

Putting the “I Can” Back Into “American”: Why We Must Stay Politically Active

Rather than diving into the world of news and politics myself, I was reluctantly pushed in by my intrepid journalism teacher and his unavoidable gradebook. He was obsessed with the news cycle, often reading stories just minutes after *The Associated Press* reported them. And much to my dismay, much of his teaching philosophy was that of discussion; he would often call on me in class without warning, inquiring about North Korea, British elections, and of course, President Donald Trump. At first, I would be caught blindsided in front of my classmates. A few months later, I would open my News app minutes before class started to cram headlines into my memory, only to forget each scandal and Senate bid the moment the bell rang for the end of class. To be fair, I didn't care about Obamacare, or Russia, or any of that, really.

Historically, Americans have shared this perspective. Unfortunately, all too often the significance of politics is ignored under the illusion of complication or the impression of irrelevance. Fallacies such as “one vote doesn't change anything” and “politics doesn't really affect me” taint modern democracy, perpetuating the notion of an inefficient and useless government. This distrust of our government has developed into complacency and inaction instead of motivating the public to advocate for change.

This skepticism has rooted itself in the public and has become apparent in the voting habits of Americans. A 55.7% eligible voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election puts the United States of America at 28th out of the 35 members in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is mainly comprised of developed and democratic states that are similar to our nation. Our midterm elections show even more dismal

results, with a 35.9% voter turnout in 2014. Ask a random person on the street, and it's more likely than not that asking the name of his or her local representative draws blank stares.

However, every Friday, without fail, my journalism teacher would allot 45 minutes to discuss current events. Even though I wasn't particularly interested in what he had to say, I slowly became more knowledgeable about the world around me. My infrequent News app visits became hours of browsing *The Wall Street Journal*, and eventually I was actually participating in the Friday discussions; not out of an interest of maintaining my grades, but rather because I actually wanted to share my opinions and understand others.

Now, I pretend I'm the 10th District Representative of Illinois on Mondays and Thursdays, a United Nations ambassador on Tuesdays, and a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist on all the other days. While it's true that we are only *Student Congress*, *Model United Nations*, and the *School Newspaper*, there's a sense of empowerment, like we're actually reaching out to our constituents. These activities have helped me begin to find my voice, and it's not just me — a political movement is sweeping across America.

But this begs the question: Can everyday citizens actually influence the world around them? A year ago, most Americans, and I along with them, would have rejected the notion. Recently we watched as the public found a voice and rose from bystanders to activists. We see it in full motion at protests like the Women's March and the March for Science, at town hall meetings on early Saturday mornings and the overflowing inboxes of our politicians; it is on full display as late night television hosts like Stephen Colbert and Seth Meyers earn record viewerships and The New York Times and The Washington Post enjoy record readerships. The media, that has ventured into controversial political territory, has seen a revitalization of support.

Since 2015, NPR has seen a 17% increase in traditional radio listenership. Since 2014, the number of monthly visitors on the largest digital news outlets has grown by over 20%. Never before has politics been so transparent in mass-consumption.

It's 2018, and we see a trend of political activism. That's what makes me hopeful. In the aftermath of the most divisive election in recent history, people have begun to value their voice. Our goal now should be to sustain this trend until it becomes the expectation.

Political activism has become all the more necessary in today's culture. Americans have become complacent with institutionalized corruption; instead of "They're politicians, we can't trust them anyway," it should be "They're politicians, they should be held accountable." It's that belief that we can hold politicians accountable that inspires the average working-class parent, or even a hopeful high school student, to ultimately become the drivers of our democracy. The actions of your representatives *do* matter. Yet more than just policy, our representatives matter in maintaining the national righteousness under which they serve the people. Because when our politicians care about incumbency over integrity, our American Dream becomes the American Nightmare.

Participation in politics doesn't necessitate marching down the streets of downtown Chicago with signs carried proudly, nor does it require the platform of fame or wealth. Activism starts with awareness. Our political landscape relies on citizens equipped with knowledge before they walk into the voting booth, mental ballots already filled in.

The 2018 midterm elections are approaching. Let's make that difference.

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