

OPINION

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS' YOUTH INITIATIVE

We must empower voters of tomorrow

By Madhu Sridhar
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

A recent post-election survey by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University revealed young people 18-29 were worried about issues but felt neglected, faced barriers to voting and lacked information.

It found “only about half of young people were contacted by any campaign or organization about the 2022 election, and 1 in 5 youth said they didn't have enough information to vote.”

Safeguarding democracy entails addressing the concerns and needs of this demographic. In 1971, the 26th Amendment granted the right to vote to 11.5 million people 18 to 20.

Young people are one of the largest untapped voting blocs in America. “All young Americans should be informed and responsibly involved in politics and civic life, and engaging the next generation is the best long-term solution to problems of polarization, incivility, and dysfunction in national politics,” said Peter Levine, director of CIR-CLE.

Navigating today's election environment is a challenge. Partisan acrimony remains at unprecedented levels, and false news spreads faster than the truth. Texas' prohibitive voting laws make matters worse. In 22 states and the District of Columbia, same-day registration enables voters to register and vote at the same time. Not in Texas,



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where there is also no provision for online and automatic voter registration. Also, a student ID is not accepted as the required identification, and there is a lack of campus polling locations.

Preparing young people to be leaders and participate in democracy must be deliberate and thoughtful. It needs to be collaborative — young people mobilizing their peers; teachers and professors offering extra credit to students for civics projects; parents connecting their children to resources and taking their children to the polls; public officials ready to partner with community organizations; and entrepreneurs investing in innovative digital solutions.

The League of Women Voters of San Antonio is doing its part.

Its Youth Initiative, launched last year, invites the next generation to think about democracy, leadership and governance. The league also shares nonpartisan voting and election information. The Youth Initiative encourages critical thinking on public policy issues and the free flow of ideas. Our vision also includes training for young voters to become poll workers and encouraging them to consider running for elected office.

This year's prompt for the league's annual youth contest was “I am American Democracy.” The winning submissions give us hope.

Madhu Sridhar is president of the nonpartisan League of Women Voters of the San Antonio Area.

I am the future of this country

By Addisyn M. Wade

I am American Democracy.
Don't leave just yet.
I know what you're thinking:
“How can she represent the American people?”
People see me and assume the worst.
“She's a thug!”
“A murderer!”
“She must vape and do drugs!”
“Her people make this world worse!”
Her. People.
Last time I checked I thought that we were just “people.”
People with hopes and ambitions.
People with million-dollar companies.
People with highly coveted awards.
People in the White House.
People declaring laws unconstitutional.
But no.
I'm a menace.
A drug dealer.
A school shooter.
A rioter.



Martin Barraud/Getty Images

Some assume the worst about us. I know something they don't.

A disgrace to the Founding Fathers.
My mother always says:
“When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.”
So when someone says that all lives matter, not just Black,
I smile and shake my head.
Because I know something that they don't:

I am the future of this country.
I am American Democracy.
And that's something you can't take away from me.

Addisyn M. Wade is a ninth grader at the Northeast School for the Arts and is the high school winner of Picture This Annual Youth Initiative contest.

Not a dream, but reality

By Nadiya White

Yes, I Am American Democracy—
For that opportunity ends
With an equal
Finish.
Yes our start
May be in question,
But a dream
To accomplish.
I imagine
I'm not too far
From this United world
Of progress:
Of asking questions,
None answered,
For not to
Challenge authority;
Of inspirations
Turned to aspirations,
Breeding ambition,
But prolonging “the torments of man.”
But don't lose hope,
Nietzsche,
For that is
Unamerican.
So Yes I Am American Democracy —
With the hope, the urge
To have ...
A dream ...
I have a dream but ...
Does it matter what dream I have
When this vision was marching
With Martin?
A dream with a rude awakening?
“Seared in the flames
Of withering injustice”
Stood that cross of sacrifice,
Dying for the sins of these righteous men.
That American dream
With American democracy
Is no beginning,
But an end,
Where progress is an illusion
Like a step forward trend,
But you keep passing the same backward promises,
Telling you to be the change.
That there *will* be change.
But we're supposed to keep hope in democracy. Dream of its potential,
Be the change
Like I Am American Democracy.
But what does it mean
To be apart of this nation,
Too proud to call itself
United?
Where the nation has to be reminded
My life matters,
Where those born on the plantation
Were reborn into poverty,
Reborn into the contradiction of united,
Reborn into a short life.
But we keep their memory
Engraved on a social headstone.
Yes, I Am American Democracy —
Social uniform, no division;
Because while death may be equal,
The living births this distinction.
“Our” American philosophy
Beginning from an optimists' dream,
Awakening the hearts of a United
American Democracy
Leaves them to believe,
“To be so blind with patriotism
That you can't face reality,”
X'ing out reality
When awakened from your dream.
But that American vision
Will no longer enslave my mind,
Disguising plantations as meadows,
Free labor as freedom.
Yes, I Am American Democracy —
In its true form,
For I represent myself:
Not a dream, but reality.
And soon, that American dream's
worst nightmare.

