



Writing for a Just World

Engaging Essays by Youth 2021

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A note from the Director of Youth Programs, Alyssa Canty

Dear Readers,

As the Director for Common Cause Youth Programs, seeing the power and enthusiasm of each new class is a rare privilege. We couldn't resist the idea of harnessing some of this power by asking our interns and fellows to put their powerful ideas on paper to create this anthology, ***Writing for a Just World***.

These are the ideas that will challenge leaders of today to do what needs to be done to strengthen the people's voice in our democracy, or step aside. These are the voices ready to fill the halls of power with chants, quiet lobbying, and by running and winning office themselves.

If you want to know what the future of democracy looks like, you're looking at it now. Read on.

Alyssa Canty

A note from the President of Common Cause, Karen Hobert Flynn

Dear Readers,

It comes from deep within. Creating something beautiful, provocative, or entertaining where once there was only a blank page, screen, or canvass, that is the very essence of freedom. The words that fill a blank page or screen can inspire, creating a vision of what seems impossible given the politics of the moment, words that might echo through time continuing to touch hearts and change minds. From Abolitionist pamphleteers to the Federalist Papers and beyond, many passionate minds have accepted the invitation a blank page is, to join in a centuries-long conversation about how we, the people, can best fulfill the promise of a democracy that works for everyone.

That spark of creative inspiration combined with a passion to fix systems that are not living up to the high ideals we claim as a nation is the motivation for ***Writing for a Just World: Engaging Essays by Youth 2021***, a project of the Common Cause and the Common Cause Student Action Alliance.

The collection of 16 essays explores the power of equity, the collective, justice, and culture. The essayists leave no stone unturned as they offer perspective on issues ranging from money's influence on politics and political advertising, the filibuster, COVID, the judiciary, race, gender, budgeting, community values, and the responsibility this generation is already taking on to address systemic problems inherent in our democracy.

This collection also celebrates youth creativity by featuring art from the winners of ***My Voice, My Art, Our Cause! Artivism 2021***, also a project of the Common Cause HBCU Student Action Alliance. Winners were chosen by public vote on the Common Cause website and won cash prizes and having their designs featured on merchandise at [SHOPdemocracy.cc](https://shopdemocracy.cc).

Whether reading one of these essays or reflecting on the artistic expression, the vision of this generation seems consistent, clear, and bold. They are also realistic – they see broken promises and broken systems and confront them head on. More than any previous generation, young voters today simply want things to work the way they are supposed to, for everyone, not a privileged few. They are less partisan, less willing to engage in so-called culture war issues that divide people, and more willing to work together, regardless of background or life experience, to find solutions, according to a range of research on youth.

One thing is undeniable – they may call out problems, but they do so not from a sense of despair, but of hope, and the very mature truth that we cannot fix anything unless we are willing to do the work together. Their hope isn't in a politician or a party, it is in each other and their ability to solve problems together, creatively, extending more freedom to more people.

In common cause,
Karen Hobert Flynn, Common Cause President

Part I: The Power of Equity



My Voice, My Art, Our Cause Activism Contest

Artist: Jennifer F., 25, Maryland
Instagram: [collagesofcollege](#)

"I chose this issue area because we have seen mass protests since the pandemic started, many of which still appear even under the new administration. This is especially true in the light of the ongoing fight for racial justice and reproductive justice. My piece represents protesting during a pandemic and how that is integral to viewing these protests now that we have lost hundreds of thousands of people in this country alone and still have to fight for our rights and our neighbors' rights every day. I hope people will take away from it that people will push for change no matter the circumstances."

BIG MONEY BACKS FILIBUSTER

By Meher Sethi, Yale University

At a recent Patriot Voices event—a conservative conference—on June 29, Republican Representative Andy Biggs [made the stunning admission](#) that without the filibuster, they’d be “dead meat.”

The filibuster is [an arcane senate rule](#) that allows a Senator to block legislation by essentially “talking a bill to death.” It’s not a part of the Constitution, and it was used incredibly rarely throughout American history—that is, until the Civil Rights Movement. While civil rights legislation was being debated in the Senate, southern Senators who wished to block debate began to frequently use the filibuster. For example, [the record for the longest individual speech](#) goes to South Carolina’s Strom Thurmond, who filibustered for 24 hours and 18 minutes against the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

The filibuster evolved, however, to facilitate obstruction with greater ease. The “silent filibuster” allows for a minority party to declare intent to filibuster, which can only be overridden with 60 votes.

Ever since the Obama presidency, this form of the filibuster has been used on nearly everything, including President Biden’s bold agenda, under the guise of protecting minority rights and unlimited debate. The problem is, though, that the key reason for the filibuster staying intact is far more nefarious.

At that same conference as Rep. Andy Biggs, [Congressman Byron Donalds agreed](#): “What’s happening up here is the fact that they’ve decided not to blow open the filibuster, in a lot of respects is going to save the republic from the worst things that the left wants to do, and HR1 is just the tip of the iceberg.”

[HR1, or the For the People Act, is a monumental piece of democracy reform legislation](#) which protects same-day voter registration, early voting, and vote-by-mail, secures Election Day as a national holiday, establishes automatic voter registration, ends partisan gerrymandering, and takes on money in politics. HR1 is not just election reform; it’s one of the scariest possibilities for the most wealthy and powerful players in our political establishment.

In a leaked video of a private meeting this past April with big money donors, Jessica Anderson, the head of Heritage Action for America (sister organization of the Heritage Foundation, an enormous conservative think tank) [boasted about crafting voter suppression laws for state legislatures across the country](#). Voter suppression is an incredibly well-funded tactic that allows unpopular candidates to soar to victory and do the bidding of the big money donors that continue to fund voter suppression laws and policies. Endless war, deregulating Wall Street, cutting taxes for the top 1%—these are not policies that the American people support, yet they are constantly supported by our elected officials. The most wealthy and powerful in our society have crafted a plethora of ways to keep democracy in their hands.

It’s not just voter suppression. Campaigns are really costly; [in the 2020 election cycle, 88% of the top-spending campaigns won](#). Candidates go to big money donors to fund their campaigns—which is, somehow, perfectly legal—and then represent those interests as opposed to their constituents. This is due to the landmark supreme court decision of 2010, Citizens United, which ruled 5-4 that the First Amendment prohibits limits on independent political expenditures, oftentimes in the form of shady Political Action Committees, giving free reign to mega-corporations and conglomerates to solidify control of the political sphere.

The For the People Act aims to tackle all of these flaws in our democracy, and has incredibly broad support across the political spectrum—democratic, republican, and independent voters, not elitist politicians,

overwhelmingly support it. [According to Data for Progress](#), 67% of likely voters across the country support the For the People Act, with strong majority support among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. That's why big money is scared. If, by ending voter suppression and gross campaign finance loopholes, the people's will is genuinely represented, who will cut taxes for billionaires and continue lucrative wars for the military industrial complex?

The filibuster is an effective attempt at dismantling all hopes of democracy reform. And it is, once again, incredibly well-funded. Koch Industries, [one of the biggest big money players in politics](#), has been actively pressuring Joe Manchin to oppose key legislative agenda items for the Democratic party. It has been effective; Manchin has been rock solid on opposing filibuster reform and HR1, even though he could potentially be the 50th vote in abolishing the filibuster.

Manchin got unsurprisingly candid in a call with billionaire donors, as The Intercept reports, [pleading with them to flip Republicans on the January 6th commission, so that, if it was defeated, the best argument against the filibuster couldn't be used against him](#). Billionaires and big money donors have the filibuster—and the politicians working to uphold it—in their pocket, so that Congress keeps serving them and not the American people.

However, we can reclaim our democracy. Abolishing the filibuster, passing the For the People Act, and ensuring a democracy that works for everybody is supported by Americans of all political affiliations, ethnicities, and backgrounds.

Let's unite to make it a reality. If you are able, please call your senators and demand they fight to end the filibuster and pass the democracy reform our country so desperately needs, so that we may live up to the promise of liberty and justice for all.

WHAT DOES ARTICLE V MEAN FOR DEMOCRACY?

Sylvia Ebenbach, University of Chicago

Overview

At some point in school, every young American student learns how the amendment process is used to make changes to the U.S. Constitution. Through this system, an amendment must pass through Congress and be ratified by two-thirds of the states. This is how all of the amendments within our nation's history were passed. However, there is another, lesser-known method of changing the Constitution. It's called an Article V Constitutional convention. A convention is a threat to the wellbeing of all Americans, because the lack of rules surrounding this process gives wealthy interest groups the opportunity to strip us of our Constitutional rights.

