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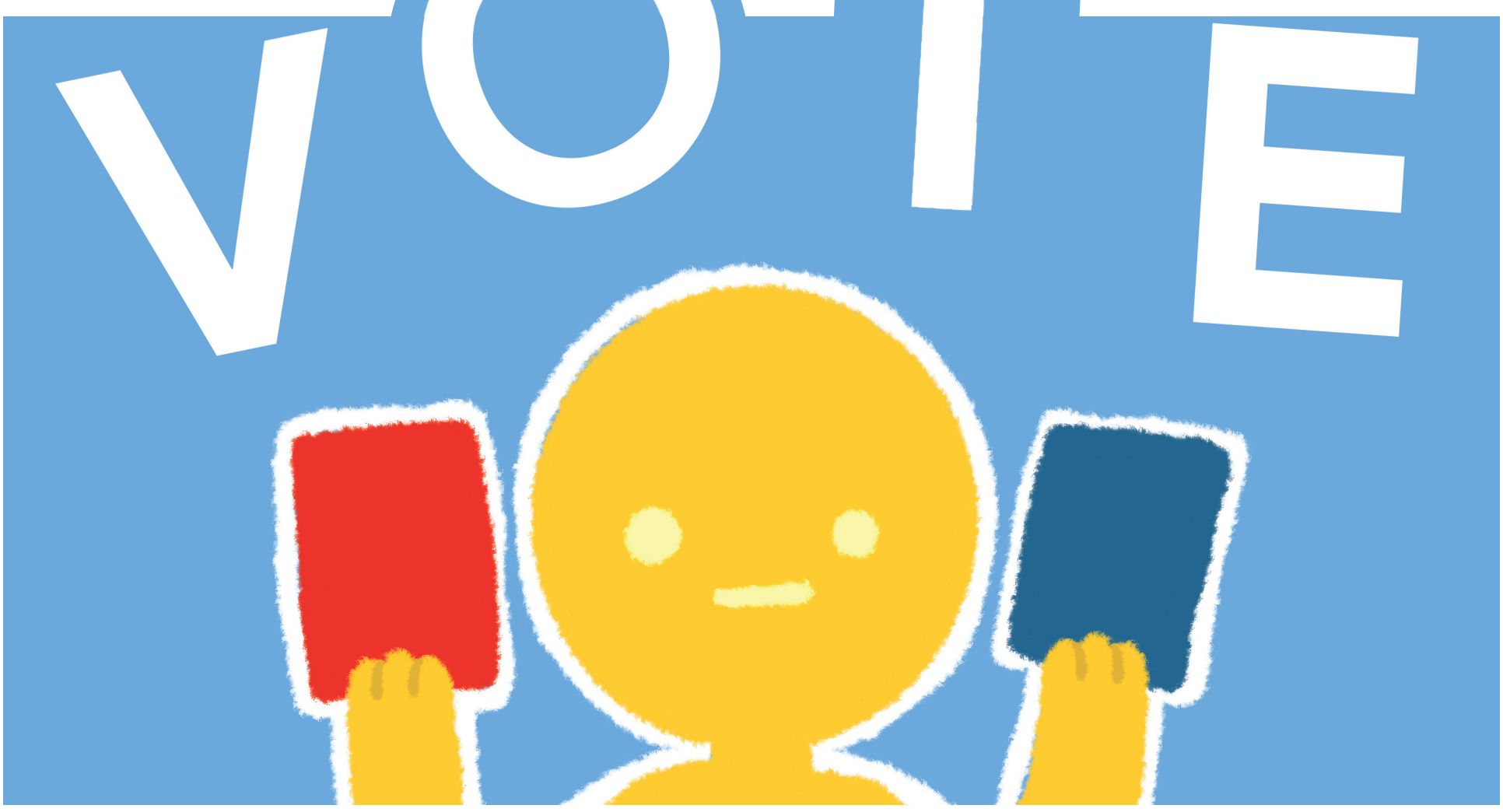
USG holds student election debate

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The University of Connecticut's Undergraduate Student Government held its annual debate between candidates for president and vice president, comptroller and chief diversity officer.

Voting for USG opened yesterday on UConntact and will close tomorrow at noon. The debates were held in the Student Union Theater from 6 to 8 p.m. on Monday.

President and Vice President: Venice Montanaro and Keira Conrad vs. Joel Harris and Eliyahu Cohen



The presidential candidates are Venice Montanaro, a sixth-semester political science and sociology major, and Joel Harris, a fourth-semester mechanical engineering major. Montanaro's running mate is Keira Conrad, a fourth-semester political science and economics major, and Harris' is Eliyahu Cohen, a fourth-semester individualized financial technology major. Full profiles of the candidates are on the Daily Campus website.

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>
> JOEL HARRIS

Harris and Cohen emphasized the low participation of the general student body in USG activities, citing low election voting rates and the sparse attendance at the debate as examples. They regularly returned to the fact that most students are in RSOs, so that's what they wanted to focus on. They also portrayed themselves as outside perspectives since they were senators but are not involved with USG beyond that as their opponents are.

Montanaro and Conrad said they are running on the pillars of affordability, accessibility and quality of life. Their message to the student body is that "your concerns are our actions." They brought up their experience in USG, initiatives that they have implemented and specific actions they hoped to accomplish if they were elected, such as improving bus and walkway accessibility.

