

I WON'T

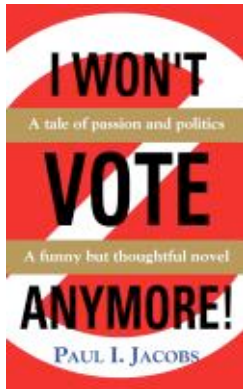
A tale of passion and politics

VOTE

A funny but thoughtful novel

ANymORE!

PAUL I. JACOBS



A retired college professor is unexpectedly called back to teach a new course on "starting a democracy from scratch." The course will allow graduate students, all classroom teachers themselves, to move up the salary scale. He meets enthusiasm from some students, indifference from others, hostility from the college administration, and outrage from well-established political groups. Some of the students are original thinkers, some are non-thinkers, and one student seeks to seduce the professor.

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A Tale of Passion and Politics

Paul I. Jacobs

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Preface

A teenage boy and his father are walking along the beach.

“Dad, why do countries fight each other?”

“I don’t know, son.”

They walk further.

“Dad, what are ‘free elections’?”

“Oh, um, I don’t know exactly. Would you like some ice cream?”

“Maybe later. But Dad, why do some people wait in line for hours to vote and others...Oh, never mind.”

“No, son. Ask me. How are you going to learn if you don’t ask questions?”

First day of class

Most enter the lecture room alone. Others enter in pairs. Some are young, some are middle-aged, and a few are old. Almost all of them *look* older than they are.

They are teachers.

They didn't have time to change their clothes or their weary expressions before coming here after work.

From 5:00 pm to 6:30 pm today, they will also be students.

After enough weekly sessions of this class and others, they will move up a step on the pay scale. They may also earn the right to place "M.A." after their name. The courses are especially designed for them and most aren't hard. They are teachers.

Some recognize each other from previous courses. Benjamin shouts "Yo" to Dusty, who rushes over. They go into an intricate handshake and fist-pounding routine.

"You're looking surprisingly good, given that your Yankees really blew it last year," says Benjamin.

"You had to bring that up?" Dusty smiles and playfully tilts up Benjamin's baseball cap.

"Well, let's sit together anyway."

Benjamin smiles, puts his arm around Dusty and leads them to the second row of seats.

Alice spots Josie, rushes over to her and receives a tight embrace. "Are you still seeing what's-his-face?" asks Josie.

Alice sighs deeply. “There are times *I* can’t remember his name either. And other times I *want* to forget it, *and* him. But it’s so hard to break it off.”

Josie takes Alice’s arm and leads her to two empty chairs. They are both startled to see the names *Pia* and *Antoine* in exquisite calligraphy on white cards placed on these particular seats. They look around. Alice points out that every seat has a person in it or a white card on it.

“Is this a fancy dinner party or an in-service course at a second-rate university?” asks Josie.

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying. Heard anything about the new instructor at all?”

“No,” says Josie, “but he must be some kind of control freak. With a sense of aesthetics.”

Josie sits down and motions for Alice to do the same.

“Hey, what’s the matter, Alice? Why the glum face?”

“I’ll tell you later,” says Alice, looking around the room. “If I drop the course. Well, even if I don’t.” She again scans the surroundings. “Just can’t talk here and now.”

“Sure, Alice. Whenever.”

Emily and Bill saunter in together, holding hands, and quickly choose two seats in the back row. When Emily notices the place-cards, she laughs, shows them to Bill. He tears them up. They both sit down.

Alice points out a sign hung on the front wall:

***STARTING A COUNTRY FROM SCRATCH:
Re-Forming the United States of America***
Please take your assigned seats

Alice gets up to find *her* assigned seat, but Josie pulls her back. More people arrive, and most head to the back of the room. No one sits in the first two rows.

A man rises from his third row seat. He is perhaps in his mid-fifties. He appears to be very physically fit, yet he moves slowly. As he reaches the front of the room, he seems to pick up energy. He turns to face the class. He looks like he has been crying. They can all see that he forces himself to smile.

The game-changer

“Welcome, everybody,” he says, “to a brand new course in our program.”

“As you may have heard, Professor Leonard, who was to teach the course you registered for, *Advanced Topics in Classroom Managements*, passed away suddenly two days ago.”

Sharp intakes of breath are heard from some.

“I was hurriedly lured out of retirement to replace him. The Dean promised I could teach just about any course I wanted, as long as the State Certification Board approved it for graduate credit. You can see the course title I chose behind me.

“Now, that topic may be a bit dicey. But if they reject it, the appeals process will keep things tied up until long after your grandchildren have completed the course. Taught by someone else, I assume.”