Since the Constitution was ratified in 1788, twenty-seven amendments have been added to our official government framework. This includes the Bill of Rights, the Thirteenth Amendment (which made slavery unconstitutional), the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments (which expanded voting rights to people of color and women), and more. These amendments were necessary to the expansion of civil liberties to all people in the United States. That isn't to say that the document itself is perfect. Over time, we have elected representatives who will advocate for what the people believe should be in the Constitution. The necessary ratification by the states of amendments balances federal and state power. A Constitutional convention threatens all of this.

The vagueness surrounding the rules of a convention would leave the Constitution vulnerable to extreme changes within a short period. Under Article V, if two-thirds of the states pass an application for a convention through the state legislature, then Congress must call one. Although some applications are worded specifically around one issue, there are no rules to limit the scope of the convention to that issue once it is called. In practice, this means that a convention opens the floodgates for big, permanent changes to our Constitutional rights.

The last time there was a Constitutional convention was when our constitution was created. Up until then, the United States operated under the Articles of Confederation. This means that an Article V convention is an untested process and is vulnerable to manipulation by powerful interest groups. The promise of reform through a convention is a trojan horse for these interests to take control of our country. For the sake of the United States, we cannot allow a convention to occur.

Threat To Our Democracy

An Article V convention undermines the voice of the people in making sure that the Constitution serves everyone, not just some. Right now, most of the efforts to pass Article V applications are being spearheaded by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a lobbying group that was started by the Koch brothers. Their goals are purely to benefit corporate interests. ALEC, along with other wealthy interests, will use their influence to write the rules of a convention in their favor. The fate of our country should be in the hands of the American people, not big businesses.

The later amendments guarantee other protections of our democracy that we take for granted. For instance, the 22nd amendment established term limits on the Office of the President, which prevents one person from seizing too much power. The removal of term limits could open the door for a dictatorship. Under the guise of an Article V convention, wealthy interest groups would have the opportunity to destroy our democracy as we know it.

Changes to the Equal Protection clause could make it legal for states to gerrymander their districts and control the outcome of elections for the foreseeable future. Bigoted politicians would be able to suppress the voice of historically-marginalized communities. There are already massive efforts underway to [restrict access to voting](#) for BIPOC, particularly in southern states. Changes to the Constitution in a convention could make it Constitutional for this voter suppression of especially Black and Brown voters to occur.

Americans could lose their voice in the government entirely, and thus their ability to advocate for their rights. This is not a Democratic or Republican issue, this is an American issue. If we want to protect our future, we must prevent an Article V Constitutional convention from taking place.

Threat To Our Rights

Even if the idea of corporations influencing the Constitution doesn't alarm you, the risk of losing your fundamental rights should. All our rights and liberties enshrined in the Constitution would be threatened by an Article V convention.

The Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution guarantees certain unalienable rights, like Freedom of Speech and Freedom of the Press. The amendments that follow expand on these rights and ensure important liberties such as marriage equality, Title IX protections, the ability for all Americans to cast a vote, and the prevention of discrimination based on race or gender. These protections encompass health care access, marriage equality, and immigration.

Health Care

If an Article V convention were to take place, our rights would be put at risk. Wealthy interest groups, like the Koch brothers, desire to overpower the will of the American people and reshape the Constitution as they see fit. Provisions could be added that would take away the freedom to make medical decisions about our own bodies. This means that reproductive autonomy, access to gender-affirming procedures, and treatment options for all health issues could be [severely restricted](#). Ultimately, this would be a huge detriment to the quality of life for many individual Americans. However, the effects on how we interact with one another would be vast as well.

Marriage Equality

The freedom to marry the people we love, regardless of gender, race, and identity, is a right that is guaranteed by the Constitution. However, there are people who would [force their own ideas](#) of matrimony as limited to heterosexual men and women on others if given the opportunity. Marriage equality for all people could once again be restricted, particularly targeting the LGBTQ+ community. An Article V convention would provide the chance for bigots to legalize their beliefs and implement them within society at large.

Immigration

The United States was founded by immigrants and has benefitted from new arrivals to our country ever since. Without immigration, [we would not be the strong nation](#) we are today. The ability for people from other countries to come to the US and start a life here is outlined in Article I of the Constitution. In an Article V convention, wealthy interest groups could change the language of the Constitution to limit the ability of folks — and even which groups — are allowed to immigrate here and become naturalized citizens.

We often forget the extent to which we are affected by the Constitution. However, an Article V convention could change our everyday lives for the worse. In order to protect ourselves, loved ones, and communities, we cannot allow an unruly convention to occur.

Environmental Concerns

An Article V Constitutional convention would put everyone at risk of losing their Constitutional rights. How-

ever, this threat extends beyond individuals — it has the potential to literally destroy the world around us.

It is no secret that corporations have historically prioritized their profits over the long term wellbeing of our environment. In recent years, legal cases that seek justice for this harm and prevent future tragedy rely on the interpretations of clauses in the Constitution. Specifically, many of these environmental law cases focus on the Property Clause and the Commerce Clause. The former, located in Article 4, gives Congress the power to regulate territory that belongs to the United States. This clause allows for national parks and protects natural spaces from development. Meanwhile, the Commerce Clause in Article 1 gives Congress the power to regulate commerce among the states. As is often the case, environmental harm often crosses state boundaries. This clause gives our legislative body the power to intervene in those situations and create rules that prevent harm to the environment. These clauses, among others, allow for the protection of our planet; we need these protections more than ever.

Unless drastic change is implemented, Earth is headed towards environmental catastrophe. The recent UN Climate Report [demonstrated](#) that humans are to blame for the extent of the damage. The effects can be seen in the frequency of fires in California, the intensity of hurricanes that reach land on the east coast, and the dying marine life on our nation's shores. We must take steps to reduce the negative human impact on the environment. However, corporations whose leadership are wealthy enough to escape the results of climate change care most about their bottomline.

In the event of an Article V Convention, these wealthy interests will undoubtedly try to include provisions that serve their goals to the detriment of the natural world. Language in the Constitution could be modified or removed altogether. The Constitution protects the country in order to protect its inhabitants, and we cannot allow this to be undermined by corporations.

The future of our country and the environment at large depend on our Constitution; a Convention that will irrevocably change it would be an incredible mistake.

History of Article V in Illinois

Discussion of an Article V Constitutional convention has existed for many years, particularly within Conservative circles. Additionally, over the course of America's history, states have called for a Constitutional convention at different times and for varying reasons. A new legal theory argues that by using sometimes outdated calls by certain states for an Article V convention, there is a claim that the number of applications needed to hold a convention has already been met. One of these states is Illinois.

Leading up to the Civil War, Illinois passed an application for a Constitutional convention with the intent of avoiding war. The conditions under which the elected officials during that time were quite different than now. However, Conservative legal scholars argue that because an Article V application has no technical expiration date, this one from 1861 can count towards the 34 needed to call a convention. These scholars also point to an application in 1903 regarding the direct election of senators. Of course, this argument is absurd.

Clearly, a call for an Article V convention from nearly two-centuries ago does not reflect the will of Illinoisians today. It is a distortion of our democratic process to cobble together the supermajority of states needed to justify a convention. That is why we must take as many precautions as possible and rescind the Article V applications that still exist in Illinois.

We cannot risk our Constitutional rights and the wellbeing of our nation with a convention. Now is the time to ask our representatives in the Illinois General Assembly to support the rescission of all outstanding applications for an Article V convention — our democracy depends on it.

THE COST TO RUN

Noah Roenitz, Georgia State University

Edited by Franecia Moore, Youth Programs Coordinator, Common Cause

From local municipalities to congress, there has been an increase in young people running for office. However, younger candidates face numerous obstacles and existing policies that make it difficult for them to run a successful campaign. Taking the leap to run for public office is an action few people take in life, but is one that is vested in a sense of patriotism and activism. From an initial announcement, to building your campaign team, to outlining your policy positions, candidates need to hit the ground running - but there is one essential step to running a successful campaign that needs to be in motion before you start any of the aforementioned items: fundraising.

Cultivating a finance team and developing a campaign finance plan are crucial to getting your campaign started. This important first step is also less likely to be articulated or shared with young candidates, especially those from marginalized communities.

According to Open Secrets, the price tag for the 2020 national elections were just shy of a whopping \$14 billion, double the previous presidential election cycle. The spending was split between \$6.6 billion for the presidential race and \$7.2 billion for the congressional contests. Meanwhile, at the state level an additional \$2.5 billion was spent for candidates and ballot measures, via follow the money.

