

CASTING ITS VOTE: A 3-part examination of Elon's evolving role in the political process

Administrators balance political views, visibility

Bryan Anderson
Enterprise Manager
@BryanRAnderson

At Elon University, deans and above are considered top-level administrators. The higher up a faculty member is in the ranks, the more discouraged they are from expressing their political views.

It is clear that students and most professors do not represent the university's perspective. For certain administrators, though, there is a fine line between speaking for themselves and speaking for Elon.

The higher up a faculty member is in the ranks, the more discouraged they are from expressing their political views.

Raghu Tadepalli is considered a high-level administrator as he is the dean of the Martha and Spencer Love School of Business. He is a registered Democrat and has been highly critical of Trump throughout the course of the election.

Since the end of the primaries, Tadepalli has written 12 original tweets about the Republican nominee — the majority of which were published in August.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit institution, the university is not allowed to speak out on political matters, according to Elon Provost Steven House. While Tadepalli's Twitter bio makes it abundantly clear that the views expressed are his alone, there could still be a conflict of interest.

"The risk of appearance of institutional endorsement may be greater when the speaker is a high-level university administrator," House said in an email.

Tadepalli said he received an email from House on Aug. 16 informing him of the university's stance on political activism within the administration. Since then, he has declined to tweet overt political opinions.

"While you may have seen my social media postings, they predate the communication from Dr. House that you refer to," Tadepalli said in an email. "Since receiving the communication from Dr. House, I have refrained from commenting on any aspect of the election. I was unaware of the policy, and since becoming aware, I do not want to do or say anything that runs counter to university policy."

It is common for administrators to face different treatment than faculty and staff on such matters, but it is noteworthy that their exercise of free speech is more limited compared to lower-ranking colleagues.

"I would never tell anybody what they could or what they couldn't say," House said. "I would say, 'You don't want to put the university at risk.'"

There is no formal policy regarding an administrator's ability to speak openly about their political beliefs, according to Lambert. Instead, the university strongly encourages its administrators to pause and consider how their words could reflect on the university.

For Lambert, the boundaries are clear. His name is practically synonymous with Elon, so he tries to refrain from publicly expressing his personal political views. For other administrators, it is difficult to distinguish what can and cannot be said.

"If Raghu were to be commenting on an economic issue, an issue pertaining to his area of expertise as the dean of the business school with regard to any candidate ... [and he] put a tweet out there that gets people thinking, I think that's very much a fair game thing to do in his realm of responsibility within the institution," Lambert said.

"I think that you would want to be very cautious about putting out a tweet that said, 'So-and-so is an idiot. I can't believe he said this.' ... The problem is there are not bright lines in these situations."

MORE ONLINE

Visit our website at elonnewsnetwork.com to see more



ELISABETH GACHMANN | Staff Photographer
Students and other Elon community members pack the Moseley Student Center to watch the second presidential debate Oct. 9.

Students find voice in civic engagement

Bryan Anderson
Enterprise Manager
@BryanRAnderson

Elon University's involvement in the political process has evolved dramatically throughout the last few years, and students have been given numerous engagement opportunities. From voting to participating in student debates, the possibilities are virtually limitless.

Elon Votes! was formed before the 2014 midterm elections with the goal of increasing voter turnout and encouraging students to make informed decisions.

Bob Frigo, faculty adviser for Elon Votes! and associate director of the Kernodle Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement, discussed the need to simplify the registration process for students.

"We want students to vote at the end of the day, and we are trying to make things as easy as possible for students to cast that ballot, whether it be here in North Carolina or from the state of their permanent residence," Frigo said.

Elon Votes! has already registered more than 800 students since August and has sponsored several on-campus events, including the first presidential debate watch party, which saw 300 people packed inside the Moseley Student Center.

Other groups have recently emerged to

increase student involvement in and dialogue on the political process.

The Political Engagement Work Group — comprised of faculty and staff, students from the Kernodle Center, Elon Votes! representatives and several other groups on campus — is only a year old. It formed as a nonpartisan collaborative team in 2015 with the purpose of implementing voter education activities and increasing engagement.

