

Citizens party hopes to reverse student apathy toward politics

By David Steinmetz
Of the Emerald

Only seven percent of University students who registered to vote actually voted in the May 18 primary elections.

That trend among University voters needs to be reversed, according to a recently formed political party.

The three-year-old Citizens Party believes that through a series of forums, films and speeches, University students can be encouraged to participate in political, economic, and educational decisions.

Several of the 125 local chapter members are also looking forward to getting involved in the possible reinstatement of a campus chapter, which has "lapsed" since a 15-member high in 1980, according to Glen Gibbons, Citizens Party state secretary.

"We want to organize people, not just promote big-name candidates," Gibbons says.

The Democratic and Republican parties have approached local politics as virtually non-partisan, but the Citizens Party is getting involved in issues that are "extremely important to the future of the city and the quality of people's lives."

An outgrowth of this involvement is a slate of 75 Citizens Party candidates running for offices across the country, including several gubernatorial and seven U.S. Congressional candidates.

Citizens Party member Laurel Paulson will be on the ballot for District 40 of the Oregon House of Representatives, and Laura Stine is one of two candidates running for District 44.

Party candidates are also running for the Portland Metropolitan Service District position, and Yamhill County commissioner and clerk.

Citizens Party members currently hold seats on a number of city councils and school boards, including three seats on the Burlington, Vt., city council.

In a recent election a Citizens party candidate came within 1 percent of being elected to the Atlanta city council.

Barry Commoner, running in the 1980 presidential race on the Citizens Party platform, received nearly a quarter of a million votes.

Gibbons said the party's 20,000 to 30,000 members are active in 30 states, with most of the Rocky Mountain and Southern states absent.

The membership is generally middle-class, white, and employed in white collar jobs, he says.

The party calls for "massive cuts" in the defense budget as a remedy to the shortage of higher education funds and high interest rates on loans, Gibbons says.

They also want the ROTC and Department of Defense research contracts off college campuses, and disagree with the draft and the present system of registration.



The party also proposes a "disarmament race" which calls for one of the nuclear nations to permanently inactivate one nuclear weapon, with a pledge to disarm another one if the other side will do the same, and so on. Several European political parties also support this plan.

Gibbons says the University is "squeezing out students" from decision-making where there needs to be more student participation.

The low voter turnout in the recent primary election shows University students are not concerned about local politics, according to James Gore, local chapter treasurer.

"Students really are affected by the (Eugene City) Council's decisions," he says.

Many voters "have lost all hope in politics," and become disillusioned with the current democratic process because of the lack of choice between the two major political parties, he says.

But it is the party's commitment to their platform as much as the platform itself which separates this new progressive party from the familiar two, Gibbons says.

Domination by corporate interests have made the Republican and Democratic parties less committed to their platforms and to their members, Gibbons says.

Gore suggests United States presidents are "more or less rented for four years" under this kind of system.

The Citizens Party is also "interested in a more democratic style of politics," by increasing input from all of society, according to Eugene City Councilor John Ball.

But it all begins in local politics, which currently has a "terminal case of hardening of the arteries," Ball says.

Citizens Party members are "a very good source of energy, committed to local politics," and can "jazz it up," he suggests.

Ball, an Independent, says although he is not yet a Citizens Party member, he agrees with their platform and attends their meetings.

He first became interested in the party and their ideas after Commoner's 1980 presidential campaign.

Locally, Ball has translated the Citizens Party platform into goals of economic diversification for the area, a better representation by women and minorities in the city's decision-making process, and more involvement by the community in local politics.

The local chapter's involvement in his recent campaign, through canvassing and "basic grass-roots work," gave him "a real good victory margin" over a better financed campaign in a largely blue-collar, working class area, Ball says.



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