The actual cost to run for political office varies nationwide. Key factors include location, type of office, and the seats competitiveness. Running for a county commissioner seat in a rural area can cost just a few thousand dollars as candidates in these areas are often running as an incumbent and unopposed. This leads to less campaigning and smaller voter turnouts for said races. For example, In Bartow County Georgia, it costs roughly \$4,052 to even file to run for a county commissioner position, while it costs just \$36 to run for the Board of Education in the same county. Nikema Williams, now a Georgia congresswoman, was once State Senator for Georgia's 39th district. Campaign Finance reports show she raised \$55,836.19, to successfully win reelection for her state senate seat.

These numbers start to sky rocket when looking at more competitive senate races, like Georgia's current Senate runoff campaigns. Reports show Democrat candidate Jon Ossoff has raised \$32,311,482, in hopes of winning a senate position, while incumbent Republican, David Perdue, has raised \$21,102,564 in defense of his seat. Looking elsewhere in the nation to Arizona, Democrat candidate and former astronaut Mark Kelly raised \$99,042,619, to defeat incumbent republican Martha McSally who had raised a total of \$71,483,697. In less competitive districts costs to run can be much less but by no means affordable. Washington Senator Maria Cantwell, who ran for reelection in 2018 and won, raised \$11,667,705, while her republican opposition raised just shy of \$2,000,000. With price tags like these, younger candidates may be overwhelmed and unsure where to start.

Aspiring candidates are encouraged to start looking at fundraising numbers at their state's elections website and work backwards or their state and local offices for elections and polling. This guidance is helpful, however; there is a disconnect between this guidance and how to build a solid campaign finance plan. In addition, candidates from marginalized communities may not have the connections to large dollar donors. The empowerment of these aspiring candidates through intentional support and education about campaign financing is necessary. Two localities that are looking at more progressive ways to encourage a broader

subset of people to consider runs at government positions include Seattle, WA and New York City, NY.

In November 2015, Seattle voters passed a citizen-led initiative known as “Honest Elections Seattle” (I-122). I-122 enacted several campaign finance reforms that changed the way campaigns are typically financed for candidates. One major reform from I-222, allows the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) to distribute “Democracy Vouchers” to eligible Seattle residents. Democracy Vouchers are certificates of monetary value that can be donated to participating candidates to use as campaign funds. The funds are realized from an increased property tax and can be utilized by Seattle residents that are at least 18 years of age and US Citizens or Residents with legal US status. The program is set to fully launch in early 2021.

In 2019, the New York City Campaign Financing Board released a new plan detailing a contribution fund matching program that pulls from public funds. The New York plan has specific provisions to encourage those running for office to engage interests of New Yorkers over that of special interest. “The voluntary public financing program matches small-dollar contributions from individuals who reside in New York City, helping to amplify the voices of New Yorkers in city elections. A \$10 contribution from a NYC resident to a participating candidate in the 2021 election could be worth as much as \$90 to their campaign.”

The current campaign finance laws pose obstacles for young candidates and candidates from historically marginalized groups that prevent them from being able to run successful campaigns. The Freedom to Vote Act would provide opportunities for key campaign finance reform to address some of these obstacles, specifically with a voluntary small donor matching system. The system would also increase transparency in campaign finance to address the occurrences of “dark money”, and strengthen rules that keep PACs and other groups independent of candidates.

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FEDERAL SPENDING IS AN EXPRESSION OF OUR NATION'S MORAL VALUES

Dylan Toth, Illinois State University

When people ask for tuition-free higher education, or no-cost healthcare, or even necessary measures to protect our environment, lawmakers ask, “well how are we going to pay for it?” However, it’s often those same individuals that propose tax cuts for the rich, corporate tax reductions, and the repeal of unemployment benefits. These priorities are obviously reflective of a politician’s beliefs. Likewise, a nation’s budget should be an expression of its moral values. What Americans need is big, structural policy change to finally achieve racial justice, environmental justice, educational justice, labor justice, and justice for the working class. And to achieve that justice, the budget of the United States must change.

The U.S. budget is divided into two parts: mandatory spending, which are funds that are required to be allocated by law, and discretionary spending, which is the money that Congress and the President have the power to influence. For FY22’s discretionary budget, President Biden has asked Congress for \$752 billion for defense (+1.6% from Trump’s enacted FY21 budget) and \$769 billion (+16.2% from FY21) for *everything else* including but not limited to education, healthcare, housing, labor, international affairs, transportation, energy, environment, and veterans’ affairs. Let me emphasize: only in the United States is the same amount of money spent on the military as all other agencies *combined*.

Quite frankly, it is absolutely disturbing how Americans have been brainwashed to think this allocation is acceptable. America needs a strong military for defense from domestic and international attacks, but its focus should not be to intervene in other nation’s affairs when we have a whole slate of crippling problems here in the U.S. China, the next-highest funded military in the world, has more than four times the number of citizens, yet about a quarter of our military budget. Don’t get me wrong - I have great respect for the U.S. military, and that is why I believe they should be utilized to wage peace at home rather than war overseas.

Similarly, we must consider how reform to our healthcare system so we can greatly improve the lives of many Americans. A study published in the American Journal of Public Health found that a shocking two out of every three people who filed for bankruptcy cited medical bills as a primary reason for their debt. Additionally, 25% claimed their bankruptcies were tied to education debt. It is common knowledge that debt and bankruptcy are terrible for our economy. By ameliorating to any extent possible the financial burden of these necessary expenses paid by the American people, we can lessen human suffering and greatly enhance our economy in the meantime. Every dollar we spend on education, every dollar we spend on social welfare, any dollar we spend that helps people thrive is a dollar that stimulates our economic welfare.

Opponents of such policies love to say that spending so much money on universal healthcare, childcare, education, or to combat the significant repercussions of human-caused climate change is an unnecessary expenditure that would collapse our economy. These claims could not be further from the truth. Meanwhile, the only things that have collapsed our economy in recent years are deregulation of the banking industry and lack of consumer confidence in our economy. By giving tax dollars directly back to the American people in the form of essential services, consumers would have much more money to buy a car or perhaps become a homeowner.

Other discretionary budget flaws include the fact that less than 9% goes to the Department of Health and Human Services, barely 6% to our public schools, and less than 1% to the Department of Labor. Keep in mind that nearly 50% of this dollar amount is given directly to the Defense department for the military that is no

longer engaged in any major wars. Is this really where we should be spending valuable tax dollars? Is this really what Americans believe is the right investment in our future?

The ongoing pandemic has only shone a spotlight on the glaring wealth inequality that our country fosters. Over the past year, an overwhelming majority of Americans have struggled while the richest got (much) richer. Aside from unemployment benefits that some states have blocked from their residents, the federal government contributed enough for a month or two of rent. The next time someone asks how we're going to pay for "radical" social programs, remind them that our members of Congress are doing fine, our military is strong, our corporations are thriving, but the working-class is far from it. If our nation truly values life, liberty, and prosperity for all, it needs to reshape the federal budget to prove it.

Part II: The Power of the Collective



My Voice, My Art, Our Cause Artivism Contest

Artist: Mithsuca B., 21, Massachusetts

“My work of art is a fight for visibility. There are so many cycles of silencing that happens in our country – and it’s keeping us from true liberation. Safety should not be something we should need to fight for. This pandemic timeline has exposed so much that is in need of healing and justice. The moment to rest brought us back into our bodies, to process what is keeping us from peace. Marginalized communities are those impacted by that the most. If we are truly in a country that encourages the pursuit of happiness – why are there so many systems in place meant to make that impossible. My use of illustration in this is to catch the eye visually – but make this conversation accessible. I want to encourage banding together as it amplifies our collective needs. We are trying to usher in a new future and that is strengthened by creating space for one another.”

COVID-19 HAS SHOWN HOW LITTLE MISSISSIPPI DOES FOR CHILDREN

Briana Burton | University of Southern Mississippi

Covid-19 has shined a light on many opportunities and obstacles for individuals and the government both here at home and abroad. Here in the South, one of the biggest obstacles to slowing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic is resistance to mask mandates and other preventive measures. The resistance has continued to grow even as cases continue to increase. The CDC reports Mississippi has the lowest number of people vaccinated in the country, with just 34 percent of residents fully vaccinated. With statistics like this, we give our children little to no defense against a virus we can—and should—be protecting our future generation from.

In Mississippi, it is normal to see people not wearing masks even as Covid-19 cases increase. It is still even more common to see children without masks. Mississippi is also one of the worst states in regards to child mortality and the pandemic has amplified the conditions that lead to this statistic. The Save the Children organization states that children in Mississippi die before their first birthday at a rate of 8.5 per 1,000 children compared to the nation's average of 5.6.

