

by Lydia Berzsenyi

On April 1, 1987, elections were held at Texas A&M University to elect the school's student leaders. For this all-important election, a scant 5,500 students expressed their opinions by voting.

On April 8, 1987, run-off elections were held, and this time only 2,019 A&M students showed up at the polls.

These numbers don't sound unreasonably small, but considering the fact that the student body numbers close to 35,000, this means that only 1 out of every 6 students cast their votes and chose who they wanted to represent them.

Why the extremely poor turnout in such an important race? The reasons may vary with the individual, but the bottom line is that students just don't seem to care.

They don't care who represents them in Student Government. They don't care what Student Government does or who is involved with it. Many just don't care about Student Government at all.

Richard de Castongrene was one of the nine candidates who ran for student body president in the April 1 election. Castongrene drew attention for his unique campaign platform, namely "Student Government should be abolished!"

De Castongrene said he bases his claim on his opinion that Student Government has no real power and that it is not representative of the students. He said that Student Government would provide better representation if its members were randomly selected out of a computer.

De Castongrene said that he ran for student body president as a statement against the existing system. In the statement he entered in the *Battalion's* Voter's Guide, he said that most of what goes on in Student Government is needless.

"Student Government needs to continuously prove its need to exist," he said. "If it fails to prove it, Student Government should be abolished."

David Alders, student body president 1984-1985, defined what he termed the three major functions of student government:

- To serve as a platform representing all the students for the advancement of student opinion to the administration, with whom the student government meets frequently.
 - To increase and improve programming by working to advance Aggie Muster, Parent's Weekend, the Big Event and the Aggie Blood Drive.
 - To promote leadership training.
- Alders said this function is especially important because Student Government closely mirrors the structure of the Federal Government, so training in Student Government is invaluable.

Read that first function again. "To serve as a platform representing all the students for the advancement of student opinion..." Does Student Government fulfill this function? Do the leaders of the school truly represent their constituents in issues that affect them?

De Castongrene's argument and

these questions raise the issue of whether Student Government *does* have a need to exist. One way to arrive at a conclusion is to look into the past. For example, what accomplishments has Student Government made in the 16 years it has existed in its present form?

In a report submitted by Pat Pearson, 1982-1983 student body president, there was a list of 10 significant contributions made by Student Government during the period from 1972 to 1983:

- Secured a full-time legal advisor for students (1973)
- Brought about the printing of class schedules and professor assignments for preregistration (1975)
- Initiated night-time shuttle van now driven by Alpha Phi Omega (1979)
- Secured lighting for Penberthy Intramural Complex (1977)
- Secured a Nautilus weight gym for student use, opened in Spring 1981 (1979)
- Secured six new lights for aerobics track (1979)
- Researched and recommended an off-campus recreation area (1981)
- Initiated the Conference on Student Government Associations (COSGA) during which student governments from colleges and

universities across the country are able to exchange ideas (1981)

had in the issues that have directly affected them.

In 1976, the Student Senate debated the possibility of adding a 'no-confidence' selection on election ballots. Under the resolution, the "no-confidence" choice would have appeared on all presidential and vice-presidential ballots. It would give the voter the chance to express his opinion that none of the candidates meet with his approval. If a majority of the voters registered "no-confidence," a second election would be held within two weeks of the first election. The "no-confidence" selection would not appear in the second election.

Supporters of the bill argued that the resolution would pressure candidates into more earnest campaigning, and also would allow voters to express their interest, or lack of interest, in Student Government. Stan Stanfield, the vice president for academic affairs at the time, introduced the bill.

"No voter should be denied the right for participation in an election due to his lack of confidence in the candidates," he said. "The use of confidence voting encompasses the basic rationale of being wise enough to choose representative leadership. The logical end to the transferral of

those polled, on Sep. 22, 1976 the resolution was defeated by the Student Senate by a vote of 33-30 with one abstention.

The fight for recognition of the Gay Student Services Organization between the organization, the Texas A&M Administration and the state court system dragged on for years. Although the actual decision-making process rested with the administration, members of the student body did register their opinions in the issue through a Student Government resolution calling on the Texas A&M Board of Regents to recognize the GSSO.

The resolution passed by one vote in the Student Senate in October 1984 and was a formal expression of the will or intent of the Student Senate. Yet there was heated debate over the Senate's decision in a meeting of the Issues and Grievances Committee of the Student Government.

The resolution's approval would have been justifiable if it had been passed in compliance with the student body's opinion, since Student Government is supposed to represent the student body's opinions.

However, 55 percent of a group of students polled by *The Battalion* said they disagreed with the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals' ruling which was in favor of the organization's recognition.

It was pointed out that the polling was not considered a true sample of the entire student body, as only 100 people were surveyed. The breakdown was as follows: 39 seniors, 21 juniors, eight sophomores, five freshmen, 20 graduate students, seven faculty and staff members, 33 women and 67 men. The average age of the respondents was 22.62.

One senator said that in an independent poll of his constituents, only two out of 100 persons were in favor of the Student Government resolution.

The results of these and other polls conducted before the final voting was held were considered, and Senate members were reminded of the importance of representing the opinions of their constituents. Yet, several senators told reporters that they voted for the resolution even though most of their constituents were opposed to it.

One senator said, "How the Senate votes has not always been in the best interests of the students."

So the question remains: Are student opinions truly being represented? Looking at these two examples from the past, the answer would appear to be no.

Admittedly, there are Student Government-addressed issues that have both benefitted the students and represented their views.

Students must let their leaders know how they feel if representation is to be improved. Otherwise, the apathetic attitude associated with Student Government will continue to be a detrimental thorn in the sides of all students.

"Student Government needs to continuously prove its need to exist. If it fails to prove it, Student Government should be abolished."

— Richard de Castongrene, 1987 student body presidential candidate.

- universities across the country are able to exchange ideas (1981)
- Increase in Library Hours during Dead Week (1982)
- Student Academic Council (1982)
- Central Quiz File Started (1982)

Several highly debated issues which don't appear on the above list have received a great deal of recognition through the years by the student body. Bills have been presented to the Student Senate which would: request a 'no-confidence' clause to be included on all election ballots in 1976, standardize Q-drop periods within the various academic colleges in 1980, require professors to provide written course requirements in 1984, recognize the Gay Student Services Organization in 1984, improve the bicycle parking and traffic problem on campus in 1985, and provide funding for extended library hours in 1982 and in 1985.

Let's look at just two of these issues, one of which gained the Student Senate's approval and one of which was dismissed by the Senate. In both cases, the Senate voted contrary to the student body's expressed views. This discrepancy leads to the question of just how much say students have

that rationale is that an individual who is given the responsibility to choose his leaders should be given the chance to reject leadership he deems undesirable."

However, opponents of the bill argued that it would not increase the intensity of campaigning and would only delay filling some governmental offices. Scott Gregson, the vice president for finance in 1976, was particularly opposed to the bill.

"This proposal has no place in our election process, on a campus level, a local level, or a national level," he said. "A negative vote like 'no-confidence' does not do anything to aid the image of Student Government. A&M is a unique institution because we have resisted useless change. This is a useless change. Lets keep A&M unique."

Before the Senate voted on the resolution, the canvassing committee of the Senate polled students to get their reactions to the idea. The poll of 229 people showed that 78.1 percent agreed that there should be a method to demonstrate "no-confidence" in the candidates, while 17.0 percent disagreed and 4.8 percent were undecided.

Despite the enthusiasm for the "no confidence" clause demonstrated by