He smiles. Nobody else does.

“The course I’ve chosen to teach is far removed from what I’ve taught previously, and is unrelated to my hobbies of the last few years, extreme sports and calligraphy.”

Still no reaction from the class.

“Okay, let’s begin.”

Suddenly an attractive, determined-looking woman raises her hand, startling him. He stares at her a moment.

“Oh, of course,” he says. “Any questions?”

“I’m Josie. What’s your name?” asks Josie.

“I’m Professor Reynolds. My friends call me Rennie.”

“This course you want to teach for the first time, Rennie, has anyone ever taught it anywhere before?”

“Not that I know of.”

“So, if I don’t want to take a course that I don’t really know anything about, taught by a guy I’ve just met, *and* it’s not the course I registered for, what are my options?”

“Someone from the Registrar’s Office will be here...” Rennie looks down at his watch, “in just a few minutes to discuss your options. And I’ve got to leave for Professor Leonard’s memorial service. But before I go, I want to briefly tell you what I have in mind for the course.”

He straightens his posture, slowly scans the faces of the teachers in the class, clears his throat and begins. “In the past couple of years, a number of governments in the Arab world have been overthrown, involved in a civil war, or both. We may be called in to advise these countries in setting up new governments based upon free elections.”

The class senses a switch in his manner from that of a chatty friend to that of lecturer with information to impart.

Rennie continues. “Why us? Well, after all, we’ve been under constitutional rule since 1789! We’ve had free elections to our House of Representatives every two years! We know how to do it right!

“Or do we?”

“In our nation’s early years, many groups of residents were excluded from voting in our ‘free elections.’ And before, during, and after each recent election, we’ve had demonstrations, media battles, and Supreme Court cases about our procedures.”

A well-groomed middle-aged woman enters the room. She and Rennie exchange friendly smiles.

“Class, this is Millicent Albright from the Registrar’s Office, here to handle your questions about the shift in the course,” says Rennie.

Millicent nods and smiles at the class, then places herself at the side of the room.

Josie glances at the visitor, then focuses in on Rennie to ask him, “What does helping governments in third-world countries have to do with our in-service training as teachers here in the U.S.A.?”

Rennie looks at his watch.

“That’s a central question our class will explore in this course, Josie, and I expect you will be one of our lead explorers. Before next week’s meeting, I’ll send you all an email with more details and a draft of the course outline.”

He looks again at his watch.

“Any *absolutely essential* questions that I can answer before I dash out?”

“I don’t have email service,” says someone from the back. Rennie glances in the direction of the voice and sees a tall handsome young man of about twenty-seven, with incongruous grey patches in his hair.

“Your cable is down?” asks Rennie.

“No, I don’t have cable.”

“Your internet connection is through your telephone line?”

“I don’t have an internet connection. Don’t need one, I don’t have a computer.”

“Millie, could I ask you to work with Student Aid to get a loaner to... What’s your name, son?”

“Joseph Cobble. You can call me Dusty.”

“Millie, could you get Joe a computer by Friday?”

“Rennie, even if it’s free to keep, I don’t want a computer,” says Dusty.

“Why not, son?”

“I got my family a computer last year. Big mistake,” says Dusty.

“My younger sister drove everyone crazy trying to round up more ‘*Friends*’ on Facebook than her real friends had.

“My kid brother used it to play games, 24/7. Not ‘thinking’ games like chess or FreeCell. Destructive, bloody, killing games. He’s joining the army as soon as he graduates high school, and he thinks his video game training will give him a leg up on winning a Congressional Medal of Honor.

“My Mom and Dad both got hooked on watching porn, actually Mom more than Dad. I had to restrict their computer use...”

“Really! What an interesting family! How old are your parents, Joe?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. For a moment, you just had me reminiscing about my own family. I can see why you don’t want a computer in your home. So I’ll send you a

paper copy by special messenger of what's in the email. Are you willing to review it?"

Millicent starts. *Special messenger! Not out of the Registrar's budget!*

"Of course," says Dusty, "if you're willing to do something for me."

"What's that, son?"

"Nobody calls me Joe. I'm Dusty, okay? Second notice."

Millicent thinks, *Finally Dusty called him on it. Joe, Joe, Joe. You've got to move on, Rennie! He's been dead for 10 years now!*

"It's a deal," Rennie says. "Dusty, I'm sure that if Professor Leonard were here with us today, he'd be pleased to see how we settled a conflict between your family values and the university's routine but sometimes unthinking use of technology.

