

Student and Faculty Leaders Emphasize Political Discourse Leading Up to Election

News - Eric Bollar '22

With this year's Election Day overlapping with the pervasive political tension in our nation as well as COVID-19's massive impact on our daily lives, SHP is taking action to ensure that political discourse remains peaceful in our community.

School principal Dr. Jennie Whitcomb emphasized the importance of peaceful discourse in our community, and how students should not focus on "[trying] to 'win' the debate in class." Instead, she hopes that community discussion will give students "a chance to listen to one another and to share [their] experiences both openly and without a desire to provoke discord." Dr. Whitcomb also detailed one notable action taken to maintain peaceful discourse at SHP, namely "[the updating of] the school's 2018 Peaceful Discourse Pledge to integrate ... language from the Civilize It Pledge," an initiative of the US Council of Catholic Bishops.

Furthermore, Ms. Lauren Benjamin, Assistant Principal of Mission and Culture, who is not only involved in the classroom but also in many student groups, noted how students have been very involved in the Peaceful Discourse Pledge in the past. Ms. Benjamin says that peaceful discourse is about "promoting a ... shared understanding" and that political discourse is "not a game; it's not about taking sides or [being a] winner or loser." Both she and Dr. Whitcomb want to ensure that students realize the impact that these discussions have on others in our community. Trying to belittle those with opposing viewpoints does not align with SHP's goals and values. Ms. Benjamin explains that

everyone's perspectives and experiences are different: "there's multiple truths; there is not one right or wrong answer." SHP faculty members want to encourage everyone to speak their mind while still being mindful of how their words might affect others.

At the student level, different groups and clubs that focus primarily on politics aim to keep civility between students. SURJ, while not a political group, is a new organization this year that aims to create a space for discussion. Anne-Sophie Lacombe '21, a leader of SURJ, listed several rules that the club has implemented for meetings, including that one should "speak from the 'I perspective,' lean into discomfort ... and listen, listen, listen, then speak." These rules for discussion encourage members to actively hear what others with different viewpoints are saying and to build the conversation in a positive way. Similarly, Theodore Purcell '21, a leader of SHPPolitics, states that the significance of peaceful discourse in their club is so vital to them that they "[begin] their first meeting with a discussion ... about it."

Both groups are taking steps towards preventing any unproductive, hostile dialogue. However, both leaders also emphasized the importance of diversity of thought. Anne-Sophie continued by stressing how necessary it is for SURJ to "have different opinions," and how their space is a place designed for one to "[discuss] one's own experiences in a group of people with a similar identity factor." For SHPPolitics, Teddy said that in the current times, "it has never been more important to include students of all

political viewpoints." Overall, the message for both groups is to promote social unity through peaceful discourse while welcoming and even encouraging multiple, diverse viewpoints.

In anticipation of the outcome of the election, SURJ and SHPPolitics are preparing for any candidate to win. Anne-Sophie mentioned providing "safe spaces for people to talk ... and give students the opportunity to connect" while Teddy likewise noted the club's plan to "[allow] open, free flowing discussion about the election." However, the shift to online learning has created many challenges for these groups. Having a club meeting over Zoom is not nearly as engaging or interactive as meeting face to face. Anne-Sophie hopes that "even through Zoom meetings, students will feel like they have a space where they can feel comfortable and accepted." Teddy echoes that "the online format has a significant effect on [their] ability to thrive as a club" as "discussions are always more effective in person." However, the two groups will still seek to engage in insightful conversation despite shifting to an online format.

Both at the student and faculty level, leaders of the SHP community are implementing ways to maintain peaceful discourse between students with differing political views during this tense time leading up to this year's Election Day. While efforts will certainly be focused on the political groups that students can join, peaceful discourse will be prioritized in classroom and extracurricular activities in order to make sure that the community approaches the election in a unified manner.

SHP's Eligible Voters Consider Mail-in Voting

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As Election Day draws near, SHP seniors and faculty are deciding how they are going to vote. Voters have the option to go to the polls or to send their ballot through the mail, and during quarantine, the popularity of the latter has increased drastically. Many individuals at SHP will be using mail-in voting to continue participating in the democratic process in a safe way.

The minimum voting age of 18 years old makes it so that seniors are primarily the only student group to be able to participate in the process. Even so, a large portion of seniors are still under 18. A recent survey sent to the Class of 2021 in which a little less than a third of the grade responded demonstrated that only 27.3% of the seniors met the age requirement. However, all of those eligible are planning on voting this year, a reflection of SHP's effort to increase involvement and knowledge about the voting process.

With regards to the method that will be used to vote, there was barely a discrepancy between students planning to vote in-person versus through mail. Of the 15 surveyed students who are eligible to vote, 8 of them will be voting through mail as opposed to the polls. Given the small sample size, the popularity of voting by mail is on par with voting in person.

Aside from these statistics, students seem to not only trust the mail-in vote, but find it to be a necessary alternative to voting in person. Katie Sandhu '21 states that voting by mail has

"been proven to be a safe and convenient way to exercise your right to vote, especially this year with the pandemic." Ava Borchers '21 agrees, saying that "mail-in voting is a really great and safe alternative to in person voting... if someone [wants] to avoid the risks of in-person voting." The risk of going to the polls during the time of the coronavirus makes mail-in voting a favorable alternative.

The primary issue that the two find with voting by mail is the topic of uncounted votes. Despite these fears, Katie notes that "in the 2016 general election, only 1% of absentee ballots were not counted, mostly due to issues with signatures. If you follow the ballot instructions and mail your vote early, you can feel secure that your vote will be counted." While Ava also finds discrepancies with signatures on mail-in votes to be an issue, she brings up another possible problem of "states [being] very strict on their prerequisites for mail-in voting and absentee voting, which can make it difficult for people who cannot get off work, elderly people, and immunocompromised people to vote." The effects of the coronavirus make mail-in vote a necessity to some, which students say outweighs the negative effects of possible uncounted votes. Overall, the seniors at SHP who are eligible to vote find the mail-in vote to be a safer option in preventing the spread of Covid-19, but many are willing to vote in-person as well.

The faculty members at SHP are also fond

of the mail-in vote and consider it necessary for those who are unable to go to the polls to vote, even before the quarantine. Ms. Serene Williams, who teaches AP Comparative Government, spoke about the importance of "political efficacy," the notion that "if [someone] participates in a political system, they will make a difference." As a result, she votes during every election cycle. However, she talked about the difficulties of being a working mother and how she is always teaching on Election Day, so "the last several years [she has] voted through mail." In fact, she is registered as a "permanent absentee voter" in order to always receive the ballot by mail. According to Ms. Williams, mail-in voting is a convenient alternative for those with busy schedules who are unable to go to the polls.

Despite the increase in mail-in voting, the polls are still open. While Ms. Williams herself is unable to work at the polls, many SHP students and alumni will be. In her 12 years as a teacher at SHP, Ms. Williams has seen a "huge increase in civic engagement" from students at SHP, and "a lot of [her] students will be working at the voter centers this year."

For both the seniors and faculty members at SHP, the mail-in vote is a viable and popular alternative to voting at the polls, especially with the current impact of Covid-19, and allows students to become involved in the democratic process in a safe manner.