There is also a smaller administrator-led Political Activities Working Group that approves candidate appearances, campaign events, voter registration events and university-sponsored political forums.

Carrie Eaves, assistant professor of political science, is a member of the Political Engagement Work Group and the Council on Civic Engagement and recently took over as the Elon coordinator for the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement.

Eaves recognizes how the climate of the current election might turn some students off from becoming engaged in the political process. Even so, she said other students might feel more impassioned and elevate their voices because of the heated election.

"It's probably a wash," Eaves said. "Some people are turned off by the process because of those high unfavorable ratings, and some people may be more invigorated because they really dislike one candidate or the other."

Students are also taking the initiative to create opportunities for their peers to participate in political forums.

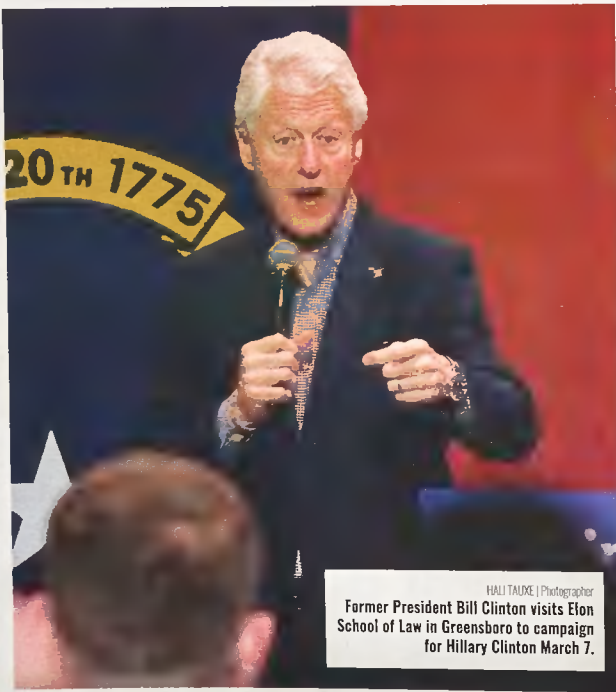
Sophomore Jay Schulte created the Politics Forum (EPF) in 2015 with the hope of bridging growing polarization and addressing issues of importance to students.

"I saw an opportunity for a group that could bring everyone together," Schulte said. "Part of the issue I have with politics is it creates a hive mind sometimes, which is important because it allows for opposition. It allows for disagreement. And we want to stay as nonpartisan as possible."

Before Schulte arrived on campus, the forum was under a different name and essentially served as a discussion club with very few members. Within the past year, EPF has become a more recognized platform for students to come together and discuss serious issues during a heated 2016 election year.

EPF became more widely known in spring 2016 after hosting a student debate. With the general election approaching, the student group decided to hold its first debate of the fall. More than 100 students attended the event.

The forum is now in discussion with student organizations on campus, including College Democrats, College Republicans and Young American Liberty, to host a second student debate in late October.



HALL TAUXE | Photographer
Former President Bill Clinton visits Elon School of Law in Greensboro to campaign for Hillary Clinton March 7.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT from cover

Jon Dooley, assistant vice president for Student Life, sees the new Schar Center as the avenue through which Elon will host those types of events in the future. "There's a lot that goes into hosting those types of events: the candidate schedules, the moderator schedules, but also having the venue that has the technical capacity and also the availability to host at a low cost," Dooley said. "We think the Schar Center will give us that opportunity."

The Schar Center, which could be ready for use as fall 2018, will seat more than 5,000 people. President Leo Lambert said he hopes the new center will make Elon more competitive if it decides to hold a 2020 presidential debate.

"We've not had the facility to do it before at the Schar Center, I think, presents us with a real opportunity that ... I don't see any reason why we couldn't make a valiant try to do that in 2020," Lambert said.

Longwood University, which has a smaller student population than Elon, recently hosted the 2015 presidential debate. Lambert and several other administrators point to this example to demonstrate how an institution such as Elon has a legitimate chance to host a major political debate.