The reports that detail the number of vaccines being rejected or returned and the number of Mississippi youth being hit hard by Covid-19 is disheartening. Many news reports are covering the stories of seven children battling Covid-19 in ICUs in Mississippi. CBS News reports some of the children who are now fighting for their lives had no underlying health conditions prior to their hospitalization. These children and many others are suffering likely because of the hesitancy to trust basic health and safety protocols recommended by healthcare experts. Dr. Leah Smith stated that the recent spike in children heading to the ICU should serve as a wake-up call for anyone who doubts the virus can affect children.

We should not need a wake-up call when we have a preventive, harmless, and effective way to combat the virus. It is critical that people wear a mask and that mask mandates are implemented before children go back to school. How can we expect children to avoid getting Covid-19 without masks, in a state that is barely a third of the way vaccinated, and with a state legislature that ignores that they have one of the highest child mortality rates?

While we prepare to enter another school year during a pandemic, we cannot sit and ignore every time a child gets admitted to a hospital for Covid-19. There needs to be something done to prevent the inevitable rise of cases to come with the Delta variant and the need for vaccine boosters. Whether the rise is created by breakthrough cases in vaccinated individuals or a lack of proper safety precautions, many children will show up to school completely defenseless who would be better protected by wearing a mask.

Mississippians should use the “southern hospitality” we are known for when it comes to looking out for the next generation. We are already among the top states with high rates of poverty, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, and poor education. Now is the time for action, and we can start now with protecting our children from Covid-19. Here are some things we can do:

- Wear your masks and social distance. We still have not expanded Medicaid, so if entire households get Covid-19, local Mississippians could be at risk of low survival due to their inability to afford prescriptions or insurance.

- Get fully vaccinated and protect your household as we head back to school.
- Educate yourself. Unvaccinated people are 98% more likely to die from Covid-19.
- Citizens should speak to the local legislature in support of mask mandates.
- Post information from authoritative sources like a health or education organization on social media to spread awareness about the Covid-19 pandemic
- Find resources available to you like health insurance plans, rental assistance, food pantries, WIC, etc. to keep yourself and your family protected.

Sources:

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UNMASKING THE REAL CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG

Kamryn Witherspoon | Virginia State University

Wallace Stegner once said “Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend.” Located in Charlotte-Mecklenburg county alongside North College Street is a large homeless encampment called Tent City. The residents of this tent city include hundreds of homeless men, women, and children living in various tents and makeshift shelters located near the downtown area. The tent city has become a haven for the homeless population due to the limited resources available to the homeless community here in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. As of March 31, 2020, Mecklenburg County reports there were about 3,683 homeless individuals across the county, revealing an increase in the unsheltered homeless population even though the overall population of homeless decreased.

Until February 2021, residents of Tent City were living in squalor and defending themselves from vermin that plagued the encampment. Even with the help of community pioneers and volunteers, the people of Tent City still had basic needs that were not being met. As stories of Tent City residents living in filth and getting sick spread, local officials created a temporary housing solution to clean the encampment, sending residents back onto the streets. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County offered residents a free 90-day stay in a hotel, an offer taken by at least 210 people. Residents were only allowed to take two bags with them, meaning many lost some of their belongings. This fleeting solution is valiant in theory but is only another link in the chain that contributes to the cycle of poverty and neglect in this city.

The topic of homelessness is not a recent discussion, it is in fact an issue that has riddled the streets of our city drastically for nearly a decade. There is a common misconception that it is solely the responsibility of public officials to aid in the fight against homeless, but that is untrue given that there are numerous ways to address the challenges the unhoused face. With the help of organizations such as Block Love CLT, Revamp CLT, and Project downtown, the unhoused community has been provided food, medical supplies, employment opportunities, and many more hopeful solutions to their poverty— but it is still not enough.

One key way to combat the homelessness epidemic is to utilize the underutilized spaces in Charlotte. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education is currently seeking interested tenants to lease approximately 11 vacated school sites. These empty school buildings could be a short- and long-term solution for our unhoused residents here in Charlotte and offer great benefits to the larger community:

- Empty school buildings could be underwritten by sponsors in the private sector or public sector, alleviating the need for any cost to the taxpayers;
- Buildings have accessible recreation facilities inside and outside;
- Buildings have grounds and classroom settings that can be used for job skill training and budgeting to prepare the homeless to become job-ready for entities that sign on to hire them after such completion or at a minimum the first right of refusal for the opportunity;
- Buildings have offices and health rooms for mental health and services and treatment;
- Buildings have access to public transportation, including a bus line.
- The ability to utilize an otherwise unused structure to provide critical services and programs for unhoused families should be a high priority.

Major Obstacles/Implementation Challenges:

The major obstacles and implementation challenges to the proposed solution are:

- Who will pay? Do we increase taxes? Can this be covered through government grants and bonds? What are the overall operational costs?
- Who will lead this endeavor? Should leadership be in the private, public, faith-based or non-profit sectors? Who is responsible for property management?
- How do we get buy-in from local city leaders and officials?
- How do we keep residents safe? Do we hire private security? Do we implement access codes and resident tracking?
- Will local hospital systems partner to provide mental health and medical services?
- Administration and staffing would be a top priority.

To be sure, there are several outstanding questions that need to be addressed to make this solution work. There should be an immediate and concerted effort to discuss when and how to move this into fruition to address the Tent City Community's challenges at a time when homelessness continues to surge.

Sources:

<https://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/construction/facilityplanning/Pages/VacantSchoolSitesForLease.aspx>
<https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nc/charlotte/news/2020/04/19/charlotte-homeless-population-living-in-tents-as-shelters-fill-up>

Wallace Stegner (2000). "Angle of Repose", p.149, Penguin

THE MUTED VOICE OF MILLIONS

De'Quan Isom, Shaw University

Not a day goes by when I am not reminded of the great crisis facing many of our communities. Be it the extremes of poverty, a lack of access to resources from good textbooks to loans with non-predatory interest rates – a sense of hopelessness in cities void of healthy food options, and a safe environment to raise children.

For millions among us, the desire to pull up one's boots and march onward like a "good" American doesn't quite match the reality that *"We have no boots to pull on."* Even the desire to reach out for help to local governments and non-profit agencies is met with its own set of roadblocks, wherein the voices of millions can go on for decades without ever being heard, even at the ballot box, due to an extensive and intentional campaign to mute them.

Growing up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I watched daily as my mother worked at Forsyth Medical Center to provide the best care possible to those entrusted to her care as a CNA. She worked most nights of the week, meaning that my siblings and I were left to my grandparents into the late hours of each night. She would pick us up from their home and take us to ours, a temporary abode in one of the apartment complexes throughout the city.

Her dream was not just to provide a better life for her children, but to give us an example to live up to and one day surpass. She taught us to never give up on our dreams, even when we could not see how they'd be made reality; to hold onto our faith amid chaos, and to work hard – passionately – at everything that we do. When she fell, and we experienced a few years of homelessness, we watched as she acted with grace under pressure and somehow made ways when there were none.

Her story is an American story, and one that is told too often when hardworking people are relegated into second-class citizenship even as the nation experiences record economic growth. I came to the realization over the course of my life that not all people have access to this growth, and not for a lack of trying.

My arrival at Shaw University as a freshman in 2016 was one that revealed to me that the struggle my family faced was not a micro-level event, but something felt by all types of people in every corner of this nation. It could not be made any clearer than my witness at Shaw from my freshman year up to the present, attending an HBCU located at the heart of an historically African-American community in downtown Raleigh.

By the very nature of Shaw's urban existence, the journey from one side of campus to another forces you to leave off of campus, into the neighborhood and onto another section of Shaw's campus. In the fall of 2016, that journey was different from the one I see today, where I encountered a community that reflected the institution it supported.

Since that time, properties which had suffered the strain of time and a lack of resources, were purchased at near dirt-low prices, renovated and sold at prices far in excess to anything affordable by the community's historic inhabitants. This created an ironic atmosphere to be learning in – where my professors spoke of Gentrification in Urban Politics as theory, but the reality of that phenomenon was occurring before my eyes.

Even as I wondered what would happen to the impoverished forced out of their homes, not just by the market which made owning their homes next to impossible, but by the policies of the state and local governments,

there was a battle going on over redistricting in the NC General Assembly and the courts.

Historically, the parallels between redistricting practices and city zoning have not been in exclusion of each other, but worked in tandem as a combined force to attack and disenfranchise the poor – especially the descendants of slaves. If this was a practice well documented in the public record, and the research of social scientists to have occurred in the early 20th century, I think it not strange to see the same occurring today.

