

Activism or Slackism: The Generation that Doesn't Vote

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WRITER'S COMMENT: With no intentions of becoming a journalist, I enrolled in University Writing Program 104C Journalism my first quarter at UC Davis. Nevertheless, I enjoy crafting a good story, especially when that story happens to be true. Stories have an unparalleled ability to inform and influence thoughts, knowledge, and opinions, which is partially why I wrote about the topic of voting. I look around at my peers and see bright, passionate, creative individuals who feel strongly about their community and yet voter turnout among the younger generation is severely lacking. In this article, I explore the bizarre phenomenon of students and young voters who call for change with their words, but not with their vote. With a major presidential election year upon us, I hope my peers and generation will take the chance to speak up and help make the decision for our future together.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: According to a Harvard University Institute of Politics Poll, only a third of 18 to 29 year olds surveyed believed their vote would make a difference. While college students often take to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to rant about their political opinions, over half of the young demographic are absent at the polls on voting day.

– Greg Miller, University Writing Program

Crammed alongside the windows of the UC Davis on-campus coffee house, amidst the commotion of students grabbing lunch between classes, thirteen ASUCD Senate candidates, three moderators and a camera crew attract a meager crowd. A single row of seats, squeezed tightly together, allows space for the handful of interested voters in the audience. Meanwhile the usual student lunch crew carries on with its day. Only occasionally would a student peek out from behind a laptop and or lookup from a meal.

This is democracy at University of California, Davis.

On a campus full of bright intellectuals, active leaders, and aspiring professionals, few turned out to partake in the first election of the year. Out of over 27,000 undergraduates, only 2,609 (9.2%) voted in Fall 2015.

“They’re not alone in this.” According to the Pew Research Center, only 53.6% of the voting age population in the United States voted in the 2012 presidential election, with midterm elections seeing even less turnout, usually 39-42%. While these percentages are significantly higher than those at UC Davis, the United States trails behind many developed and underdeveloped nations around the world in voter turnout.

Specifically, students and younger individuals belonging to the “millennial” generation are notorious for dismal voter turnout, with only 45% of young people ages 18-29 participating in the 2012 Presidential election. In the 2014 midterm election, when Republicans won most of the seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, the number of young voters decreased to a record low of 19.9%.

There’s one question many Americans can’t help wondering: do the millennials care about what happens in their country? Do they care about what happens on their own campus?

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The Associated Student Body of UC Davis (ASUCD) holds elections twice a year, a schedule which ensures that experienced senators are always in office. This staggered voting is essential given that any student can declare candidacy by gathering 150 signatures from current undergraduates. Among the sixteen students who ran this term, some were new to UC Davis and others lacked previous leadership experience.

This was apparent at the debate, when a first-year candidate admitted to not knowing much about legislation, other experienced candidates were quick to demonstrate their knowledge on the how to pass a bill into law. While the aspiration to serve is commendable, the position requires a certain level of understanding in order to properly serve all of the UC Davis campus community.

ASUCD Senators write and vote on legislation pertaining to the use of ASUCD property, allocation of ASUCD funds, and policies affecting the entire undergraduate student body. They make decisions affecting student-run organizations like the Coffee House, Unitrans, and The California Aggie newspaper – all of which are maintained for the benefit of the entire student body. Senators also pursue campaign-promised goals for their constituents. Some of these platforms include raising mental health awareness on campus, providing more resources for Transfer, Re-entry, and Veteran students, and supplying free tampons in women's restrooms.

Of course most candidates are well versed in the functions and processes of ASUCD Student Government through previous roles. For instance Puneet Dhindsa was a staffer for current elected Senator Alex Lee, Georgia Savage serves as Legislative Director for the Office of Advocacy and Student Representation, and Mikaela Tenner served in all three branches of ASUCD.

And yet college students such as these, passionate about the well-being of their community and peers, appear to be rare among the generation.

Catherine Rampell, writer for The Washington Post, offers reasons for the millennial generation's lack of voting in her article, "Where are all the young voters?" deeming it the "the laziest, most narcissistic and most entitled generation ever." However, many university students devote their time to fighting for causes much larger than themselves. From the Occupy Movement to #BlackLivesMatter, students across campuses have been protesting for the government's attention and action.

