

J. Q.

Man, we are tired. We are so, so tired. After COVID-19, the 2020 Election, January 6th, our racial reckoning, our climate crisis, and the collapse of our democracy, I wonder how much more our generation can be asked to handle. After spending several weeks on American voting rights, and asked to reflect on how we have made a difference and highlight and reflect on our work, I was a bit uninspired. Cynicism is a bitter pill and it is not hard to digest after the last few years. After all, how can I, all of 17 years old, shake a durable status quo that benefits from the maintenance of it.

The answer of course is I cannot alone. We can produce tiny ripples of hope which will bring change. We cannot give up faith in our democracy. As Mr. Sprinkle frequently says, the fundamental goal of our democracy is preparing us for our lives in a complex and broken democracy. Man, this is truer than ever.

In response to the ask to do something---I thought about many of us who will be voting in the Democratic Primary for the 12th Congressional District. The district, gerrymandered (pending lawsuits) to protect the entrenched incumbent. It is easy to roll your eyes and move on. However, given that the Democratic Primary will effectively be an election, I thought it would be useful to create opportunities for our class to hear from some of the Democrats running---from a transphobic moderate Democratic to a self-proclaimed Socialist, we brought in four different candidates. With Sprinkle's help we prepared questions, and engaged in these conversations from April-late May.

While they are not complete, I find this all to be incredibly empowering. To reach out to candidates on social media and organize this, it has been so rich. We get to see relevance in our democracy. We get to practice asking rich and profound questions grounded in our research

about them. We get to see how journalists ask rich questions and emulate them. The part about learning how to craft rich questions was particularly transformative.

One moment I particularly enjoyed is when Suraj Patel was not able to answer Frances' question. It stumped him. He couldn't name a NY politician he admires. Maybe that something about New York...

I was incredibly grateful for the opportunity to push my own thinking about our democracy and how we can better own it.

B.F.

I am a junior at the New York City Lab School, and I was recently given the opportunity to register my colleagues to vote. This opportunity sparked my attention very quickly, because utilizing one's right to vote is a topic that is extremely important to me. I have always been interested in politics, and it has become a central aspect of my life. This is apparent because I am the leader and founder of a club at my school called Lab Change Makers. My club is committed to making an impact in the community. We do this by addressing political and social problems that connect to our members' own lives. We have carried out multiple philanthropic events, and we have had different guest speakers come in and discuss the problems taking place in our country's current political climate. We have made it our mission to make our peers aware of our governmental issues, and ways that we can each individually bring about change. Additionally, I have also engaged in many different conversations during my history classes. During these periods, we discuss the past political situations in our country and how that has changed over time. We talk about the different rights that the men and women before us fought for to ensure that every person has a voice. In general, I have been strongly impacted by the lessons these teachers have taught us. I now have a new found passion for politics and I try to educate others on the information that I have learned.

The right to vote is a topic that often gets brought up in my club's conversations because it is such an essential part of our democracy. In these discussions, we often articulate that the right to vote is underutilized by many Americans today. We want to make sure our members are informed that they can pre-register to vote at the age of 16 and 17, and that they can officially vote when they turn 18. In discussions about this topic, we mention that many individuals in this

country were not given the privilege to vote until recent years. We emphasize the importance of making use of this opportunity. In our country, everyone should use the rights that they have in order for them to make their own choices on what they would like to see in government.

Eventually, once it came time to hand out the forms, my co-club leaders and I had a loose idea of what we thought we were going to do. We planned on making an announcement at each grade's assembly, and we would distribute the cards as we spoke. We ended up carrying through with this plan for the freshman class. During this assembly, the group of teenagers seemed to be uninterested and disengaged. We handed the cards out anyway and hoped that they would listen. After the assembly was over, we began to walk out of the gymnasium and saw that more than half of the voter registration cards were on the floor. This was very disappointing to see because we hoped that these people would actually fill out the cards and pre-register to vote. Instead of sticking with our plan for the three other grades, we decided to change our course of action. We established that for the tenth-grade class we would go to each classroom during their advisory period. During this time, we would spend a moment talking with each group about the importance of registering to vote and utilizing it. This would allow us to make a personal connection to each group, and answer any questions that people had. After visiting all ten classrooms that day and handing out around 115 voter registration cards, we were satisfied with the way people took in the information. In most rooms, we engaged in thoughtful discussions about our country's democracy, and people had already begun to fill out the forms. This moment truly put a smile on my face to see that I would be making a difference in our country one step at a time.

After that day, my group still had to visit the eleventh and twelfth grade classrooms. On these days we made sure to add some more information to our speech because these are the

people that will be voting in the upcoming elections. Just like the tenth grade, we were pleased to see that people had positive reactions to the cards and seemed excited about filling them out.

Once the distribution process of the forms concluded, I felt extremely satisfied with the results. We ended up getting dozens of new people to register and we became hopeful that the next generation of voters would be even more inclined to actually step into those voting booths and share their own voices in our country's politics.

Journalism and the role of a free press is the bedrock of democracy and is extremely important to holding powerful people responsible. Additionally, journalism helps to inform the general public and allows them to make wise, informed decisions. In recent decades, journalism has played a role in exposing powerful figures such as Former President Richard Nixon after a *Washington Post* article exposed the administration's actions. However, today, journalism is threatened by the ruthless attacks from politicians and the Republicans. This was specifically evident during Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign and subsequent presidency. Trump appeals to his base by describing journalists as "liars" and "terrible people" with the goal of discrediting stories that are critical to him. During campaign rallies, Trump encouraged his supporters to verbally, and sometimes physically, assault the news media covering the event. The incendiary words that Trump uses to attack the free press are dangerous and even resulted in a *Guardian* reporter being physically assaulted by Republican candidate Greg Gianforte in Montana. In the days since the 2020 election and the January 6 riots at the United States Capitol, the attacks have only gotten worse with a large portion of the country not even believing that Joe Biden is our president.

Journalism is more important than ever in our society today because it is under siege. As Benjamin Franklin famously said, "Whoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freeness of speech." It takes a lot to suspend the freedom of speech but that does mean it is a guarantee. That is why I lead my high school's student newspaper.

At the New York City Lab High School, I have uplifted students' voices by giving them a platform to voice their grievances on any topics from the gradebook to social movements. Truth and transparency are of paramount importance in my leadership and we encourage students (and teachers) to write about topics and issues that they are passionate about. This was even more

important during remote learning last year. As students and faculty were working in their homes, my co-editor-in-chief and I made sure that students' voices were uplifted as we quickly implemented a remote process. We ended up publishing a record seven online editions last year! During this past school year as we shifted back to in-person club meetings and back to paper copies of the paper, we have reached a record number of club members with more and more students volunteering their time to write for us. Since we are a lunch club as opposed to an elective, we rely on students taking time out of their lunch period to help us create the newspaper.

One thing that strikes me the most is the diversity of our writers with a relatively even number of students from each grade. In a small school of only 500 students and only 30 contributors, it might surprise some that our paper is 24 pages long. However, the passion in our school allows for this which brings out different voices in the newspaper. On any given day in between classes, it is common to hear students talking about articles. The level of engagement in the paper allows students to become inspired to write their own articles, even regarding sensitive subjects such as the body positivity movement, for example. It is very important to help create a sense of trust in the school community because the goal of a newspaper is to make readers aware of certain issues and hopefully address them.