The practice of gentrification is as sinister yet “American as apple pie” as Bishop William Barber famously decrees. When we displace hardworking Americans, and remove their right to vote, we have reinforced a caste system that relegates the poor into poverty for generations – and the advantaged into a life of privilege.

Gentrification, to me, is not just an issue of economics or social malpractice, but one which calls to the forefront a great debate in America which has yet to occur. A debate over whether we truly have a heart for the poor, rejected, and marginalized in the hopes of giving them access to our American Dream? Or have we given ourselves willingly over to our worst instincts? Are we to see in this era, a return to red-lining reinforced by not just partisan or racist gerrymanders, but economic/class gerrymanders?

The cries of millions must be heard.

STUDENTS CAN, AND WILL SAVE, OUR DEMOCRACY

Jazmyne Abney, North Carolina Central University

Right now, neighborhoods should be buzzing with community organizers and students knocking on doors explaining options for each household to respond to the census. We should be attending community events focusing on the practical importance of the census and how an accurate count will improve government programs. We should be hosting block parties and church picnics bringing people together and cultivating community action for change.

On April 1, enumerators with the U.S. Census Bureau should have entered our communities to begin counting people who live in group quarters like colleges. Organizations should have held canvassing events to increase awareness about the current count and garner participation. None of this will occur, at least not for the next few weeks.

Instead, many communities are quiet, as families remain inside and observe physical distancing guidelines: Quietness will continue as stay-at-home orders remain in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media platforms were flooded with friendly videos, colorful flyers, and witty messages designed to remind Americans to respond to the census. Despite engagement on social media, the days and weeks leading up to Census Day were much quieter than anticipated. What we do in the coming weeks will shape public policy for the next decade. Students have access to knowledge and resources that can be used to agitate their home communities as well as their school communities into action.

Through their participation in student-led organizations and their work with nonpartisan, advocacy, and community-based organizations students create change. Many organizations rely on student volunteers, interns, and fellows to further their missions on college campuses and in their communities. Student-led organizations are instrumental in mobilizing students to fill community needs and advance issue-based causes.

The principles of community-focused work are ingrained in students at historically Black colleges and universities. Many HBCUs have mottoes centered around dedication and responsibility to the community. Students at North Carolina Central University, a public HBCU in Durham, hold the motto “Truth and Service” near to their hearts as they maneuver higher education and community service. These students have historically coordinated on-campus organizations and events to uplift their peers and the Durham community.

The ability of HBCU students to mobilize the community based on the longstanding relationships between institutions and neighborhoods has captured the attention of presidential hopefuls. HBCUs are valuable turf for those seeking office, evident in their efforts to grasp students’ attention; for example, Bernie Sanders’ HBCU Tour and Michael Bloomberg’s “HBCUs CHANGE LIVES!” campaign t-shirts. It is imperative that HBCU students must recognize these efforts and consider their purpose in influencing not only their personal votes but the community as a whole.

Students must stay engaged with their school communities now more than ever. Collectively, student populations interact with nearly all of the unique needs of their communities: Both in their academic studies and through their work with the community. Whether it is mentoring with youth programs, tutoring in schools, canvassing for an upcoming election, or serving at soup kitchens, students are actively filling needs.

Often, students use these interactions to inform their ideas about their community and how they strive to make an impact in it; including, in their fields of study, through their further community work, and with their

votes. However, the absence of students from their college campuses and communities, during this period of quarantine and physical distancing, will impact our democracy for the next 10 years.

In 2020, we will elect our next president, members of the 117th U.S. Congress, as well as countless positions at the state and local levels. Every election cycle we have the opportunity to reclaim our democracy by casting our ballots, but this year we have another opportunity. We will be participating in the 2020 census. Every 10 years the U.S. Census Bureau invites every household in the United States of America to participate in the count. The population data collected from the census count is used to allocate resources to government programs, reapportion congressional representation, and create voting districts. Accurate census data is central to creating fair voting districts which will amplify the voices of the community.

We have the opportunity to participate in this process. We can go beyond completing the census form and voting in the districts assigned to us based on the population information collected. We can participate in creating accurate maps that reflect the interests of our communities. Students have the opportunity to lead in these efforts as they exist at the pinnacle of opportunity, resources, and knowledge. Students can, and will, save our democracy.

Part III: The Power of Justice



My Voice, My Art, Our Cause Artivism Contest

Artist: Camila T.G., 24, Washington, D.C.
Instagram: [byunnaturalcauses](#)

“While the media has shifted attention away from the Black Lives Matter movement, the problems that incited the protests are still there, unaddressed by our government. Namely, the systemic racism in our in-justice system means that no matter who you are, if you are black, you are in danger of police brutality and harsher punitive sentences than white people. If we do not approach criminal justice as a matter of racial justice, then we will not be able to build new structures of transformative justice that uplift true democracy, accountability, and equality.”

WHAT'S AT RISK IN THE UPHILL BATTLE FOR ELECTION ADMINISTRATORS

Gretchen Coleman, Syracuse University

Election administration may seem like it's pretty high up on a list of boring jobs, but the profession is quickly becoming a major battlefield in the fight over democracy.

For most of U.S. history, election administrators worked in near obscurity, quietly keeping our political system humming throughout cycles of tension and turmoil. These are not only the people who keep meticulous records and coordinate every detail of polling place maintenance; they also certify election results so that ballots manifest in actual political power. But the impact of Trump's misinformation campaign against these officials is escalating dangerously, putting the legitimacy of our next elections - and our entire democratic system - at risk.

There has never been enough public support for election administration, a job that is only becoming more difficult to do. The people in charge of local elections today must be well versed in law, statistics, policy, data analysis, cybersecurity, tech support, customer service, logistics, and communications - but they have nowhere near the resources and staffing to meet these demands. Even in the best of times, this profession is consistently overworked and underpaid.

The 2020 election cycle was nowhere near the best of times. While administrators clambered to safely conduct an election in the midst of a pandemic, the Trump administration actively made their jobs harder. President Trump planted seeds of doubt in millions about the validity of tried-and-true vote by mail ballots, baselessly undermining confidence in the only contact-free method for casting a vote. At the same time, the Trump-appointed Postmaster General Louis DeJoy made changes to the postal service that caused [unprecedented delays](#) to mail delivery. The months leading up to the election were a frantic scramble for officials to keep up with changing public health guidelines, combat misinformation efforts, and make vote by mail systems tenable.

But by the skin of their teeth and some miracle, election administrators managed to pull off the near impossible. Voters turned out in record numbers, and a coalition of federal election infrastructure officials and experts called the November election ["the most secure in American history."](#) If 2020 taught us anything, it should be that the vast majority of election administrators are dedicated and competent (if under-resourced) civil servants who can be credited with holding our democracy together.

For many of these extraordinary civil servants, however, their profession has become even more unbearable since the election. Trump's seeds of misinformation have bloomed into mistrust of the electoral process altogether. Election officials of all kinds - poll workers to secretaries of state, Democrats and Republicans alike - have been the target of this fear and hatred. In a [recent survey](#) commissioned by the Brennan Center for Justice, 1 in 3 election officials reported feeling unsafe because of their work, and nearly 1 in 5 reported threats to their lives being a job-related concern, especially due to their role in certifying election results.

On top of that, Republican-controlled state legislatures are working to [impose strict penalties](#) on administrators' human errors. A new bill in Iowa would fine up to \$10,000 for a "technical infraction" of election rules like opening a polling place late. In Texas, legislators are considering a measure to criminalize sending out unsolicited absentee ballot applications. Florida election administrators can be fined \$25,000 for leaving a ballot drop box unsupervised or accessible outside of early voting hours. Legislators are systematically

villainizing the people who are by and large just trying to do their jobs.

In effect, those responsible for this climate are driving experienced officials to quit the profession, leaving a void of expertise in their wake. [Almost 35%](#) of local election officials will be eligible to retire by the 2024 elections, and many will feel compelled to escape from these overwhelming conditions. The likely impact of such vacancies on the electoral process is not yet clear. Vital roles in offices may go unfilled, leaving entire election departments unequipped to run a safe and secure election – or the positions could be filled by extremists who will refuse to certify the results if their party doesn't win.

We cannot afford to wait and hope that our current perilous situation will blow over. When we take election officials for granted, we also take for granted their role in legitimizing our electoral process. We need to take threats against all election workers seriously. We must hold social media corporations accountable for their role in spreading misinformation and provide resources, staffing, and legal support for local election authorities to combat it. We need to develop a robust code of ethics to protect against undue partisan interference. And we need to drastically step up our funding to make the field sustainable long term.