In November 2015, two student-run marches occurred on campus. One stood in solidarity with the black students of the University of Missouri who have faced countless threats against their safety. The other,

known as the Million Student March, demanded free tuition and erasure of student debt.

“We are dreamers,” ASUCD President Mariah Watson shouted passionately to the crowd circled around her. “We are a generation of innovators who are supposed to be making a new way for this country to be more inclusive, to be the best and the brightest the world has to offer!”

Students wielded posters, brandished “Bernie 2016” signs, and chanted together in unison as they marched from the Memorial Union to Mrak Hall, the UC Davis administration building. From various ethnicities and financial backgrounds, Davis students came together for a common cause – to support their fellow classmates against injustice.

At the Million Student March that took place two days later, many candidates running for Senate, along with current ASUCD Senators and members, spoke out in support for the movement to make UC tuition free and eliminate student debt. Some of the most vocal individuals included Senate candidates Georgia Savage, Adilla Jamaluddin, and Jacqueline Obeid.

“I urge you all to continue fighting,” Savage called out to the crowd. “I urge you to come with us to the capitol, utilize Sacramento, which is in our backyard. We need to tell our local representatives that we will not stand for this.”

But when it requires more effort on the students’ part - either by advocating in Sacramento or simply by voting - will they rise to the challenge?

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With a presidential election year quickly approaching, the campaign to attract young voters is underway. The Office of Advocacy for Student Representation (OASR) was equipped with voter registration forms at the Million Student March for students who were ready to have their voices heard; however, few used the moment to register.

In fact, advocacy was also a controversial topic at the CoHo Debate. Some candidates specifically stated they did not identify themselves as activists while others vehemently disagreed with this sentiment.

“As a senator, you should be an activist for the student body,” noted another candidate for ASUCD Senate. “If you’re not an activist, you shouldn’t be running.”

Perhaps a lack of activism isn’t the problem though. Further

into her article, Rampell argues that students feel disillusioned by the American voting system. While politicians continue to promise change and opportunity, important issues come to a standstill in Washington, D.C. due to political party differences. Rampell's argument carries some weight, as educated students realize that their voices are not as loud as those of lobbyists and campaign funders who make financial deals behind closed doors.

This sentiment is echoed by many of the students running for elected student government at UC Davis. "What you're doing should be transparent," Joshua Dalavai, ASUCD Senate candidate claims, in reference to maintaining a more open dialogue between the government and the public.

Yet even at the CoHo debate, the conversation among the ASUCD Senate candidates veered off topic as an argument arose concerning political parties, known on campus as "slates." Slates are primarily used as an easy way to receive "trickle down" votes, where students can vote for their number one choice and then vote in favor of the rest of that candidate's slate for the following ranks. Unfortunately, arguments between members of slates can turn toxic during election season, from arguing over each other's platforms and positions to attacking candidates personally.

With the presidential election looming, the young generation's vote holds more value than ever before. Numerous issues have become prominent among the younger generations including education funding, gun control, and women's health resources. Controversial characters from this election season are being hotly debated among the millennial generation, such as Donald Trump, Ben Carson, Bernie Sanders, and Hilary Clinton.

The United States political system reflects this political party tension, which often wards off young hesitant voters, especially as potent as it has become today. According to a Harvard University Institute of Politics Poll, only a third of 18 to 29 year olds surveyed believed their vote would make a difference.

Instead, college students often turn to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to express their political opinions. Disagreements erupt online and rifts form between classmates and friends, often

becoming distasteful, aggressive, and ultimately, unproductive. While the younger voting generation may be actively paying attention to the presidential candidates on social media, over half of the young demographic are absent at the polls on voting day. In order to participate actively in the government, this generation must actively seek the knowledge required to make informed decisions about their nation, and their local, government. However, the information will likely not be found in Facebook comment sections.

“Education is the most powerful weapon with which you can change the world,” Elijah Pipersberg of the OASR shouted to the crowd and to the passing students at the Million Student March.

Students already took the initiative to achieve a higher education and now they hold the capacity to create change both on their campus and in the country. How many will rise up to the challenge?

“STUDENT!” Roman Rivilis, ASUCD Senator called out.

“Power,” echoed the student marchers – passionate but lacking the volume of their generation.

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