"And he'll be extremely pleased when I arrive at his memorial service only a half hour late."

He runs out.

Millicent moves to the front of the room.

Motives

“As Professor Reynolds told you,” says Millicent, “I’m here to handle any questions you might have about the class change.”

Almost everyone’s hand shoots up. Josie’s is not among them.

Alice looks over at her, startled. She whispers to Josie, “I thought you’d be the first to transfer out.”

“Changed my mind,” whispers Josie.

Then in a normal voice, Alice says, “Before you got here, Millicent, a student asked Rennie what options we had if we didn’t want to continue in a course we never actually registered for. He said you could cover that question.”

“I was that student, Ms. Albright,” says Josie. “At the time I was skeptical that Rennie could deliver the goods. But he’s now shown us his ability to think outside the box, his concern for social issues, and his devilish sense of humor. I look forward to taking his exciting new course.”

Millicent thinks *What is this interesting, opportunistic young lady up to?*

She asks the class, “How many agree with the last speaker?”

No hand is raised. No one speaks for an agonizing ten seconds that feels like a full semester to both Millicent and Josie.

Finally, from Alice, “What if you’re sick of this whole academic scene and you just want your money back *today?*”

I can relate. But the School of Education can barely stay solvent from day to day. Out loud, Millicent says, “Ordinarily, no problem.

“I could let you transfer to another three-credit course in our program, and under the circumstances, waive the usual change-of-registration fee.

“But unfortunately, at this point all our other courses are completely filled.”

Groans from the class.

“Well, except for *Advanced Inferential Statistics in Educational Research*.”

Alice shudders at the thought.

“Right now,” Millicent continues, “there’s just one student in that class. You’d be able to get almost individual attention.”

Alice puts her head down on the desk and moans.

“Would anyone here be interested in that course?”

No responses.

“Well then, any other questions?” Millicent asks. “Perhaps on a *different* topic?”

She sees Dusty raise his hand. *Thank God, he’s got smarts.* “Yes, Dusty?”

“How did Professor Leonard die so suddenly?”

“The family sees it as a private matter, Dusty, and isn’t releasing any details,” she answers.

If I had to spend two hours a week with a class like this, I’d blow my brains out too.

Weirdness

“There’s something weird about Rennie,” says Benjamin, as he signals for his coffee cup to be refilled. “He tells us ‘I was suddenly lured out of retirement’ but he gives no further explanation. I have to wonder if he has an alibi for Professor Leonard’s time of death. I saw this movie where...”

“Oh, come on,” says Dusty.

Alice and Josie pass by, and Dusty waves them over to the table. The women sit down.

“Well, I don’t think he’s weird,” Dusty continues. “Maybe still uncomfortable, still settling into a job he unexpectedly got a few days ago.

“And we’ve all seen movies... But Rennie weird?”

Dusty waves his finger at Benjamin. “Well, maybe like a Red Sox fan is weird: eccentric, intense about his little hobby, but not like a crazed killer.”

“Thanks a lot,” says Benjamin.

“Usually, anyway,” adds Dusty.

“Well, excuse me. I never took Intro to Psych,” says Benjamin.

“Were you just talking about Professor Reynolds?” asks Alice.

“Who else?” says Benjamin.

“Well,” says Alice, “I’ve noticed a few odd things about Rennie, like how he persisted in calling Dusty ‘Joe.’”

“And,” adds Josie, “he talked about Professor Leonard like he was still here among the living, still caring about whether Rennie came late to his memorial

service. That sort of stuff. He must have been pretty close to Professor Leonard. Now he's grieving, and you sometimes do odd things after the sudden death of someone you cared a lot about."

Josie stares at her friend Alice, trying to imagine whom in her life she's *really* talking about.

"Even if you murdered the guy who died?" asks Benjamin.

Now the other three look intently at Benjamin.

"For me," says Alice, "the tragic aspect of Professor Leonard's death was that Elliot—you remember Elliot? He was in last semester's class with us? He already took Professor Leonard's course a year ago..."

"The same one we were registered in for this term?" asks Dusty.

"Well, that we *thought* we were registered in, yeah. So, anyway, last week he sold me all his class notes and copies of the class exams for \$250."

"Too bad," says Josie. "I also got his stuff from that course. For free. I was going to share it with you, Alice."

"You got it for free?"

"Yes, for free."

"You didn't even pay for the photocopying?"

"That's right. Just had to perform a few sexual favors."

"No, no, you didn't! That's awful," says Alice.

"You're right, I didn't. It *would* have been awful. He's not my type at all. I was just kidding. I wanted to lighten the general mood around here."

