Bryce Febres ‘22, Vice President of Student Assembly for the Spring 2020 semester, includes in election guidelines for Fall 2020 a prohibition against candidates receiving endorsements from student organizations. Eric Stenzel ‘23 contends that the prohibition surpasses the authority given the Vice President by the Student Assembly Constitution, overstepping the rules enumerated in Student Assembly Bylaws, Article V, Section 1.

The proposition of student organizations involving themselves in on-campus elections involves a reasonable hope for engendering increased participation and a more diverse representation of interests. We trust that these ideals inspired candidates to consider seeking endorsements, especially given the specific organizations with which they are involved. Accompanying these hopes and ideals, however, there is a considerable risk. It is not unthinkable that, on a campus as small as Hamilton’s, any organization affiliated with the college would hold enough sway to disrupt the electoral process and devalue the votes of individual students.

In considering the arguments brought before us, we examined the entirety of the election codes for violations, but focused on the Vice President’s responsibility to ensure “The voting rights of all students are protected.” Of principal concern was the influence potentially exerted by organizations over their own members. As institutions across the country work to combat the dangers of hazing and other such abuses of influence in student clubs and societies, that these organizations are able to coerce members to act against their better judgements is beyond question. We are of the opinion that the voting rights of students are only protected in a fully democratic election. Whether students are coerced to vote for harmful platforms or even for the aforementioned ideals, coercion by at least 239 organizations would qualify an oligarchy inconsistent with our democratic arrangement. It follows that organizations cannot be allowed to involve themselves in Student Assembly elections.

A second consideration entertained by the committee was the implication of endorsements for the cap placed on campaign finances. Albeit indirectly, money spent by an organization might serve as a

1 Student Assembly Bylaws, Article V, Section 1, Subsection G, 1
2 “Organizations,” https://hamilton.presence.io/organizations
3 Student Assembly Bylaws, Article V, Section 1, Subsection B, 1
further incentive for its attendees and members to vote in support of a candidate backed by that organization. This influence might not only constitute coercion (addressed above) but could allow candidates a backdoor to evading the maximum budget. Assessing cases of bribery\(^4\) would also become near-impossible were organizations, with their potentially very large budgets, allowed to play a role in election proceedings.

A third consideration brought before the committee concerned whether upholding the prohibition on organizational endorsements would violate the college’s policy regarding students’ and their organizations’ freedoms to inquire and express their thoughts and beliefs. It is our opinion that Student Assembly elections are categorically a “regular and essential operation”\(^5\) of the college. As the potential for organizational endorsements to disrupt elections is the very item under consideration, this concern was deemed inapplicable. Moreover, our decision would only impact Hamilton College Student Assembly electoral proceedings and would not affect the rights granted to students and their organizations by the earlier-referenced institutional policies.

During the course of our deliberations, Student Assembly and its affairs were often compared with those of other governing bodies, such as those that govern our nation and peer institutions. We deemed that there were no relevant comparata; Hamilton’s Student Assembly is a unique functioning body. The influence potentially exerted by organizations on our campus must be considered on its own with regard to the demands of our constitution.

Ultimately the committee’s interpretation required us to specifically assess whether the endorsements discussed would constitute a violation of the voting rights of students. While we were unable to foresee all possible scenarios which might precipitate from organizational endorsements, we can envision many in which endorsements could be used anti-democratically. It is not the responsibility of this committee to police the internal affairs of student organizations, and a broad interpretation is needed to prevent violations of the Hamilton College Student Assembly’s Constitution and Bylaws.

The election rules for Fall 2020 and prohibition on organizational endorsements are upheld. A candidate found to benefit from such an endorsement, solicited directly or indirectly, is to be disqualified from Student Assembly elections.

\(^4\) Student Assembly Bylaws, Article V, Section 1, Subsection F, 1, 1