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“MY VOTE DOESN’T MATTER”

Helping Students Surmount Political Cynicism

By Paul Loeb, Alexander Astin, and Parker J, Palmer

You’ve heard it again and again. “My vote doesn’t matter,” students too often say. “Politicians are all the same.” “They’re all just corrupt.” “It’s a rigged game.” How do we overcome this cynical resignation and encourage students to vote despite all their hesitations?

Americans in general have [low voting rates](#), but even [more young voters stay home](#). Between uncertain job prospects, cuts to higher education, and massive student debt, it’s no wonder that so many students despair about their power to make a difference in electoral politics. That’s true even as they continue to volunteer in one-on-one service, or march for causes they believe in. In 2016 Bernie Sanders galvanized electoral participation among many. But after he dropped out, [nearly 6 million young people \(ages 18-29\) who were registered didn’t vote](#), their numbers dwarfing the presidential margin in key states. In 2014 [12.5 million](#) who were registered stayed home was, and only [only one in five](#) of those potentially eligible showed up at the polls.

Whatever our political beliefs, the 2018 midterms will have a critical impact on America’s national direction. Races for Senators, Governors, and Congressional and legislative representatives could shape America’s political landscape for a decade or more. And if young voters do turn out, they’re more likely to continue voting the rest of their lives. But will they? That may depend on what the rest of us do to help them navigate the barriers.

Practical barriers are part of the problem, like ever-more-challenging voting laws. Getting to the voting booth can be like fighting past five pits of alligators, and unless students are hugely motivated, many take a look and decide it just isn’t worth it. Barriers like ID laws and labyrinthine registration procedures [are real and daunting](#). Those of us who want to see students vote need to supply accurate practical information, like [the state-specific voting rule summaries produced by Campus Vote Project](#).

But the practical barriers are complemented and compounded by cynical resignation: the sense that, on some fundamental level, voting really isn’t worthwhile. When students say their vote doesn’t matter, and won’t make any difference they mean two things: that the impact of their single vote will be inconsequential; and that the entire electoral and political system is so fundamentally compromised as to be fruitless as a venue for change. If we believe in American democracy we need to remind ourselves--and them--that whatever its current problematic state, it will improve only with greater participation, not less. And convey that message to those whose skepticism leaves them on the sidelines.

UNEXPECTED TIPPING POINTS

We might begin by reminding our students of the incredibly small margins by which critical elections can be won. In 2016, more than 50 colleges each had enrollments greater than the

presidential margin in their states. Five hundred and thirty seven votes handed George W. Bush Florida and the presidency in 2000. In 2013, 165 votes decided Virginia's Attorney General race. In 2017 control of Virginia's House of Delegates was determined by a single House election that ended up tied after all the recounts and ballot challenges: they drew names from a bowl to pick the winner. Students may assume that their votes will be inconsequential, but multiplied by those of all their peers, they matter, time and again.

Paul once interviewed a Wesleyan University student named Tess who, inspired by an environmental conference, joined with several friends to register nearly 300 fellow students concerned about environmental threats and cuts in government financial aid programs. Nearly all ended up supporting their strongly sympathetic Congressman, who won re-election by 21 votes. Tess had hesitated before she began. She didn't think of herself as a "political person," didn't want to come off like "a politician spouting a line," and wondered whether her efforts would even matter. Nonetheless, she decided to go ahead and do the best she could. Had she done nothing, her Congressman would have lost.

Paul experienced this impact personally securing three votes for his preferred Washington State gubernatorial candidate on the day of the 2004 election. One forgot it was Election Day. Another didn't know if it was still OK to use an absentee ballot. The third needed a ride to the polls. After three recounts, the difference was 133 votes, so had just a handful of his fellow volunteers stayed home, or if there had been a handful more on the other side, the outcome would have been reversed.

But even when students understand the math, many still resist participating. They'll say they don't know enough and that "the issues are too complicated." They'll insist the candidates are really "all the same," so their choice will make no difference. They'll say this even when candidates hold radically different positions on issues like health care, climate change, gun issues, sexual politics, immigration, tax policies, higher education budgets, and student financial aid. Others hold back because they feel helpless to change things. Caught in a self-fulfilling perception of powerlessness, they decide it makes little sense to take on the challenge of following candidates and issues enough to determine who to vote for.

We can begin to counter this by encouraging students to reflect on candidates' positions, and helping them separate truth from fiction amid the barrages of attack ads—ads that often deepen students' sense of electoral politics as a toxic field of lies. Students have told us repeatedly they want "more fact-based campaigning" and "to learn more about positions." They repeatedly say things like "All the ads, all the lies, you can't believe what the candidates say, and I don't want to vote for the wrong person." "If I only had a list where I could see what they actually stood for."