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Alice reaches out to hold Josie's hand. "Maybe it's just *your* mood that needs lightening."

Sex changes and relative democracy

Rennie stands at the front of the lecture room watching his students arrive. He looks at his watch.

“Welcome back. Has everyone here received the course outline I emailed?” He looks over at Dusty. “And Dusty, did you get it too?”

Dusty gives him a thumbs-up signal.

“If you’ve read the outline, are any comments, suggestions, or questions about it?” asks Rennie.

No response from the class.

“Well,” says Rennie, “I’ll quickly run through the course outline and maybe a few questions or comments will come up.”

He begins reading from his notes:

“STARTING A COUNTRY FROM SCRATCH: Re-Forming the United States of America.”

“The Constitution developed in the 1700’s may have been adequate for its time. But major changes in the United States, and certainly the world, have occurred since then. Has our process for choosing our lawmakers through ‘free elections’ kept up with these changes?”

Some students shrug, others text friends, and a few listen intently. He continues reading.

“In 1776, the first House of Representatives had a total of sixty-five members for all the thirteen states.

“Each House member represented about sixty-one thousand voters. Quite a caseload! And, more

importantly, he (they were indeed all men) didn't have any internet surveys or even telephone polls to tell him what the people he represented thought about the issues. Or even what issues mattered to them."

"Has that 'all men' really changed much over the years?" asks Emily.

"Good question," replies Rennie. "And it might be a good topic for a term paper."

"Yes," says Benjamin, standing up and adjusting his baseball cap. "If I chose that topic, my title might be 'Sex Changes in the House of Representatives over the years.'"

A few scattered giggles among the students, then whispered comments with those seated near them, and finally almost everyone is laughing, including Rennie.

Benjamin's face alternately shows a puzzled look and a forced smile, like a blinking human neon sign.

"And the body of my report," Benjamin continues, "could be, in 1776, no women in the House of Representatives; but, in 2012, 20% women. That's my guess. End of report."

The class turns to Rennie, awaiting his reaction.

"You might," says Rennie, "present data for every twenty years from 1776 to 2006, discuss what events and factors may have led to changes in the percentage of women in the House, and discuss how the situation in the U.S. has differed from that in the legislatures of Canada, Great Britain, France, and other relative democracies."

A stunned silence.

Then, from Benjamin, “Are you calling the United States of America a *relative* democracy?”

“Would you call it an *absolute* democracy?” says Bill.

“Here’s my understanding of the situation,” says a student nobody has ever really noticed before now. “In the U.S., we allow temporary workers into the country because they have special skills that are desperately needed here. Like, they can do farm work for long hours under a broiling sun for minimal wages without complaining, and our native-born citizens don’t have that skill.

“So it works out well for everyone, a win-win situation.

“But after a while the temporary worker gets lonely. He wants to bring his wife, his kids, his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and cousins and so on over here. So it’s no longer one good worker with special skills we’re getting, it’s a big extended family that over time can outnumber us.

“And that’s what *I* understand by the term ‘relative democracy.’”

“That’s a very interesting interpretation of the term,” says Rennie. “What’s your name, son?”

“Gregory.”

“And what do you teach, Greg?”

“Me? I teach English as a Second Language to adults in evening classes.”

“And do your views about ‘relative democracy’ come from observing and talking with your students in class?”

“Definitely. And outside of class too. I like to get to know them as individuals, make them feel at home here, answer any questions they have about adjusting to life in their new country.”

Rennie sees Bill squirming in his seat.

“Bill, do you agree with Greg’s interpretation of the term?”

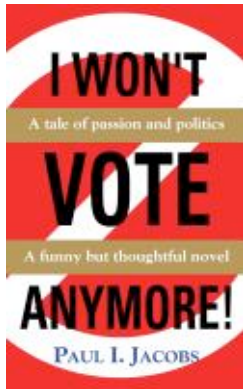
“Well,” says Bill, “to me, a *relative* democracy protects *basic rights* like freedom of speech, the right to vote in elections, and the right to practice any religion or no religion, *more than* most other countries do.

“I don’t think there are any *absolute* democracies.”

“I remember reading about something like this in Canada,” says Antoine. “Some immigrants got expedited visas so they could use their ‘special competencies’ to work in strip clubs or massage parlors, or with clients of escort services.”

“This is amazing,” says Rennie, “how merely reviewing a course outline produces so much interest, emotion, and understanding in students.” *And reveals such ignorance, bigotry, and misunderstanding.*

He wipes his brow.



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