Do you think you have what it takes to be your state’s governor? How about a senator or supreme court justice? Before spending a week at the 2008 Vermont Green Mountain Boys State, I wasn’t sure I had what it takes. Although we hear about our government all the time in school and in the news, it’s not often that we get to try it out. I was excited for the chance to see democracy in action and to test my political chops.

Diving In

On June 15, 143 boys from all over Vermont arrived at Lyndon State College. At registration, our town counselors handed us each a thick green folder and gave us instructions to become familiar with its contents. The so-called *Green Book* contained information on everything from the daily schedule to the various political offices in great detail. Reading it, I learned that I was now a citizen of the town of Sorrell (population 25; geographic location: second floor of my dorm) in Sanders County, which included Sorrell and five other towns.

We didn’t have long to get acclimated before we had to perform our first political task: gathering signatures to be put on the ballot. To run for town office, we needed to collect signatures from citizens in our town; for county offices, we could collect signatures county-wide. Those aspiring to state office had to obtain signatures (25 for governor) near the end of the first day to be on the election ballot. A person could only sign so many times for a particular office; the limit was once for governor and ten times for state senator! Because most of us decided to run for governor, none of us could gather enough signatures on our petitions. We made Green Mountain Boys State history—all gubernatorial candidates were write-ins for the primary.

This was our first lesson in democracy: there are many roles to play in government, not just the highest offices.

Talking the Talk

For several days, we citizens listened to campaign speeches. Candidates for state office often used stage tactics, such as introductory jingles or juggling acts. Some delivered serious messages, while others chose lighthearted talks. Those speeches with the greatest impact were short, clearly organized, and entertaining, with humor, music, or stories.

Over the course of the week, I noticed that the most successful candidates had clearly stated objectives and a plan to achieve them. They came prepared to win and, early on, endeavored to gain the support of a group—a dedicated base of support to help them psychologically (think cheering). This grassroots support system served as a campaign team that facilitated a quickly generated marketing blitz. And the successful candidates were strong communicators. They did not deliver speeches with complicated messages—theirs were simple, unique, and believable.

This lesson was amplified by the pros, starting with Vermont Governor Jim Douglas. Although we had tough questions regarding everything from energy issues to paying for college, he showed his depth of knowledge on the issues and responded smoothly and thoroughly. When we heard from Vermont’s Lieutenant Governor (and Green Mountain Boys State alumnus) Brian Dubie, I began to wonder if any of us would ever have such a stage presence. Having entered politics from the private sector, he demonstrated the potential that we all have to become public servants. We also heard from University of Vermont Professor Frank Bryan, who addressed our “state” on the complexities of true democracy, something we were learning firsthand.

Walking the Walk

All our hard campaign work culminated in one of the most important political events of the camp: the primary elections. The offices up for grabs ranged from
secretary of state and attorney general to town representative and sheriff. We deposited our paper ballots, like those still used in Vermont, into the ballot box to be counted by our town counselor. When the results were announced, I was elected Sorrell’s grand juror, while my roommate became weigher of coal (yes—that is a real office!).

The state legislature had to address the issue of our governor. Because we had so many write-in candidates, no one had the majority of the popular vote. The task fell to the House of Representatives and the Senate to vote on who was to be our governor. Many ballots later, it was decided. The 2008 Green Mountain Boys’ State Governor was Taylor Yeates.

Throughout the week, we held daily town meetings (which are actually held once a year throughout New England), an opportunity for citizens to assemble and discuss town issues. Our Moderator (an elected official) ran the meetings using Robert’s Rules of Order. The citizens of Sorrell had to approve (or not) a proposed town budget, which covered everything from a police department (with a penchant for 4x4s and trained German shepherds) to a sorely understaffed fire department (four volunteers to serve a population of 4,000!). And we scrutinized our school budget and brainstormed to come up with innovative cost-cutters (no one wanted higher taxes). For example, we decided to allow farmers to sell their produce directly to the students to reduce cafeteria expenses.

Later in the week, we got to practice state government in Montpelier, Vermont’s capital. Our representatives and senators proposed and debated bills in the actual legislative rooms, and the five supreme court justices held court in the real judicial chambers. Because I was both an elected senator and appointed supreme court justice, I had to make a choice. I opted for a short career in the judiciary.

As a justice, I listened to a case regarding search and seizure and involving a confession argued to have been obtained under duress. I had done an enormous amount of reading to prepare for this case. At the trial, lawyers (participants who had prepared arguments in advance) represented each side, and the justices asked questions to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each side’s arguments. After deliberating, the chief justice and fellow justices presented the majority and dissenting opinions.

**Recreation & Celebration**

Although this camp really put us to the test politically, there were plenty of opportunities to relax and build “town spirit.” For instance, we had time in the afternoons for sports—basketball, volleyball, soccer, and swimming, in which we competed against other towns. We also had the chance to read *The Green Mountain Boys Statement*, the camp newspaper put out by some of the participants, and to catch up on everything important to our burg, from political pandemonium to cafeteria food reviews.

Some participants also put in a lot of practice in preparation for Parents’ Night, which featured a concert by the Boys State Band. Their patriotic music and the accompanying poetic verse underscored the sense of pride and accomplishment we all felt. After the concert, we celebrated the inauguration of our governor and other state officials. It was an amazing night!

**Lasting Impressions**

I came away from Green Mountain Boys State with a better understanding of how our government functions and what it takes to be elected or appointed to office. When we watch the news on television, we hear occasional speeches from high-ranking officials and hear about committees deliberating on important issues. But it’s not often that we see the details that make our political system work, and there’s nothing like watching the inner workings of democracy.

This one short week in June gave us newfound respect for our public servants. With the excitement of Boys State behind us, we juniors returned home to attend school in the fall as politically savvy seniors—and to participate in the world as informed, engaged citizens.

**Imagine**

For more information about Boys State and Boys Nation, see page 24.

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