



# LIPKA: Yale’s DisTrustees

ANDREW LIPKA | 11:32 PM, MAY 31, 2021

GUEST COLUMNIST



Imagine an election where only incumbents or their hand-picked designates can run, where every candidate is gagged, where all legitimate policy debate is off-limits. Absurd? Yes. Yet that is what Yale’s trustees [announced](#) this week for an election already underway and future Yale trustee elections.

Some background. Under Yale’s charter, alumni vote for six of the 17 active trustees. Alumni stand for election through insider nomination or outside petition.

In recent years, incumbent trustees have steadily eroded the process. Nominations now come from an unelected “alumni” committee, where paid Yale officials, some not even alums, make up much of the membership. Petition candidates can gain ballot access only by amassing over 4,600 signatures — a high bar. (Last year, only 17,000 alums voted and Yale denies petition candidates access to alumni contact information. Without such access, how can petitioners realistically amass the requisite signatures?) Worst of all, Yale has of late gagged all insider candidates: Official nominees are instructed not to discuss any issue. Some election!

Last year, a 15-year petition drought ended; a distinguished alum and former U.S. ambassador, Victor Ashe, [qualified](#). As a petition candidate, Ashe was not subject to the gag. He thus raised issues, albeit in debate with an empty chair. His biggest issue was election transparency itself; he was for it. Alas, he [lost](#).

Ashe’s campaign inspired me to file as a petition candidate for the upcoming year. Over the last several months, I gathered volunteers, coded a website and refined my message. In short, I began a campaign, and did so following the strict letter of Yale’s election rules, which required candidates to file by mid-March. Two other alums also filed on time.

This week, in a Commencement Day massacre, Yale changed the rules in the middle of the game. The trustees eliminated petition candidates “effective immediately” — that is, retroactively, ex post facto. Henceforth, alumni will be allowed to choose only among silent and preapproved administration puppets.

The trustees accompanied this week’s coup with a revealing if unintentionally hilarious explanation. They cited concerns about a “political campaign” where “issues-based candidacies” might emerge. Translation: Incumbent trustees know who they want and alumni might make a bad choice. For an even blunter translation: we hate democracy. Can you spell “voter suppression?”

History is not on the side of this kind of trustee high-handedness. Past incarnations of this board banned Jews, persons of color and women for eons before outside pressure forced the trustees to mend their ways. In 1965, Yale’s first Jewish trustee, William Horowitz, won — as a petition candidate.

Last I checked, this is America. Here we believe in elections, debates, issues and voters. To gain ballot access, petition candidates must demonstrate broad support among rank and file alumni. To win, petition candidates must tell the voters what they stand for. There is something wonderfully American about the petition process: any alum can be a trustee if they win the respect of their fellow alums. All this is now kaput. Canceled.

The trustees rightly emphasize that they are “fiduciaries” for Yale. They seem to think that fiduciary duty compels them to usurp elections. In fact, their true fiduciary duty is to carry out Yale’s charter, which unambiguously requires a fair election by alums, not trustees or bureaucrats.

My campaign was based on a love of Yale and on my decades of grateful service to Yale as an engaged alumnus. I believe faithful alumni and senior faculty are the most informed and farsighted stakeholders and stewards of the University, and that in recent years Yale’s bureaucratic insiders have wrongly shunted alumni aside — a view now dramatically confirmed by this week’s attempted coup.

I was and remain independent — not beholden to any interest group or driven by any agenda other than a love of Yale itself. I was funded by my own sweat and that of other alumni. I welcomed debate and put my views on my website, [lipkafor Yale.com](#) — which remains up, so all can confirm my claims of independence and a Yale-centric agenda. Alumni have now lost the chance to vote for my vision of a greater Yale through a fair process.

As part of my alumni involvement, I co-host a weekly podcast, “America’s Constitution,” with my fellow alum, Akhil Amar ’80 LAW ’84, a Sterling professor at Yale. Earlier this month, Amar published “The Words That Made Us; America’s Constitutional Conversation, 1760-1840.” This book shows that America constituted itself through conversations at all levels and that notwithstanding our nation’s flaws, it is conversation itself that makes us Americans.

Yale, which claims as its motto “Lux et Veritas,” now seeks to silence enlightened conversation. By backing this attempted coup, University President and Corporation Chair Peter Salovey has betrayed Yale’s essential mission. He must denounce this attempted putsch and take immediate steps to reverse course, leading Yale back towards light and truth.

ANDREW LIPKA 

Andrew Lipka (’78) registered as a petition candidate for alumni fellow for the 2022 election. He is an associate fellow of Jonathan Edwards College, alumni lead of the Yale for Life program (2013-2019), a board member of Yale Alumni College and founder and director of its Princeton campus. Contact him through [lipkafor Yale.com](#) or at [andrew.lipka@gmail.com](mailto:andrew.lipka@gmail.com).