The University’s Museum of American Political Life was the place to be on Election Night, Nov. 7. Several hundred students, faculty, staff, administrators, media representatives and people from the community were on hand to watch the returns and celebrate the opening of the exhibition, “The Will of the People? Presidential Campaigns That Made the Nation.”

Organizers of the exhibition must be credited with unusual prescience; the exhibition could not have been more timely. With the 2000 presidential election ending in a virtual tie, the outcome was still too close to call when The Observer went to press 10 days later.

As in all of the country and much of the world, the astounding events on Election Night and the days that followed were watched closely by those on campus and discussed energetically, not just in classes but in dorm rooms, offices, Gen- gras, the Commons, The 1877 Club. Many saw the excruciatingly close vote and its aftermath as a crisis and an indication of a great divide in the country. Others viewed the vitality of the national debate as a healthy exercise of democracy. The dramatic, often contentious, unfolding of history became a supreme civics lesson for all, not only for the students who were voting for the first time in a presidential election but for their professors as well.

Intense interest in the campaign was evident throughout the fall, with a level of student attention to the political process that had not been seen on campus in more than two decades.

Four days before the election, Channel 2, the University’s student-run television station, broadcast a live town meeting from the campus television studio. The event, the brainchild of senior Michael Baldyga and junior Ezra Shanken, was organized and run entirely by students. Participating in the forum was an audience of 50 students and a panel that included Connecticut Comptroller Nancy Wyman; Assistant Secretary of the State Tanya Meck; Paul Lewis, news director for WTIC-TV, Channel 61; Guy “Chuck” Colarulli, associate provost and dean of undergraduate studies, who is also associate professor of politics and government; and representatives of the Bush and Gore campaigns.

Among the topics discussed were why 18- to 24-year-olds tend to stay away from the polls, the rising cost of higher education, and violence in schools.

In early October, members of the Government and Law Society joined other students nationwide to give electronic feedback on the presidential and vice-presidential debates.

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The Progressive Student Alliance invited Green Party candidate Ralph Nader to campus for a rally in Lincoln Theater on Oct. 4 and, later in the month, Reform Party vice-presidential candidate Ezola Foster spoke to students in Suisman Lounge. The dialogue continued two days after the election as civil rights leader Martin Luther King III discussed the results with several hundred students, faculty, and staff.

Launching the political events on campus in September was a roundtable discussion, sponsored by the University’s annual Deeds Symposium, with four noted political strategists and pollsters discussing presidential campaigning and the impact of the new forms of electronic media. —DS

**Rating the Debate**

by Terri Raimondi

As millions of Americans tuned into the presidential and vice-presidential debates at home this fall, University of Hartford students tuned in to “Rate the Debate” live, via the Internet.

On Thursday, Oct. 5, and Tuesday, Oct. 17, 20 members of the Government and Law Society joined thousands of other students nationwide to give simultaneous, moment-by-moment feedback on the candidates via the Internet. The Hartford students used the latest in Internet technology on state-of-the-art equipment in the University’s new Computer Learning Center (CLC) to respond positively or negatively while they watched the candidates debate on television.

On Oct. 5, the students rated the vice-presidential debate between Democrat Joseph Lieberman and Republican Dick Cheney. On Tuesday, Oct. 17, students rated the presidential debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush.

Sophomore Andrew Fimka, president of the Government and Law Society, said the group had traveled to Boston for the first presidential debate between Gore and Bush and were eager to participate in “Rate the Debate.”

What the candidates said during the debates mattered less than how their messages were received at CLC. As students gave live reaction to the debate and to some of Campaign 2000’s tough issues, their responses were automatically tallied and reported by Fox News.

“Rate the Debate” is an interactive Web initiative sponsored by Speakout.com and Fox News Channel, which records television viewers’ responses to the candidates’ performances during the debates. The sponsors and Youth Vote 2000, a nonpartisan coalition that urges young people to vote, encouraged students nationwide to log on and rate the debate.

Students logged onto an Internet-based “dial meter” that allowed them to score every second of the debate on a 0- to-100 scale, indicating their level of approval or disapproval. The continuously running graph displayed the results of their input immediately, producing instant online results.

Fimka said that using the Internet gave credibility to the students’ answers and put participants’ responses on equal terms nationwide.

Junior Jeffrey Morris, a politics and government major, described “Rate the Debate” as an interactive learning experience. “We watched the candidates speak and simultaneously voiced our opinion” said Morris. “The candidates reiterated what they believed in.”

The students generally liked what they heard, although many students were critical of how the candidates responded and felt they did not give direct answers. Many students were interested in
knowing how the candidates would benefit education.