Only after we take bold action can our election officials get back to their job of quietly making democracy work.

THE PERFECT JURY?

Ashley King, Bennett College

For the majority of my grade school years, I participated in Teen Court, a program involving teen volunteers who are trained in traditional court protocol and conduct hearings for various misdemeanor cases. One of the most crucial deciding points of each case was the careful selection of jurors. Jurors would have to swear under oath that they had no bias or prior knowledge of the defendant.

I served as a juror, defense and prosecuting attorney, and eventually a peer judge. No matter what position I held in Teen Court, one thing was essential to me: Everyone deserves just treatment.

I assumed that our technique of jury selection was how the real court system worked, providing equitable consideration. Now, as a college student and a Common Cause Democracy Fellow, working to increase youth participation in elections, I have found that is not the case.

This week, the North Carolina Supreme Court will consider an appeal in which there is evidence that Black citizens were denied the right to serve on a jury simply because of the color of their skin. This is a problem across North Carolina.

Based on statewide studies of jury selection as well as the [Jury Sunshine Project](#), prosecutors remove about 20 percent of African-Americans available in the jury pool, compared to only about 10 percent of whites. Prosecutors in urban areas, which tend to have larger minority populations, remove nonwhite jurors at a higher rate than in other parts of the state. In the same manner, judges also remove black jurors “for cause” about 20 percent more often than they remove available white jurors.

This racially skewed trend, played out across many cases, is a cycle that negatively affects our justice system. As a result, the defendant is not judged by a jury that properly reflects their community. Many defendants’ cases are determined by white jurors who could not begin to relate to what a Black person experiences through their lifetime.

As a Black woman, it is incredibly upsetting that my civil right to serve on a jury could be denied so unfairly. It is difficult to trust a justice system that erects barriers to jury service not just for me, but for people of color throughout the United States. The issue of jury discrimination affects young people who are just familiarizing themselves with the justice system because they already have a presumption of distrust with the justice system based on previous observations.

Jurors decide whether someone will walk free, spend the rest of their life in prison, or face execution. It is wrong to have the opportunity to be a juror taken away simply because of the color of my skin. Juries need people like me, who can relate to the experience of being a Black woman in America.

Black people, in particular women, have had so many opportunities taken away from them based on their skin color. It is unfair to exclude our voices and invaluable perspectives from the justice system.

The North Carolina Supreme Court should overturn this case because there is clear evidence of discrimination. In doing this, the Court will demonstrate that they are ready to finally enforce laws prohibiting racial discrimination in the jury selection process.

The N.C. Supreme Court would be sending a strong message to all citizens that the days of prosecutors striking Black jurors with impunity are over. Overturning this case could ultimately change North Carolina's deplorable record of never having enforced laws against racist jury strikes.

TENT “CITY”

Marcus Ponder, Winston Salem State University

Charlotte, NC has an unrelenting and growing homelessness epidemic, its name is Tent City and sadly it is how a new generation of children are experiencing life. The City Council should consider sheltering or housing most of the homeless people in the city, they already evacuated the encampment earlier this year but have no long-term plan for its inhabitants. Waiting and not having a plan would be a disastrous waste of money, time, and energy. It would encourage short-term fixes instead of lasting solutions. Whoever is left on the streets and sidewalks, sadly after said “fixes” could be told to stop living in the area and possibly be cited or even arrested. Eventually, when every district has fulfilled the settlement’s quota, the city could go back to enforcing anticamping infractions, which have not been widely enforced due to court decisions and, in the past year, the pandemic. The city could fulfill the settlement’s sheltering and housing obligations by offering the homeless community a spot in a safe camping ground, a personal house, a group shelter, or shared house, at bare minimum a hotel or motel room, or an actual apartment. But given the cost of moving more than 200 people off the streets, the city would almost certainly go the quicker, easier route: putting them into temporary shelters. By doing that they will have taken their focus off the only real way to eliminate homelessness, which is providing permanent long-term housing. All the city will have done is move part of its homeless population from encampments and underpasses to more “secure” tents, tiny homes, and other temporary digs in whatever parking lots or unused plots of land officials can find. Unless their circumstances somehow change, the people who aren’t offered shelter or won’t accept it would still be homeless somewhere. Rather than solving the homelessness problem, the city will simply have allowed police and sanitation workers to clear homeless people off the streets, which sadly is what a lot of the council members’ constituents want. Regardless of one’s past, everyone on this planet is human and should have the capacity to better themselves if they truly want it. We must stop as a society marginalizing and demonizing groups of people who don’t have as much as us and start helping one another attain it.

DIVERSIFYING THE JUDICIARY

Farah Tolu-Honary, Beloit College

Imagine you are walking into a courtroom. The judge, the prosecutor, the defense attorney, and the jury are all white. The only person of color is the man standing trial. Due to generations of systemic racism, this is a typical scene in American courtrooms across the nation. Both state and federal courts are overwhelmingly composed of white, male judges. Federally, seventy-three percent of judges are white and sixty-seven percent are male. At the state level, twenty-four states have all-white supreme courts and thirteen of those have never had a person of color serve as a state supreme court justice. People of color and women are severely underrepresented in the judicial system. To combat this, President Biden has made diversifying the federal courts a goal of his administration. However, increased diversity on the bench cannot cure generations of systemic racism that has plagued the judiciary alone.

The underrepresentation of racial minorities on the bench is a result of many variables, such as racial discrimination and inequitable access to law schools. Other factors, including whether the state uses a gubernatorial appointment process or elections, provide for the lack of diversity on state supreme courts. [The Brennan Center for Justice](#) found that people of color are more likely to be appointed to a state supreme court than they are to be elected. The same study also concluded that incumbent justices of color are 19 percent more likely to be challenged and 8 percent more likely to lose a state supreme court election than their white colleagues. Because court races are not well-followed and most voters are uninformed about the candidates, surname bias presents itself as another inhibitor of judicial diversity. Some uninformed voters opt for candidates with the “white-sounding name” rather than research the options. To offset the [increasing cost](#) of running for a judge position, candidates take stances on issues to get campaign donations from interest groups. This has contributed to the lack of judicial diversity because white candidates [receive more](#) campaign donations than candidates of color.

Contentious research indicates that diversifying the judiciary cannot be framed as a quick and easy solution to mass incarceration nor the disproportional representation of people of color in prisons. [Some studies](#) show that white judges are more likely than judges of color to sentence offenders to prison. Research conducted [at Princeton](#) found that the presence of a Black judge on a panel increases the likelihood that non-Black judges will rule in favor of affirmative action policies and plaintiffs claiming Voting Rights Act violations. At the same time, [competing research](#) provides that judges of color may deliver harsher sentences because they feel pressure to prove themselves to their white colleagues and community. Judges of color feel pressure to demonstrate that they are not pursuing a political agenda, so they often give longer sentences to people of color than their white colleagues would have delivered. This underscores the need for greater representation so that judges of color do not feel compelled to convince their colleagues that they are not trying to “go easy” on defendants of color.

Diversifying the bench is a necessary step for criminal justice reform, which is why it has [been a priority](#) for the Biden administration. However, it should not be a substitute for substantive criminal justice system reform. The mere presence of judges of color does not indicate that the system is working nor that it is not racist. Therefore, diversifying the bench should not become the only solution to achieving systemic reform. Most advocates know this and argue that diversifying the bench is in part about enhancing legitimacy. Advocates hope that if people see a demographically representative courtroom, they will put more trust in the system.

However, the court system requires deeper reform before it deserves legitimacy from people of color. The goal of diversification cannot be to enhance court legitimacy by means of creating a fairer courtroom; deeper,

broader, more substantive criminal justice system reform is necessary. Instead, diversification could enhance legitimacy through symbolic representation, which, however, runs the risk of being co-opted. The presence of judges of color can be used to keep deeper systemic racism further from the public eye, because diversity can be manipulated as proof that the system works. This manipulation of public opinion helps ensure that systemic racism stays entrenched and upheld. Judges of color cannot be tokenized in order to convince people of color that they are being treated fairly under the law. Judges of color should not be used to persuade people of color that their sentence was fair just because it was delivered by a fellow person of color.

The courts need legitimacy if they want the public to trust and respect them as an institution. Diversifying the courts is a part—but not the only— necessary change on the path to real justice for all. People of color are [disproportionately incarcerated](#), live in [over-policed communities](#), and [face longer sentences](#) for the same crimes that are committed by white people. A diverse judiciary will not be enough to ameliorate these issues, but it is a start. Ending state supreme court elections is one step that can help achieve that goal. Americans living in states with supreme court elections should contact their legislators to let them know that they support a gubernatorial appointment process to the state supreme court. However, it cannot be neglected that the racial disparities within the United States legal system require institutional change across the board, not simply symbolic representation.