Cohen responded to those specific actions by calling them "no-brainers."

"Of course we want to support students like that. But we want to create new value added," Cohen said. "There's a real issue with Tier II organizations that needs to be addressed, and this money needs to be put back in the pockets of students."

Harris emphasized they are not part of a "USG bubble" and that they would look for results for the wider student body.

Montanaro responded by saying that they were also well-rounded outside of USG, but their knowledge of the institution would help them take real action.

"We see these issues, and we know that these issues are no-brainers, but the fact is there needs to be follow-up," she said. "So, I think not only with our experience in USG, but outside of USG, we can help with that."

Conrad added that they also planned to make USG more accessible to the student body through strategies like open office hours.

Both pairs said they wanted to expand and enhance legal resources available to students when it came to the possibility of federal immigration agents coming to campus.

Montanaro pointed to the legal services committee that they already started to help students with issues including and beyond immigration. She said it was important to protect students' right to advocate and Conrad added that they wanted to make students more aware of available resources.

Harris emphasized that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement had no place on the campus. Cohen said they should partner with real organizations and "adults" because they bring "legitimacy and credibility."

When the vice presidential candidates were asked about how they would foster an inclusive environment, Conrad pitched ideas like office hours and better social media outreach. Cohen criticized the office hours idea, saying "people are lazy" without an incentive to come. He emphasized generating interest through more effective emails and a better internal culture on the messaging app Slack in his answer.

Montanaro closed by acknowledging her opponents' point that there was low student engagement in USG elections but saying that she hoped to represent those students anyway.

"We want to deliver meaningful impact," she said. "We hope these problems get solved, but we also know that if we form a credible team in some government, if we work to include the rest of the university and improve our outreach, we can create meaningful and long-lasting change."

Harris said they would advocate for students as well, but the value they added was their commitment to funding Tier II organizations.

"USG does great work and runs great programs. There's no denying that. But Tier II organizations deserve a lot more," he said. "They don't deserve us paying our own advisors countless hundreds of thousands and us paying ourselves to sit at desks and do icebreakers. What they deserve is us empowering them to fund initiatives they care about."

Comptroller: William Lipinski vs. Andrea Perez-Meneses

The comptroller debate saw incumbent comptroller William Lipinski, a sixth-semester political science major, face challenger Andrea Perez-Meneses, a fifth-semester economics major.

During Perez-Meneses' opening statement, she said that she had been preparing for the role for years and would not be stepping in blindly. She also emphasized that changes in leadership are healthy.

"It brings fresh perspectives, renewed energy and the opportunity to evaluate systems with intention," she said. "Strong institutions are built not on comfort, but on continued improvements."

Lipinski opened with statistics about the current state of USG funding under his leadership. He emphasized that funding for Tier II clubs, which is the comptroller's major responsibility, was still available even in March of the second semester and that the USG Funding Office won 90% of its funding appeals this year.

"This is unprecedented," Lipinski said. "It's signaling a shift in accurate policy implementation and funding staff efficacy and professionalism."

He also brought up improvements in transparency and advocacy, such as weekly budget updates for Tier II organizations and a funding town hall.

When asked about how USG can balance fiscal responsibility with providing support for Tier II organizations, Lipinski said it was important to recognize what objective funding policies outlined.

"The decisions we make in terms of funding in Tier II organizations are not subjective. They're not based on which clubs we like and which clubs we don't like in any way," he said. "It's purely based on a set of very detailed policies."

Perez-Meneses said the problem was that a lot of registered student organizations did not understand funding policies, which hurt both RSOs and USG's image.

"The truth is that there's not enough clear checklists for how to apply for certain things," she said.

Throughout the debate, both candidates stressed the importance of clear communication with RSOs and pointed out ways USG could do better, such as explaining more clearly the Tier II spending cap and USG's inability to fund retroactive requests.

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Lipinski said one way USG could improve their spending efficacy is by ensuring the events they host are "effective and meaningful" for the students and minimizing events that overlap with the Student Union Board of Governors (SUBOG), which holds more recreational events.

Perez-Meneses said USG could make more efficient use of the money they spend on speakers coming to the school by ensuring the guest is a relevant choice for the student body. She also suggested giving more money to the CDO's office.

Lipinski said in his closing statement that he was proud of what he had done so far and his favorite part of the job was being able to work with students.

"I ask that you give me the opportunity to expand upon the work that we have," he said, "I've laid the groundwork. My team and I have laid a strong foundation, and I want to continue to advocate for students."

Perez-Meneses said student government came from a place of caring and believing in the university's potential.

"The comptroller's role is ultimately about trust, protecting the money that every student contributes and ensuring it creates a meaningful impact," she said.

Chief Diversity Officer: Sadaf Zarei vs. Syna Patel

The candidates for CDO are Sadaf Zarei, a sixth-semester economics and mathematics major, and Syna Patel, a fourth-semester political science major.

During their opening statements, both candidates said their campaigns were rooted in their lived experiences.

Patel cited her time studying abroad as very informative about what it meant to build an inclusive community.

"I saw communities not defined by skin color, wealth, economics or beliefs, but rather the shared experience of human connection and inclusivity," Patel said. "As chief diversity officer, I want to bring that perspective to UConn by creating initiatives that foster a connection across differences and encourages students to engage with perspectives beyond their own."

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