

The Youth are Building Bridges

Bella Druckman



The high schooler sitting on the public bus is writing letters to her senator.

My blood pumped through my ears as I sat in the back of my religion class and my teacher asked, “Who is going to be the 2020 Democratic presidential candidate?” Conversations such as these were common in my Catholic Ethics course, which taught students how to be citizens according to Catholic values. A classmate raised their hand and stated, “It doesn’t matter because Trump is going to win.” This was not the first time I was exposed to a classmate with a viewpoint different from my own.

What matters about this interaction, however, is the conversation that followed. We dove into the student’s comment and then considered potential Democratic candidates. This conversation was a model of maturity: an instance of cross-partisan politeness that is rarely, if ever, found in the adult world of politics today.

In George Washington’s 1796 farewell address—basically a “Ruling America for Dummies” guide—he warned Americans about the problems related to party affiliation. 223 years later, America finds itself drowning in the words of stubborn political leaders, its hands grasping for a hold on sanity and peace.

Polarization is the perpetrator, and it is worse than it has ever been before.

The phenomenon of extremist opinions did not exist until Ronald Reagan's presidency in 1980. He inspired the New Right movement, which denounced abortion, homosexuality, and the Equal Rights Amendment.

Following Reagan's presidency, opinions diverged further with each new leader. In this age, we are faced with radical politicians receiving a large following across the globe. These leaders come from as far as France for Marine Le Pen and India for Narendra Modi, but as close as the United States for Donald Trump.

America is a nation where, in February 2019, "77% of both Republicans and Democrats who were married or living with a partner said their spouse or partner was in the same party," according to the [Pew Research Center](#).

America is set in its ways. Legislation has reached a gridlock. Politicians argue about minimum wage, the environment, and human rights issues from womb to the tomb. Yet, they cannot simply meet in the middle. Instead, they argue as innocent people are left to live paycheck to paycheck, sleep on cement floors, and lose their homes from the effects of natural disasters.

This must change.

The solution is the youth of America. We may be labeled as lazy, phone-obsessed, and rude, but we are the solution. We know we have power, and we have the motivation to act.

Many question the capabilities of this generation. Why are we so much more qualified than other generations? The truth is that every generation of youth has been equipped to change the face of their country, but at this moment, Millennials and Generation Z are those who have the power to bring this country away from its extremes.

Yes, it is true that the youth still hold a range of political opinions. I remember talking to some friends who attend a liberal public school about the Pledge of Allegiance and being shocked when they said no one stands up to recite the pledge. This was a phenomenon foreign to my conservative high school.

Yet, despite these differences, we are unified.

Following the tragedy of the Parkland shooting, the voices of the youth were awoken. On March 14, 2018, school walkouts exploded across the nation. Students were threatened with bad grades, detentions, and suspension, but refused to be deterred by authority. Our voices were heard. We headlined newspapers and even enacted change.

These students did not come from the same party affiliations. I talked to my Republican friends at my Catholic School about the issue and my Democrat friends from the public high school as well. They disagreed about the desired legislation to curb gun violence, but knew one thing for sure: gun violence must end.

This feeling of unity amidst varying opinions is what will allow the youth to collaborate to improve American polarization. [The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement](#) discovered voting increased 10% between the 2014-2018 midterms. We are registering to vote and promoting legislation that conforms to rule of law.

We are acting, but not dividing. I have friends who attend pro-life marches, while I attend pro-choice marches. We do not agree about this issue because unanimity is impossible, but we have the courage to ask each other, "Why do you believe this?" We stand with people who hold opinions different from our own, a value our parents have ingrained in us since birth but seldom follow themselves.

The time of Republicans and Democrats acting like toddlers over the construction of a border wall will be something of the past. We will soon be the leaders in elected positions. Leaders will be educated and diverse in all aspects of the word. Leaders will genuinely debate with the opposing political party.

The youth must act to catalyze this change.

I have channeled my power by carrying signs that declare "18th Century Laws Can't Regulate 20th Century Weapons" and "Don't Call Yourself Pro-Life if You Only Value Certain Lives." I have called my state congressmen and women to tell them to vote "Yes" on HB 2040, a piece of legislation that banned for-profit detention centers in Illinois when it was passed in June 2019.

In 2020, my "I Voted" sticker will join others that beam proudly from water bottles, laptops, and t-shirts. They will be evidence that America is on its way to a better future. A future where politicians compromise.

The high schooler sitting on the public bus is writing letters to her senator. The child on his scooter is learning about democratic values in school. The baby sitting in her highchair eating peas could be the 55th president of the United States. The youth are building bridges that will connect the two sides of America.

Several times throughout the course of my junior year, I sat in the back of my religion class and raised my hand when my teacher asked who would be able to vote in the 2020 election. My hand was lost amongst a sea of other hands. Those hands might have different party affiliations, but they are respectful and desire improvement.

The youth are coming. The youth are coming with change.

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Image Source: Bella Druckman

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