

It's only February and, already, I run into the presidential election everywhere I go. Over Christmas Break in Long Island, I sorted through the magazines and newspapers scattered on my kitchen counter. I flipped through The New York Times Magazine on Sunday, and found its pages filled with profiles of the Democratic candidates for president and updates on their campaigns thus far. Driving to the airport a few days later, I saw a bumper sticker that read, "Let's not elect Dubya in 2005 either." I got onto a plane to fly down to Charleston, S.C., for a semi-annual convention called "Renaissance Weekend." The man seated to my left was reading an article on Howard Dean that appeared on the front page of the New York Times. Intrigued by the headline, "From Patrician Roots, Dean Sets Path of Prickly Independence," I asked my seatmate if I could borrow his paper. Instead of following Dean or discussing his platform, the article was mostly about what the NYT referred to as Dean's "Blue-blood," Park Avenue upbringing.

Dr. Dean grew up in New York City, in the same neighborhood that I grew up in: the infamous Upper East Side. The tone of article suggested that this counted as a strike against him. To further the image of Dean's elitist background, instead of noting St. George's for its academic rigor, the school is distinguished by its ownership of a 69-foot sloop. If Dean is attacked for being raised on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and attending a New England prep school (St. George's in particular), then I can certainly empathize. But is there a difference between identifying with a candidate and supporting a candidate?

I come from a long line of Republicans. My parents are Republicans, as are their parents and probably their parents before them. Political conservatism runs in my blood. One might argue that I'm just a product of my environment, but I'm convinced that it goes deeper than that. If I were I product of my environment, I doubt my beliefs would have withstood eight years of being one of only two Republicans in a class of 50 girls. My two closest friends come from politically active liberal families, and even they have given up the hope of converting me. It has always been clear to me that I could never come to agree with welfare (or "handouts" as they would be called in my house) and higher taxes, to name a few classic liberal beliefs. However, I never considered that I might be influenced to support a Democratic candidate for personal reasons.

Politicians have been aware of the benefit of having voters identify with them for decades, possibly even centuries. Andrew Jackson was enormously popular and considered to be a man of the people; he was the president representing the common man. Bill Clinton was lauded for his charisma and his ability to reach out to people. Even Clinton's decline in popularity was based on the choices he made in his personal life. In

the 2000 election George W. Bush won brownie points, and consequently critical votes, by speaking Spanish in a few of his speeches to a Hispanic audience. Relating to your voting pool is no new tactic in politics, but until recently I never felt affected by it.

I was interested in just how far these similarities would take me. Everyday I am reminded of Howard Dean, whether it's by sitting in English Class with a "Howard Dean for President" poster at my back, or a "Dean 2004" baseball cap on my college counselor's bookshelf, or chatting with Sam Dean '06, on my way to class. Over Christmas break, in Charleston, I had my first encounter with Dr. Dean, in the flesh. When he spoke in the lecture hall of the "Renaissance Weekend" hotel, I was impressed by his poise and eloquence, but most of all I was struck by how normal he seemed. Suddenly he wasn't this larger-than-life presidential candidate, he was a friendly, relaxed, articulate speaker, discussing his political views and singing a line from Outkast's, "Sorry, Ms. Jackson" to

"Suddenly [Howard Dean] ... was,
a friendly, relaxed, articulate speaker,
discussing his political views and
singings a line from Outkast's,
"Sorry, Ms. Jackson" to entertain the few
teenagers in the audience."

entertain the few teenagers in the audience. I realized that he wasn't a political Titan; He was a fellow St. Georgian, a fellow Manhattanite, and not a bad rapper. With these realizations I began to develop an affection for the candidate, and for a second I thought to myself, "If I were 18, I might even vote for him!"

The conversation at dinner that evening was on Dean's speech, specifically Dean's politics. As the liberals around me praised Dean for his answers to the critical questioners in the audience (including one man who prefaced his question with, "You and I share the same first name and I think it's about time we had a Howard in the Oval Office), it occurred to me that I did not agree with virtually any of his policies. I had nearly fallen for the, "Support me, I'm like you" trap. It made me wonder: If Stalin grew up on Carnegie Hill and graduated from St. George's would I support him as a candidate for president of the United States? I'm not suggesting that Dean is anything like Stalin, of course, but my reasons for supporting him would be exactly the same. After careful consideration, I decided that Dean can have my sympathy—no one likes to be judged solely on where and how they grew up—but when it comes to my (hypothetical) vote in 2004, I'm all about politics, policy, Texas and Phillips Academy Andover.