That's something we can help with as educators, promoting both classroom and co-curricular discussions about where candidates actually stand. Our nonpartisan [Campus Election Engagement Project](#) creates precisely these kinds of concise and accurate [nonpartisan candidate guides](#) comparing candidate positions (as well as [a 90-second video on close elections](#)). [To distribute them](#), schools have done everything from encouraging the student paper to use them as the basis for more in-depth articles to blowing them up in high-traffic areas like Student Unions and dorms, to sending them via campus mail to every student's mailbox. And students have found them tremendously helpful, saying things like "It was great that we all got these accurate

guides in our mailboxes. They didn't tell us how to vote, but they gave us a sense of where the candidates actually stood."

We need to educate students on where candidates stand, making the case that, even if they have decidedly mixed feelings about the choices at hand, it matters to elect those who are closer to their values. That's partly because opting out makes more likely the election of the candidate they most oppose. But also because voting isn't the end of the process, but only one step in pressuring elected leaders on all the issues they care about.

It's not just lack of information that leads students to withdraw. The paralysis of so many of our institutions in the face of deep rooted crises from climate change to widening inequality, and political polarization can easily create a general sense of powerlessness. When they say "My vote doesn't matter," they're also conveying a sense that the political system is so corrupt or the problems so intractable that no matter who wins, true power will remain in the hands of the wealthy and connected, and that the voices of ordinary citizens will be ignored. Even when they concede that their votes could alter the electoral result, many doubt that this will particularly matter. So they'll often be ambivalent about all the candidates or decide that they can't vote for them unless they support every stand that they take.

A TOOLBOX FOR CHANGE

If we want students to fully participate, we need to acknowledge the current context. And to give them a chance to see their electoral participation as an antidote to those aspects that leave them cynical spectators. Historical context can also help, something we can do our best to offer even if we aren't historians or political scientists.

There's a temptation to view voting as a vehicle for self-expression, and at times it may be. But it's more useful to frame it as a concrete choice between two or more individuals whose decisions could have a profound impact on our lives and communities, and sometimes on lives and communities across the globe. If we help elect candidates who resonate more with our beliefs, they still won't take every stand we'd like, and at some points they'll disappoint us. But it's reasonable to expect that they'll come a lot closer than those who've made clear their very different priorities from the start. And we also can play a role in how far they push their beliefs—which is how electoral and non-electoral engagement complement each other.

How, again, do we use historical perspective to encourage students to vote?

The more students see their vote as promoting the kinds of changes they'd like to continue to work for, the more likely they'll be to show up at the polls, bring others along, and stay involved after the election. We might suggest they view voting not as the only way to make change, but one in which electoral politics complements other approaches in a toolbox of change such as one-on-one service or political organizing and protest. Carpenters don't discard their saws or drills just because they prefer swinging a hammer. They recognize that you can't build a house without using all three.

To familiarize students with the toolbox of social change, we can explore ways they can reach out on issues they care about, build broad coalitions, tell the story of the causes they embrace in a ways that will resonate beyond the already converted (think of the gay rights movement for a successful example). More than anything, we can encourage them to persist in working for what they believe, whatever the inevitable setbacks. Whatever their politics, they'd do well to heed the

conclusions of Meredith Segal, a young woman who founded Students for Obama on Facebook, grew it to 150,000 members, and then co-chaired the national student campaign from her Bowdoin dorm room. “Your candidate gets elected,” she said, “Obama or anyone else. People think, ‘Here’s their platform, here are their policies. They’ll magically become law.’ But that’s never the way things change. You have to keep pushing. You have to keep working. You have to keep building that engaged community. You can never expect any elected official to do it all on their own, no matter how much you admire them or how hard you worked to help them win. Your election night victory is just the beginning of the process.”

Historical examples can also offer powerful context. Think of the relationship of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to the civil rights movement. They were personally sympathetic but held the movement at arm’s length for fear of shattering the Democratic coalition, in which Southern segregationist whites played a major role. Johnson even opposed the seating of an integrated Mississippi delegation that challenged the official all-white one at the 1964 Democratic convention. Yet civil rights activists persisted and created a political and moral force so strong that it expanded the horizon of the possible. Johnson ended up investing all his political skill and capital to pass the civil rights and voting rights bills, even though he knew the likely costs to his party—and predicted, accurately, that the Democrats would lose the South for a generation or more. Since Johnson’s opponent, Barry Goldwater, was a staunch opponent of these laws, he would never have signed them, much less actively pressed for them. It took both the right political leader and a movement systematically pushing them.

For a recent example, think of the Tea Party. They began (before they took the Tea Party name) by showing up at Town Hall meetings on Obama’s health care bill, publically speaking out while most of Obama’s supporters did little beyond signing online petitions or emails. They organized through friends, colleagues and online networks. They aggressively recruited candidates and volunteered to get out the vote, sweeping state and Federal offices in 2010, and playing a key role in 2014 Republican successes (while so many young voters stayed home, including many who’d been passionately engaged in the Occupy movement). Then the Tea Party provided much of the grassroots energy that helped elect Donald Trump as President. Without combining electoral and non-electoral approaches, they would never have made a remotely equivalent impact.

