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Roomies hold opposing political views

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BY NIKKI ARSENEAU, Correspondent

Like any good friends, Matt Van Vossen and Ryan Melchin have a lot in common.

They are loyal Chicago Cubs fans. They enjoy playing video games, and they love hosting parties at the townhouse they share.

But there's one area where these University of Illinois at Springfield roommates agree to disagree: Politics.

Van Vossen, of Oak Lawn, is president of the College Democrats at UIS while Melchin, of Hoffman Estates, is chairman of the College Republicans.

"We don't really argue," said Van Vossen, 20. "We know where we stand on issues -- but we don't have any hard-core debates where we try to change each other's minds."

Melchin, 21, said debating is usually kept to about 15 minutes or less, and neither ever walks away upset, even with hot topics such as health care reform.

"I'd have C-Span on in my room. Matt would come in and we'd talk about it. It never got hostile," he said.

The two knowingly chose to be roommates, and both agree it has worked out to their advantage.

"We were good friends, otherwise, and we were both going to be the leaders of our political organizations and that was kind of a bonus that we could work together on events and do some combined activities to bring the campus together as opposed to just alienating each other," Van Vossen said.

A good example of their combined efforts happened in January when they held a "watch party" for President Barack Obama's State of the Union address. College Republicans and College Democrats sat together and watched the speech on a big-screen TV.

Melchin and Van Vossen said it would be nice if politicians in Washington, D.C. could take notice of how they are living their lives and accomplishing things despite their differences.

"I feel if they could cooperate more, it would be really helpful for our country," Van Vossen said. "They need to work together and not have the base of their parties be as partisan."

Two other roommates live with Melchin and Van Vossen - another Democrat and an Independent. Melchin said living with two Democrats has definitely helped him better understand the Democratic Party. The same goes for Van Vossen, who said the whole experience has been eye-opening.

"In the news, they show all the Tea Party people and they turn out to be total extremists. Ryan has told me that is the far extreme of that party -- and that there are sane people, like himself, in the Republican Party who Democrats could work with. That's giving me some hope," Van Vossen laughed.

Van Vossen became interested in politics during his senior year in high school at Marist High School in Chicago when he researched the Iraq War and it became apparent to him there weren't any weapons of mass destruction. He said he didn't like how the Republican Party was "backing up everything President George W. Bush did." He decided to help the Democrat Party. He campaigned for U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd), of Western Springs. This summer, he will be working in Lipinski's office again.

Melchin, who has experience campaigning for local congressmen, including former U.S. Rep. Peter Roskam (R-6th), of Wheaton. He became interested in politics in seventh grade after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He said what draws him to the Republican Party is the idea of limited government, and he said it is time the political landscape starts changing in Illinois.

"Right now, Chicago Democrats pretty much control the whole state," Melchin said. "Especially this year. Our governor candidate and our lieutenant governor candidate are from downstate, and I think that offers a better balance of power for Illinois."

He and Van Vossen will not be living together for much longer, though. Both juniors have decided to room with other friends next year, but they'll still see plenty of each other. Van Vossen is running for re-election as president of the UIS Student Government Association and Melchin is running for vice-president.

"Matt and I have publicly come out in support of one another's election and we both are running uncontested," Melchin said.

And if the day comes when they run for office in Illinois, will they still campaign for each other?

"Absolutely," said Melchin.

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