George Brophy, the University’s new director of information technology services (ITS), said “Rate the Debate” was a true example of teamwork across the University. Although the Computer Learning Center was not yet in use, ITS was able to work with other departments, including media technology services and telecom, to make the new center ready for “Rate the Debate.” When fully equipped, CLC will include more than 20 computer seats plus printing and scanning capabilities, and a professional presenter’s station with a ceiling-mounted projector, screen, and television hookup capability.

“The technology performed flawlessly as the students watched and listened to the debate via the television hookup, and rated the debate in real time over the Internet,” said Brophy. “It was both exciting and enjoyable to see our students in action using this technology while participating in the political process.”

The “Rate the Debate” event attracted impressive media attention, including WFSB-TV Channel 3, NBC 30, WTIC-TV Channel 61, New England Cable News (NECN), and The Hartford Courant. Channel 61 and NECN set up satellite trucks and broadcast live from the event.

“I was pleased to see how well our students interacted with the media and how well they presented themselves and the University of Hartford,” said Brophy.

Freshman Ugo Mbawuiki said “Rate the Debate” is a good example of democracy in action. “If we all took time to do something like this, the world would change,” he said.

Professor Nader Returns to Campus

On a swing through his native state, Ralph Nader addressed a cheering crowd at Lincoln Theater on Oct. 4. “There aren’t many presidential candidates who can say that they taught at the University of Hartford,” he said. The Green Party candidate taught Far Eastern politics at the University in the early ’60s.

His campaign rally and press conference at the University took place on the day after he had been turned away from a debate-viewing site at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

Speaking to an audience of students, faculty, and staff, as well as community and Green Party members, Nader promised to launch a “people’s debate commission” to counter the Commission on Presidential Debates. The Commission, a private, corporate-sponsored organization, had barred from participation all presidential and vice-presidential candidates except those of the Democratic and Republican parties. In Boston, organizers and state police had waited for Nader, who legally held a ticket, and told him he would not be permitted to enter the hall to watch the debate.

Nader urged those in his UofH audience to vote for him, whether or not they expected him to win. A substantial vote for the Green Party, he said, would provide validation for the causes he continues to promote on behalf of “ordinary Americans.” Of the choice between Al Gore and George W. Bush, Nader stated, “There comes a time when the least of the worst is not the best of the political system.”

Continuing his advocacy for decent wages, universal health care, affordable housing, campaign finance reform, and his opposition to excessive military spending and corporate greed, Nader said that both major candidates had forgotten the poor and people of color and overridden the sovereignty of the American people.

Corporate power, including that of multinational corporations, has wrested control from taxpayers, who are the actual continued on page 22
owners of land, water, air, and airwaves, Nader said. “Cheap politicians...are selling our political birthrights for a mess of fund-raising.”

For greater democracy and as a counter-balance to corporate media domination, Nader advocates an alternative, independent media system, or “new news.”

Nader brought his message home to Hartford by citing the “gleaming office buildings side by side with abysmal poverty,” as he reiterated his determination “to abolish child poverty.” He cited the health concerns of Connecticut’s cities, notably a 40 percent level of asthma among the children of Hartford, the highest children’s asthma rate of any municipality in the country. To activists in Connecticut, he recalled the successful opposition to the Patriots’ stadium and urged continued questioning of both Adriaen’s Landing and the Long Wharf Mall project. To young people present, he warned, “If you don’t turn on to politics, politics will turn on you.”

“In pursuit of justice you discover happiness,” Nader told the UofH audience—a reference to his long-held belief in each person’s committing to activism rather than waiting for a leader. In such engagement, he said, is found a “politics of joy and justice.”

George Washington (a.k.a. Associate Prof. Harald Sandstrom) presided over one of the re-enactments of the 1787 Constitutional Convention that took place in most of the American Government classes this fall. Students, acting as delegates from each of the states, engaged in vigorous debate, including Stewart Mader (center) who portrayed James Madison, the pre-eminent figure at the Convention. The re-enactments were the inspiration of Christopher Anderson, adjunct faculty member in the department of Politics and Government.

In September, panelists at the annual Deeds Symposium kicked off a season of election-related activities on campus with a discussion of “Sound-Bite Politics: Presidential Elections in the Age of Electronic Media.” Shown (left to right) are Richard H. Davis, who served as campaign manager for Sen. John McCain’s 2000 presidential bid; Douglas E. Schoen, a political strategist and President Clinton’s research and strategic consultant in 1996; Kellyanne Fitzpatrick, president and CEO of “the polling company™” and a political analyst for CNN; and Donald A. Baer, a political strategist and adviser to President Clinton.