

Dartmouth Alumni Vote Down Proposed Changes in Trustee Elections

By [PAUL FAIN](#)

Dartmouth College alumni have defeated a proposed new constitution on alumni governance, thwarting proposed changes in the process by which alumni are elected to college's Board of Trustees.

The results of the election, which were released on Thursday and in which a record 38.3 percent of eligible alumni voted, was a major victory for conservative students, alumni, and representatives of national groups like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, who had campaigned vigorously against the proposed constitution. The battle drew the attention of the national news media.

"Dartmouth may have to change the way it does business," said Joe Malchow, a junior majoring in government who, through his blog, [Joe's Dartblog](#), became prominent as a critic of the proposed constitution. Mr. Malchow says the election results prove that Dartmouth must treat the concerns of its alumni with more respect.

The alumni tussle at Dartmouth has its roots in the 2004 election of an alumnus, T.J. Rodgers, to the Board of Trustees. (Alumni nominate eight of the board's 18 members.) Mr. Rodgers had petitioned to join a slate of candidates selected by Dartmouth's Alumni Council, a body composed mostly of class and alumni-group leaders.

Mr. Rodgers's upstart campaign, in which he decried an alleged suppression of free speech by college administrators, gained the support of conservative students and alumni. He won the election in a landslide and became the first petition candidate to be elected to the board in 24 years.

Two more petition candidates, both of whom lean conservative, were elected to the board in May 2005 after a closely watched contest, which some higher-education observers said could be a new front in campus culture wars ([The Chronicle](#), May 13, 2005). Although all three of the "insurgent" trustees were elected on platforms that dealt with many Dartmouth-specific issues, some critics feared that the new trustees would bring partisan bickering to the governing board. Dartmouth's president, James Wright, has said that he has had good relations with the three petition trustees.

"I look forward to working with all members of the Board of Trustees, all alumni, and the rest of our great Dartmouth community to help carry this institution to new achievements," said Mr. Wright, in a written statement released on Thursday.

In 2003, an alumni committee at Dartmouth began drafting a new constitution on alumni governance, which was ratified by the Alumni Council last May. The new constitution drew heavy criticism from those who had supported the petition candidates, many of whom claimed it was an attempt to prevent future outside candidates from gaining seats on Dartmouth's board.

A chief complaint of the critics was that under the proposed new rules, petition candidates would need to submit the required 250 signatures before the Alumni Council announced its candidates.

"Those in power at Dartmouth are clearly intent on discouraging diverse voices on the Board of Trustees," said Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, in a written statement released in June.

Dartmouth alumni groups said the proposed constitution was not designed to freeze out candidates, but was rather an effort to streamline alumni governance. College officials also denied charges that administrators would attempt to influence the vote.

Marketing efforts around the constitution and seemingly sophisticated polling of alumni, however, added to concerns that the college was attempting to influence the election. Related complaints were published on blogs and newspaper opinion pieces. A September editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* also urged the constitution's defeat.

"Throughout the course of this election, I have felt the deep regard my fellow alumni have for their college, regardless of which outcome they favored," said William H. Neukom, chairman of Dartmouth's board, in a written statement. "I will make every effort to help us put aside divisions in the joint pursuit of these larger goals we all share."

According to Dartmouth's Association of Alumni, 12,729 alumni, or 51 percent, voted against the constitution while 12,041, or 49 percent, voted for it. Two-thirds of alumni voters are required for any changes in alumni governance. Four amendments on alumni governance were also rejected in the election, which closed on October 31.