



Apr 18

A Defense of Student Government

erica colston

During this year's controversial executive-alliance election, I heard the same remark over and over again — Student Government doesn't matter anyway, so who cares? The same organization which created SURE Walk and passed a resolution to remove UT's Jefferson Davis statue is the same organization students belittle for not having any “real” power. While it's true Student Government doesn't have as much influence over the university as candidates might advertise during election season, reducing its leaders to college kids play-acting at government encourages an apathy that is especially worrisome in today's political climate.

Look at March for Our Lives and the Never Again movement. Over a million protesters across the nation joined together in the wake of the Stoneman Douglas shooting to address the epidemic of school shootings in America. Ever since Valentine's Day, student activists from Stoneman Douglas have capitalized on a critical moment in American history to advocate for greater gun control legislation. Young people in America possess the enormous potential to effect change by calling it as they see it, often unlike leaders in our national government. As put by *The Orator's* Candace Baker, “Citizen activism like this sends a message to our lawmakers who might forget the sort of practical change that the public wants.”

And yet, they don't vote. Young voter turnout for presidential elections in recent decades has never even approached the same levels as other age cohorts, often explained by a lack of confidence in the value of an individual vote and being forced to choose between the lesser of two incompetencies. They don't think their

attitudes toward politics in America are characterized by cynicism, grounded in the belief of their fundamental inability to actualize their opinions.

One might see electoral apathy in youth on a national scale and want to directly equate it with apathy toward campus elections, but that doesn't *quite* fit either. This year's elections saw enormous turnout compared to prior years, although students didn't suddenly care about more about Guneez-Hannah or Colton-Mehraz' platforms. The candidates' characters themselves came under attack, and naturally people care about *how* they want to be represented. Of course, the same people who cared enough to vote in one of UT's more controversial Student Government elections aren't necessarily the same who disparage the institution and its very existence.

It's true that apathy toward campus elections is entirely different from those on a larger level. Some UT students are disillusioned by the fact that the governmental institution itself has no power, whereas young voters across America believe that they themselves have no power over influencing who calls the shots in matters of national importance. But what is similar about these two apathies is a notably pessimistic attitude currently crippling the potential of youth in democracy.

In a time in American history when some students are at the vanguard of a national discussion on gun control and the Second Amendment, others are deriding the value of participating in elections to express their opinions on issues which directly affect their everyday lives. We should be encouraging youth to participate in representative democracy at every level, be it on their campus or Pennsylvania Avenue, and not perpetuating the same sort of cynical language that keeps them from voting in larger elections.

You can certainly recognize Student Government has little independent power and still exercise your right to elect local, state, and national leaders. But this demeaning and detracting attitude toward campus representatives — students just like us, who bridge the gap between the student body and the administration — implies there is little point in even attempting to influence university administration. This apathy toward campus politics diminishes the first ingredient in liberal, participatory democracy — concern for one's self-interest. Who's to say that same cynicism doesn't carry over to other elections? And even if it doesn't, why should it be encouraged?

Those students who chastise UT Student Government for being "useless" should be just as concerned about how they can affect student life through campus elections as they should be about elections in "real" government, especially as it concerns their immediate lives. Even if our Student Government lacks the ability to write legislation that stands on its own, there is meaningful power in concentrating opinion through

representation. It's not the kind of power you expect and acts more indirectly, but quite frankly, universities aren't liberal democracies.

Expecting Student Government to have that same level of vested power and criticize it when it falls short is unreasonable and undermines what its actual goal is — to communicate the opinions of the student body to the university administration. You can argue it doesn't do that very well either, but that's another debate. The conversation we should be having is not whether Student Government is useless and should be disbanded, but rather how we might make it better at what it is meant to do. For now, I can't help but find the perpetuation of any sort of political apathy to be dangerous, particularly in a time when we ought to avoid it at all costs.

Campus

apathy, youth



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