidates may announce a visit only days before the actual rally.

"[The Trump visit] came up quickly so students were not as prepared," he says, noting everyone learned of it late in the week before the planned event. The deans met and decided to allow a shorter time frame for the petitioning process; they would expedite any requests handed in by end of day Monday. They did this, Cosgrove says, assuming they would receive perhaps half a dozen. "By end of day there were 40-50 petitions," he says. "That was unexpected on our end. And maybe another couple hundred students who chose not to go to class or who didn't have class anyways. It was an event people were compelled to go to."

Cosgrove cites his son, who is 18, as just one example of why the school worked hard to enable students to experience the Trump rally in particular firsthand. "He was eight rows in at the Trump campaign," he says. "He was motivated because of what he heard. I think a lot of kids felt that way. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Cosgrove admits it was not a decision that was universally popular with the faculty, however. "It is challenging. Our decision was not without some criticism, which is totally fine," he says. "Your presence at the table is crucial. If some students are missing, it can have a disabling effect. It's a challenge to make the decision we feel is the right one for our students and faculty trying to do the job in the classroom."

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