Part IV: The Power of Culture



My Voice, My Art, Our Cause Artivism Contest

Artist: Selorm T., 28, Ohio

Instagram: [gp_crafts](#)

"I believe the media wrongly represent adults, specifically black adults, creating a gap in the next generation's view of growth. My work of art represents the beginning (genesis), roots and culture. I hope to convey, finding yourself in any of the old stories that constructed the foundations/structure of the world as we know it today. As well as the duality in all things."

SNEAKER SUBCULTURE: A PATHWAY TO EQUITY AND ECONOMIC FREEDOM

Johnathan Gorum | Bowie State University

Economic justice and racial justice are crucial parts of building up not only our local community but the global community too. In many communities, people form subcultures as a way to obtain equity and economic freedom. One subculture that is growing in popularity is sneaker culture. Sneaker culture is the buying and trading of sneakers as a hobby or career. It is rooted in collecting sneakers from limited drops and iconic colorways worn by some of the greatest athletes. Sneaker culture helps people achieve the overall goal of economic justice, which is to create opportunities for everyone to potentially thrive and prosper in the new age. The economic system in America runs off of pure capitalism and doesn't give lower-income individuals the opportunity to generate wealth because the limited pool of well-paying jobs does not cater to their talents and skills. Capitalism puts a limit on what individuals can potentially earn and holds the economy back as the low-income class continues to grow. We can combat economic injustice by increasing minimum wage, progressive taxation, and diversity inclusion.

Increasing the minimum wage will stimulate the economy by putting more money into workers' pockets. According to the Center for American Progress, "raising the wages of low-income workers will stimulate the economy; substantially lower the amount the country spends on social safety net programs such as SNAP, and reduce economic inequality, thereby unleashing additional economic growth in a period of recovery." Progressive taxation can help the economy by having a fairer income distribution which leads to higher revenues, less volatility in the economy, and faster growth. Lastly, diversity and inclusion helps the economy by ensuring people of color can access a greater share of labor. Marketing to different racial and ethnic backgrounds will lead to a higher market share for the businesses, helping people of color generate more wealth. For example, the Center for American Progress says that "women of color own 1.9 million firms. These businesses generate \$165 billion in revenue annually and employ 1.2 million people. Latina-owned businesses, in particular, have total receipts of \$55.7 billion since 2002".

While economic justice is an important part of our society, racial inequality also ties into the unfairness in the economic system. Racial inequality is the imbalance in power, opportunities, and economic resources due to race. Racial inequality has created systems that prevent people of color from being able to obtain power or wealth. When people of color create subcultures like sneaker culture, they are trying to create a community that they can exist in without race limiting their access to resources and opportunities.

Racial justice in America has been unfair for many years but the past year has uncovered the reality of the injustices that the Black community face. The death of George Floyd caused major protests in many cities ranging from DC, to Minneapolis, and to many more states across the nation. There were many peaceful protests across these cities to bring about justice for not only George Floyd but for the lives of many other Black people that were taken by extreme use of force used by unaccountable police officers. Although protesters were peaceful, they still were abused and harassed by the police; but when white supremacists stormed the US Capitol on January 6, they experienced little to no police interference - further proving that the fight for racial justice in America is not —and nowhere near —over.

Economic justice and racial inequality are two important issues that must be addressed not only locally but globally. One way that I have seen people in my community address the inequalities they face is through sneaker culture. Sneaker culture creates a bridge between people from different economic groups and different races.

Sneaker culture helps individuals achieve economic justice by giving individuals the opportunity to invest by purchasing a limited or in-demand sneaker for the retail price, and selling it for more than purchased to bring in a profit. Purchasing and selling attracts people from all economic classes but allows the economically disadvantaged to use their passion to create a business that has high demand. Although sneakers are a limited resource, companies have made obtaining them a fair process where every individual is given equal purchasing power.

As far as racial justice, the sneaker community is international and includes people from all races and people from all economic statuses that have something in common, sneakers. This common interest breaks down the wall and tension between races and allows each individual to connect with other people outside of their racial identities and economic status. Like most communities in the United States, the sneaker community is not perfect. As someone who has built a network within the sneaker community, I have hope that it will continue to be inclusive and that the larger world will one day work in a similar way – allowing everyone to have a fair chance at obtaining wealth and being seen as equal.

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THE IMPACT OF POLARIZING ADS ON COLLEGE VOTERS

Imani Bennett | Spelman College

Our generation is often jaded by the dangers of engaging with large amounts of controversial content. Growing up with YouTube, Tumblr, and Twitter, this election cycle's first-time voter pool is known as the generation of social media and was targeted by political campaigns on various social platforms. Disinformation campaigns and the spread of misinformation have become common on social platforms, making it difficult for users to determine credibility. An analysis conducted by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that young people (ages 18-24) are turning to social media to "both consume and produce political content". Of those surveyed by CIRCLE, 70% of young people got their information about the 2020 election on social media. Considering the overwhelming effect of political ads and polarizing algorithms from the general and 2020 senate run off elections, I am concerned about college students' prospects for long-term civic engagement. Has the exposure to dis/misinformation presented a stronger divide in our country? Will current college students lose interest in long-term civic engagement as a result of ads and algorithms on social media?

Political and racial divides persist in the United States and political campaigns are taking advantage of this division in the name of engagement. Such tactics were clear in the 2020 presidential and Georgia senate run-off elections. Nonstop campaign ads and voter outreach used "vote for me because you hate them" as a messaging strategy to recruit supporters for their campaign and/or political party's slate. While it can be nauseating and a "turn-off" for politics, we have to recognize the strength of these organizing tactics and what they reflect and foreshadow about our civil society and the future of voter engagement.

I conducted a survey targeting college-aged Georgia voters about their election experience, where 75.8% of the 33 respondents were first-time voters during the 2020 election cycle. When asked about their voting experience, 48.5% rated their experience this election cycle a 10/10, being that they are excited for the next race. One claimed they were "very excited to be a part of the democratic process and see my voice contribute to change".

Respondents stated their primary method of receiving election updates was via social media. When asked about social media's influence, 30.3% of responses noted that social media had a neutral influence over how they voted. Two-thirds of the respondents saw more than one political view on their social media, and one-third did not see more than one. My survey also inquired about social media companies' role in helping create or intensify this clear divide between political ideologies. When asked if social media itself polarized the country, respondents had mixed feelings: two-thirds said no, and one-third said not necessarily. One wrote:

I know [social media] helped open my eyes to different perspectives within my own political party (specifically related to topics and policies focused on the state and local levels), and I've found myself becoming even more liberal than I already was in the past.

Building upon the previous question about the contribution to increasing polarization and extremist views, I posed the survey takers to consider the social media companies' obligation to monitor the content amongst users, such as hate speech within its algorithmic patterns. This prompted diverse responses amongst participants: 54.5% said yes; 27.3% said no; 18.2% said maybe. One answered, "I think that to a certain extent they should, especially when it comes to harmful messages being spread, but I also think there's only so much they can do without completely stripping people of their opinions." On the other hand, one

responded, “We all have the freedom to post our beliefs, so I feel as though social media companies should not regulate speech.”

I was surprised by the amount of students who did not connect recent events like the insurrection and the rise of Black Lives Matter (BLM) to social media. Right-wing extremists used platforms such as Parlor, Gab, MeWe, Rumble to build a community and gain support for the insurrection. Since 2014, BLM has used their social network to build community and support for families of Black people killed by police officers. Social media has allowed individuals to create two different realities in regards to these events without prioritizing true information. Social media platforms have not been held accountable for their role in the spread of harmful information, posing a threat to the civic participation of future generations.

While freedom of speech and expression is the selling point to many of these platforms, market economies and monetary gain are too prioritized for the sake of engagement. Yosef Getachew, Common Cause Media & Democracy Program Manager, writes that “Platforms have implemented business models designed to maximize user engagement and prioritize their profit shares over combating harmful content.” Although election season has concluded, this proliferation amongst social platforms continues to polarize our society when trying to implement election audits, overcome COVID-19 vaccination efforts and even critical race theory being taught in our schools. Considering that the Georgia student voters surveyed preferred social media as their news source, we must focus our attention on accurate, clear, and factual dialogue on our digital platforms.