From a different political perspective, think of the impact of the young Parkland students bringing gun issues onto the national agenda. Or DREAM Act advocates who’ve worked to allow students who come from undocumented backgrounds to continue their journey as citizens. A student leader from Minnesota’s Winona State University told about a meeting with her Wisconsin State Senator. She told the State Senator about one of her closest high school friends whose family was Bosnian and how she had to stop her education after high school. She and her peers were able to change the Senator’s vote on a state-wide bill to open up opportunities for undocumented students. Young activists have made a similar impact on gay rights and on environmental issues. Whatever the political values of our students, it’s important for them to understand the ways that electoral and non-electoral engagement can complement each other

BEYOND THE PERFECT STANDARD

When students resist electoral participation, it’s often from a sense that the sphere has become so corrupted, particularly by money, that it will in turn corrupt them to participate. They fear that it will undermine their authenticity and leave them craven and corrupt, like the Wesleyan student’s

fear of becoming just “a politician.” This fits the narrative that Paul’s *Soul of a Citizen* book calls “[the perfect standard](#),” where people decide that they can’t dare act for change unless they know every relevant seventeenth decimal statistic, are as eloquent as Martin Luther King and as saintly as Gandhi, and find the perfect cause and moment to act in their lives. When applied to political candidates or leaders, this standard demands a consistency difficult to match, because whatever candidates’ strengths or flaws, they’ll inevitably disappoint us with some of their compromises or stands. The question is whether students will participate in choosing our elected leaders despite their reservations, or withdraw and let them be selected by others, including those very wealthy contributors whose undue influence so many of the students bemoan.

We can encourage students to volunteer in campaigns despite mixed feelings about particular candidates or even the electoral process in general, suggesting they make phone calls and knock on doors for those they prefer even if they don’t agree with their every stand. In fact, voicing their ambivalence while making clear the stakes may even give them more credibility, given how much of the population shares their doubts. On the practical side, we can give them academic credit for doing this, accompanied by whatever reflective follow-ups we assign or negotiate.

Our challenge is to make our classrooms and campuses venues for thoughtful debate, reflection, and discussion, bending over backward to ensure students of all political perspectives feel welcomed. We can work to create a commons where they can reflect on issues and candidates, talk about them with their peers and remember why their involvement matters, whatever their beliefs. To emphasize this last point, if we’re politically liberal and just a single student of ours is conservative, or vice versa, they need to feel encouraged—even if we have to go out of our way to help connect them with ways to participate consistent with their values. November’s election will have a profound impact, on students’ lives, and on our country. So we need to model a climate where students recognize the stakes, argue the issues, yet respect those with differing opinions, refusing to cavalierly demonize them. Although the forces that have corrupted our political life may feel overwhelming, the more we can build these more intimate civil conversations, the more we can chip away at the toxic political culture of our time.

If students are politically disappointed, and many are, we might do well to stress the words of Czech dissident (and eventual president) Vaclav Havel, “Hope is not a prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart.” Or as Jim Wallis of [Sojourners](#) puts it, “Hope is believing despite the evidence and then watching the evidence change.” That means hope can never be the property of a particular political leader, party, or campaign, though candidates can certainly tap into it. Rather, it resides in the actions of ordinary citizens, including, but not limited to showing up at the polls to exert what influence they can. We’d do well to use the podium of our classrooms to encourage student idealism, whatever its political direction, including when it breaches the boundaries of what’s deemed politically possible. We can emphasize that those we elect will make immensely consequential choices in our common name, and that whatever the political visions our students embrace, they’re most likely to achieve them by actively supporting the candidates closest to their stands, rather than withdrawing from the fray and allowing those whose values they most oppose to be elected by default. In other words, they can challenge the degradation of our politics without withdrawing from the process, or holding those who nonetheless participate to an impossibly perfect standard. And the more they participate, they help the reality change, and create a context where their voices can actually be heard.

RESOURCES FOR ENGAGEMENT

The national nonpartisan [Campus Election Engagement Project](#) (CEEP) that Paul founded works to help faculty, administrators, and staff involve their students in the election, offering systematic resources [to help students register, volunteer, learn about issues and candidates, and turn out at the polls](#). To help students navigate challenging new voter registration and ID laws and other practical barriers, CEEP distributes the resources of partners like [Campus Vote Project](#) and [VoteRiders](#). To help them sort through candidate positions, debunk false campaign ads and rhetoric, and make informed decisions in their choices, [CEEP](#) creates [non-partisan candidate guides](#) to statewide races where its staffers are working. We also encourage people to visit respected nonpartisan websites like University of Pennsylvania's [Factcheck.org](#) and [Flackcheck.org](#), and other respected nonpartisan sites like [Politifact.com](#) and [Votmart.org](#). Whether or not students vote may well be determined by their mentors and peers, and that's an area where all of us in higher education can help.

Paul Rogat Loeb is founder of CEEP, and author of [Soul of a Citizen](#) and [The Impossible Will Take a Little While](#). Alexander Astin founded UCLA's [Higher Education Research Institute](#) and chairs CEEP's Advisory Board. Parker J. Palmer is founder and Senior Partner of the [Center for Courage & Renewal](#), and author of [The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life](#).