Nadiya White is a student at the University of the Incarnate Word and the undergraduate winner for Picture This Annual Youth Initiative contest.



Jacquelyn Martin/Associated Press

Many people thought democracy was on the ballot in the last election. But democracy is a process.

Democracy is an ongoing relationship

By Helen Baird Trotman

I am not democracy.
Democracy is not a definition in the dictionary. It's not an act of legislation or a chapter in an American history textbook. It's not a voter registration card or a permit to carry a gun. It's not the “I voted” sticker on your shirt or the brooch my great-grandmother handed down to me.

Democracy is not a political donation or a government handout. It's not a border patrol, a fence, or a treaty. It's not a character in a Broadway musical or the picture of George Washington on a dollar bill. It's not a dinner table debate or an argument on the senate floor. It's not an act of Congress or an act of violence. It is not the political sign in my front yard or the sign in my neighbor's yard, engaged in a silent stand-off across the street.

Democracy is not a flag or a pledge or “The Star Spangled Banner.” It's not

a heated discussion in English class or a vigil outside an elementary school. It isn't thoughts and prayers and political theories. Democracy is not a threat. It's not a talking point, a cliché, or the answer to a question.

Democracy is neither a voice nor a chorus. It's not a protest or a prison sentence, a state or a country. It's not a president, or a candidate, or a voter or a dissident. Democracy is not a talk show or a subscription to the New York Times. It's not a tweet or an infographic; it's not a picture, a documentary or a 15-second clip.

Democracy isn't an essay. It's not a singular or exceptional thing. Democracy is a process. It's an ongoing relationship — a messy, essential mix of all of these things.

Helen Baird Trotman is a 10th grader at Saint Mary's Hall and is the high school winner for the Picture This Annual Youth Initiative contest.

As American as George Washington

By Jonathan Fletcher

Born the citizen of another country, like George Washington, I only became an American later. As did he. But I'm no less proud to be one than him — uniformed in blue wool: the cuffs and lapels of his coat buff in color, his waistcoat and breeches buttoned in gilt. Incomplete without a hanger sword. Every Patriot had one. Mine's my heart.
That's American.

Raised by a single mother, as was Washington, I celebrate mine. I celebrate Mary Ball Washington. And the five children she raised in the British colony of Virginia. And a country big enough for families of every size, makeup. Partners with children. Or none. Or ones from a previous relationship. As were George's and Martha's. I celebrate it all.
That's American.

Though baptized as an infant, gifted religious books as a child, like Washington, I attend no house of worship regularly. But I still think, as he did, in terms of the numinous, the ineffable, the sacred. Yet, like him, respect those whose ideas of them differ from mine. Or who hold none. And surround myself with such diversity, count such company as a positive, a blessing.
That's American.

Witness to turbulent, transitional times, a participant, too, I, like, Washington, try to learn, let my actions be changed through experience. Though none so dramatic as his evolution on slavery — hastened by seeing Black Patriots fight the Redcoats, his bond with William Lee, Phillis Wheatley, all of which moved him to finally free his slaves — many of my views, loyalties, have also changed. That's not unpatriotic.
That's American.

Jonathan Fletcher is a graduate student at the Columbia University School of the Arts and the graduate school winner of Picture This Annual Youth Initiative contest.