

NIU Student Senators Are Not Bad People

Lately Student Association (SA) Senators have been getting a lot of flack in the media for our decision to deny recognition to the SSDP. I was one of the nine Senators who voted to give them recognition. The real problem lies not with the Senators, but with our bylaws. In fact, the Senators who voted against recognizing the SSDP were acting in accordance with those bylaws. Under SA bylaws, organizations that lobby the government or run informational campaigns are considered “political groups”, and are ineligible for funding. SSDP clearly falls in this category. When I voted for the SSDP’s recognition as a non-political group, I realized that my vote was not in accordance with the SA bylaws, but I was more concerned about complying with the United States constitution.

Many other Senators were unaware that there was any controversy in denying the SSDP recognition. To them, they just followed the bylaws like they’re supposed to. With respect to Sens. Johnson and Quick, I was not under the impression that most Senators voted against recognizing the SSDP for personal reasons. In fact, some of the Senators that I talked to privately said they agreed with drug policy reform, but needed to follow the bylaws. Previous Senate sessions have not been as strict in applying the bylaws, which is why organizations like the Campus Anti-War Network and Advocates for Choice are not classified as political organizations.

The senate bylaws are officially written by the senate, as the constitution mandates. In reality, they are written only by the leadership and then put in front of the senate for approval. The senate bylaws are basically recycled each year with only a few changes made to them. Our prohibitions against funding religious and political groups have been in there for a long time.

There was a revision to our bylaws, which I believe was made in response to SSDP seeking recognition. The change defined what a political group was, but it was unconstitutionally broad. No one had time to read the changes because the rules were suspended to move it from new business into old business, thus making us vote on it at that session. Senators were given five minutes to review a four-page document and then vote on it. The leadership seemed to back the changes, so the senate passed it.

Our bylaws, though I disagree with them, were written with the best of intentions. The reason political groups do not receive funding is based on the belief that students should not be forced to fund groups that they may not agree with. Not allowing the SSDP to put up fliers is a different story. That policy makes absolutely no sense to me. I’m told that it is so that the school knows what’s being posted on campus. First of all, why do we care what’s being put up? Secondly, if the reason is

just to know what's being posted, why not allow organizations that aren't SA-recognized to post fliers?

In an article on Reason.com, Jacob Sullum wrote, "Given their inflated sense of their own importance and their experience in passing blatantly unconstitutional legislation just because they're offended by something, these guys seem qualified to be real senators someday." When I read that, I literally laughed out loud. It's funny, but not an accurate portrayal of the SA Senate. Senator Johnson's quote: "I felt like they didn't respect our decision the first time nor did they take our critiques seriously", has been blown out of proportion. This was probably just an off-the-cuff remark that he made not realizing the impact of what he was saying. The senate is full of nice, well-meaning people. We just need to reform our bylaws and make them fairer.

By: Brian W. Troutman, SA Senator