Campus Activism: Vote, Vote, Vote

For college students who need to send in an absentee ballot to vote, you can find your application for one and instructions here. Read about the important questions on the upcoming ballot here.

For those debating voting:

As a political science major, I have been trying to split my focus between what I am learning in class about politics and what is happening in the real political world all the time. It has been a weird (interesting) experience learning about politics while so much is happening in the political sphere every day. My professors bring it into classroom discussions and lectures with small comments or references, such as "our current president," or "and as with politics today," or occasional references to "him" when talking about today's government. Of course, there are explicit references to President Trump, but these little side comments highlight how much the most recent news story is on my professors' minds, even as they talk about something removed like philosophy. My point is that it's so easy to forget, in a lot of classes, the real world importance behind what I'm learning. But in my politics classes, the reality can feel instead like a weight bearing down on every discussion. This is one of the reasons the varying attitudes from my general age group toward voting is constantly on my mind.

Midterm elections have been dominating the news, and historically significant races have been widely discussed on campus (specifically the wins by Massachusetts Congressional candidate Ayanna Presley and New York Congressional candidate Alexandria Octavio Cortez). Yet when it comes to voting, college students are overwhelmingly unprepared and unregistered. At least until 2016, college students have been historically in the age group with the lowest voting rates. Not even half of us vote, which is unfortunate because a lot of us are studying topics that are very relevent in elections and could help us a lot in choosing who and what to vote for.
This summer I registered to vote. As a political science major, this moment had been built up in my mind as some extreme right of passage and I badgered my friends to make it a fun group activity. I was partially embarrassed that, even being so passionate about voting myself, I had put off registering for awhile. Part of the reason was simply that I viewed voting in terms of presidential elections, and it was not until I started understanding local voting better that I felt the urgency to participate. I kept messaging my friends about going to register to vote, but we didn't get it together to go as a group. Eventually, I unceremoniously registered when I went to renew my expired learner's permit and they handed me a form with "Would you like to register to vote today?" written at the bottom. My prior persistence to register did, however, start a heated debate with one of my friends about the merits of voting. It led to an outcome that I still hope to change, but that I am not sure I will be able to: I cannot convince one of my best friends, someone I consider family, to register to vote.

This fact probably may not seem very important or particularly disturbing to many people in the way that it is to me. For me, it seems aggressively disheartening that the current political mess can convince someone, who is incredibly smart, that voting is not worth her time and won't make a difference. I have no doubt my friend can and will make a wonderful impact on the world. However, she doubts that she will by casting a vote. She sees the election of the current president as a symptom of various sentiments she is not sure that her vote can counter. She sees a wide political stage of discouraging events, selfish people, and oppressing, suffocating issues that need to change. This is largely my interpretation, not her explicit wording. But from my viewpoint, it seems like she is weary and tired.
For me, tackling daunting obstacles starts with acting in a way that you hope everyone else acts. You can't force other people to vote, can't force all the horrible bias and pain away from our country just by your one vote. But voting is the start in supporting people who are trying to inact positive change but cannot without your help. Voting is democracy in action. It is exercising the privilege we get in this country to have our beliefs reflected into positive change in the world around us. It is always powerful, even if you do not like any of the options. It is powerful because in this country if you do not vote, you are giving the power of your vote to someone else; to whatever voice, opinion, belief, or person that comes out on top. People who could but did not vote in the 2016 election -- overwhelmingly people in college and people my age -- gave their vote to Donald Trump. This is not to blame someone who could but did not, I am only trying to explain the political system of our country as I see it. You cannot opt out of it. Voting and political participation are basic realities in our country, instilled in every person's citizenship. They are taken away from the people who the outcomes of presidential elections tend to impact very strongly and directly -- such as convicted felons, undocumented people, people who live in American territories (Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the North Mariana Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands), and people in other countries. Your vote is a right many people do not have and many people need. It is a privilege that was denied from people with African heritage, from women, and from other designated groups for so much of this country's history. Your vote -- whether or not what you vote for wins -- is always worth casting because it is part of standing up for what you believe in, and exercising it always makes a positive difference even just in its attitude and significance. It can also be the deciding vote--that has happened. Voting is so important.
This blog is a desperate plea for people to vote, and especially to vote in the upcoming election and ballot. Please, please, vote "yes" on the third ballot question for November. It is on Anti-Transgender Laws, and is asking whether or not to keep the 2016 state law banning discrimination against transgender people in public spaces. Thus, if enough people vote "no," it will be legal in Massachusetts to discriminate against someone because they are transgender in places like restrooms, restaurants, and malls. Voting "yes" on this ballot question will prevent this discrimination, and it is pressing and urgent that people register and vote "yes." The results will have direct consequences, either attacking or protecting, so many people in Massachusetts. The first question has to do with how many patients can be assigned to nurses at hospitals, and can impact you whenever you visit a hospital, and it will impact the nurses that take care of us. The second question is regarding a proposal to overturn the Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court decision that the government could not restrict political spending by corporations. Critics say that this allows for monetary influence in elections. You can read about them here.

ON CAMPUS NEWS: National Voter Registration day is September 25th, and the UMass Center for Education Policy and Advocacy (CEPA) will be holding a Voter Registration Fair on Goodell Lawn to help people get registered.

Follow up reading:

- "Why Vote?" NY Times
- "Suit Accuses Alabama of Bias in Law That Bars Some Felons From Voting" NY Times
- "U.S. trails most developed countries in voter turnout" Pew Research Center
- "Dislike of candidates or campaign issues was most common reason for not voting in 2016" Pew Research Center
- "Barack Obama Says Not Voting in Midterms is 'Dangerous'" Time