All things considered, we as users must continue to be pillars of truth and accountability within our circles, Facebook groups, and amongst our followers. Due to the shortcomings of social media algorithms and absence of human fact-checkers from artificial intelligence codes that interpret information, we must act collectively to fight this bug of prioritizing likes and comments over truth. Social media does not present the most welcoming space for dialogue that encourages learning and understanding. However, infographics connect appealing graphics and simple text to simplify complex topics, and those methods have helped with left-leaning opinions. This same human intervention can work and will work to end the acceptance of false information. Community moderators for public forums have also proven to change minds and hearts on contentious issues. These efforts have kept young voters engaged and gives hope to the idea of maintaining life-long engagement for this generation of students.

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THE SEDUCTION OF RAGE: PUSHING BACK AGAINST “WE ARE NOT OUR ANCESTORS” RHETORIC WITHIN BLACK YOUTH ACTIVIST CULTURE

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In thinking about the ways in which many young people frequently consume images of Black death and destruction through the vehicles of social media and television, I am struck by the misunderstandings, internalizations, and gaps in knowledge of one’s history. This is evidenced by frequently shared memes that flippantly read;

“We are not our ancestors. Sincerely, these hands.”, or “Dear Racism, I am not my grandparents. Sincerely, these hands.”

Historically, young Black folks have had involvement and/or have stood at the forefront of every historical civil war and civil rights movement since this country’s inception. Reactionary responses from young people in pain in the face of crushing oppression, death, and destruction have served as catalysts for some of the most transgressive and transformative Black liberation collectives. Young Black activists started The Black Panther Party in Oakland, California and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at Shaw University in North Carolina. Ella Baker, founder of SNCC, would attest, in order to create tangible solutions in our struggle against white supremacy, we must move past pain and into power.

Black youth across our nation internalize white supremacy and conceptualize their own roles through acts of resistance or by remaining transfixed within white supremacy’s chokehold. Margaret Walker calls forth an arresting reckoning by interrogating the ways we have been rendered ineffective. Walker asks, are we dulled in defeat or are we awakened to a new awareness of man’s continual struggle to be free?, do we accept our fate as colonized people less than slaves?, or is there such a destined dream as freedom, peace and human dignity to bless us with their truth?” In other words; have you given up? There is a notion that our contemporary response to these prevailing power structures, being more direct and confrontational, are superior to the response of our ancestors. The idea that our ancestors’ response was lacking because it was “passive” or “respectable” is totally wrong. These attitudes and misconceptions are not only highly disrespectful to the legacy of Black resistance and progress, but also largely ahistorical and inaccurate.

Academia’s erasure of the history of Black activism, advocacy, and eloquent yet justifiable rage is a viable explanation for the lack of understanding within the young Black population. Not only have we failed to reach back for the tools and historical maps for liberation left for us by our ancestors, we have wholly dismissed them as ineffective. This perpetuates the cycle of outrage and disillusionment that surrounds each tragic Black killing. The cyclical nature of history recommends that we look back for answers to our present day afflictions. The nature of the game of white supremacy has not changed. The players have simply become more covert in their game. As bell hooks quotes, “We have to constantly critique imperialist white supremacist culture because it is normalized by mass media and rendered unproblematic.” For young Black people who cry “We are not our ancestors!” in retaliation and anger as a response to white supremacy; who believe they are rebelling against the “passive” tactics of the past, I invoke the words of a beloved history professor: “Y’all sho ain’t.”

Utilizing the potentials of our education in the practice of freedom would demand from us a more nuanced, effective and informed response to our current set of challenges. We must return to the works and histories

of our ancestors. So many stories of the most radical Black revolutionaries of the past like Angela Davis, Malcolm X and Huey P. Newton, are seldom told and rarely critically analyzed and understood. If only we would have read and studied their works, as well as the books that they read, cultivating the mind of a revolutionary instead of simply imitating a revolutionary aesthetic, how much further we would be?

We have much work to do.

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I AM NOT AN ANGRY BLACK WOMAN – PERIOD.

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The word angry is defined as “feeling or showing strong annoyance, displeasure, or hostility.” However, I believe that “*angry*” means “to show passion or feeling for something that does not work in your favor.” Every day, whether in the home or in professional spaces, black women are seen and described as angry. We are seen as sassy, bossy, and loud. We are not allowed to express our emotions entirely without being criticized and scorned. But a black man? A white woman? A white man? They are all allowed to shout and have a tone of annoyance that is usually angrily verbose and unprofessional, yet their responses do not encounter similar scrutiny. The problem lies when me and other black women react in a similar way. When people see us forcing our eyebrows together, pointing our fingers, rolling our necks, or simply raising our voices, it is said that we are being hostile or aggressive. It baffles me when I am told to chill or relax for doing the same as someone of the opposite race or sex. I am a black woman that should be allowed to share her feelings without being chastised like my racially diverse colleagues. I should not be labeled as something I am not. Because I know all too well that my legal identification documents do not list me as an angry black woman!!!! Period.

I believe the most upsetting part of this stereotype is the amount of money that people make from supporting this narrative. Filmmakers, writers, journalists, musicians and so many others have successful careers built around upholding and perpetuating this narrative. They focus very little on what the problem is and instead emphasize the black woman’s reaction. For example, the famous movie *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* is considered a romantic comedy-drama. Let us stop here – are we seriously creating jokes from a black woman’s pain? The movie’s plot is based on a rich couple that seems to have their lives together. However, the husband continually misuses his wife by disrespecting her and having numerous affairs. The wife on the other hand, gives her all to this relationship as it has been her biggest accomplishment in life yet. On the couple’s anniversary night, the wife walks into her home, surprised that her belongings are packaged, and another woman is moving into her home. This is the root reason for her reactions throughout the rest of the movie. The wife struggles to be open to another man and relationship. She returns to her husband’s mansion and vandalizes it completely. Simultaneously, she verbally, emotionally, and physically abuses her ex-husband when he becomes ill. While this is only one movie that chooses to highlight how a black woman reacts when she is disrespected, ignored, challenged, and hurt there are many others. Some examples include *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, and *Amos ‘n Andy*. In addition to these movies, Books and Magazines like *The Death of An Angry Black Woman*, *That Damn Angry Black Woman*, and *Accusations of A Mad Black Woman* make it all seem like it is okay for the world to just see a black woman as the issue. I am a black woman that believes that it is unfair and truly foolish for the root of the problem to be ignored.

It is 2021 and I am still at a disadvantage because I am a woman. When we stitch in that I am black, I encounter more professional inequality. I may never receive equal pay or even be seen as an equal individual. Statistics show that for every dollar that the white man makes, the black woman only makes 62 cents. This life is completely unjust for us. I am a black woman that is exasperated, exhausted and frustrated that the world looks down on me.

“Black women are the most disrespected people on this planet”, according to Malcom X. Decades later, this statement still stands true. No later than this Spring, a white man boldly refuses to call a black woman the way she requests to be acknowledged. Tony Collins, a NC official, refused to acknowledge Cassie Rosario’s doctoral title. Dr. Cassie Rosario is an associate professor at UNC Greensboro. In a public zoom meeting, the white man refused to place “Dr.” in front of her name when talking to/about her. Dr. Cassie Rosario asked

multiple times for him to correct this, and he persistently declined. What would the case be if she did not recognize him the way he would like to be? What if she was a white woman instead of a black woman? He expected us – yes, us – to settle for the bare minimum? Yet he would not tolerate the same. Way too often, people believe that they can disrespect black women. Dr. Cassie Rosario is living proof that black women refuse to tolerate incivility and inferiority. I am a black woman that is confident, secure, and unreserved.

One day, I hope that the rare and true nature of the Black woman is seen for what it is. The truth is simply this, a black woman should only be defined as an oddity that frightens the masses due to the realization that we are indeed a powerful force to be reckoned with. Nothing else should be our social label but due to us ignoring the cries for us to be unconditionally tamed we will always be deemed to be something grotesque.

I am a black woman that will demand respect from the rest of the world because the world does not give it to me freely.

I AM not an angry black woman. If someone referred to you all of your life as something that you are not, wouldn't you be angry too?



My Voice, My Art, Our Cause Artivism Contest

Artist: Jacob W., 21, Georgia

Instagram: [wiant.works](https://www.instagram.com/wiant.works)

“My piece represents the ongoing struggle for equal rights for individuals in the LGBTQ+ community. As a gay man and an artist, it is my responsibility to protest through art and design. One vote can influence countless people. This piece exemplifies the impact of my singular vote for the LGBTQ+ community in the process of assuring marriage equality, queer education, and overall safety for other members of my community. This piece communicates a sense of solidarity to other members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially those who suffer in silence. Additionally, the work will place some hope in the democratic process in order to build a better future for our community.”

