



Mar 28

ESB: Supervision or Suppression?

grace leake

Amidst the drama of this year's Student Government elections, one theme has been consistent: the shameless overreach of the Election Supervisory Board (ESB) in silencing the voices of the executive alliance candidates.

The ESB, which functions as a judicial entity processing election complaints, first silenced Hannah McMorris and Guneez Ibrahim. It penalized their campaign for their platform video and for liking a tweet which complained about "straight white Zionist men in power." The ESB ruled that liking this tweet constituted "deceptive campaigning." They argued that while McMorris and Ibrahim purported to represent all students, liking this tweet indicated otherwise. Apparently, they felt that criticizing underrepresentation of minorities in government amounted to discrimination against the majority. After their deliberation, the ESB issued a moratorium on McMorris and Ibrahim's campaign during the last day of election, stifling their voices at the most critical point of the election.

The ESB wasn't done. On March 22, during the run-off election, the ESB penalized Colton Becker with a moratorium for "love-reacting" to a post from UT Jewish student leaders on his personal Facebook account. Condemning discrimination that Jewish students have faced at UT, the post called for the UT community to denounce anti-Semitism on campus. The ESB ruled that the post unfairly alleged that the Guneez-Hannah campaign was "complicit in anti-Semitic rhetoric" and that Becker's reaction contributed to the allegation and to verbal harassment.

These instances of suppression are virtually the same. In both cases, candidates were voicing an opinion related to representation and Zionism. Both opinions were silenced.

Jennifer Valdez, chair of the ESB, argued in an email interview that these actions were justified: “Myself and other members of the Dean of Students Office actually met with legal services to discuss freedom of speech and ensure that our decisions were not blatantly infringing on those rights. Although a case could always be argued for freedom of speech, we were advised by legal services that we were not doing so... When we make a decision, hours of thinking have gone into that and when we make a decision, we are well within our rights as an ESB to make a decision.”

Even if the ESB’s actions did not infringe upon freedom of speech — which is debatable — its decisions still shut down students’ views, views which are vital to healthy discussion on our campus. The moment students are penalized for sharing opinions, particularly controversial opinions, our intellectual climate collapses. All members of our community lose both the opportunity to express themselves and to learn from others’ differing perspectives. Everyone’s education is compromised. The danger of this suppression, both to us as individuals and to our campus climate as a whole, cannot be understated.

When McMorris and Ibrahim liked that tweet, when Becker reacted to that post, they were expressing opinions that are valuable to the ongoing discussion on our campus. Even *if* the ESB had the authority to penalize their speech, it should have restrained itself. This is not the type of election we want on our campus. Our community should be ashamed that candidates were silenced for expressing their opinions, for liking a tweet, for reacting to a post.

It’s easy to get caught up in the different personalities and platforms of the candidates, but don’t forget that more fundamental values are at stake. It’s up to UT students to keep authorities like the ESB accountable. Don’t remember this election for the petty intricacies and intrigues of the campaigns. Look beyond the shallow campus politics and in the future advocate for what’s really important: that no one’s voice is silenced.

Campus

esb, executive alliance, student government





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