

COMMENTARY

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'Choice voting' gives students representation, reason to vote

Guest commentary

With student government elections under way, young people across the country are being asked to vote for student representatives. But many times this plea is answered with a more difficult question: "Why should I vote? It doesn't count."

While sometimes seen as a sign of apathetic young people or a lament about the limited powers of student governments, examining this statement can reveal a deeper political problem. One of the basic ideas of democracy, that the people vote and then receive representation, is not being realized by the current political system. Rather than expressing apathy, students are being realistic about how much impact their vote has.

Under the current winner-take-all plurality voting system used in most U.S. elections, a candidate who wins a bare 51 percent majority can receive 100 percent of the representation. As many as 49 percent of votes do not lead to a voice in government. For these people, their votes do not count.

But a new political reform idea gaining momentum on college campuses can ensure that all votes count and all voters are represented. Choice voting, a form of full representation, was passed overwhelmingly last month by the Associated Students of University of California-Davis. Instead of just marking one candidate on the ballot, the system allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. These preferences are then used to award seats. If there are 10 seats to be filled, a candidate needs the support of about a tenth of students to win a seat. If there are five seats, a candidate will win with the support of 20 percent of students.

Choice voting dramatically increases the chance that a ballot will lead to representation. If a smaller group of like-minded voters prefer a candidate, they can win at least one seat. Also, if a voter's first choice is not strong enough to win, their second choice is considered. Ranking candidates ensures that more than 90 percent of ballots lead directly to representation when electing 10 seats.

This is significant for student governments, where elections are often dominated by a particular campus group. The winner-take-all system allows a dominant group to win a vast majority of seats. Under choice voting, smaller student groups can consolidate their support and win representation. The typical result is a more diverse student government representing more views.

Harvard, Princeton, University of Illinois, Carleton College and Vassar all use choice voting or another form of full representation. Even more schools use instant runoff voting. On the international scene, the United States and Canada are the only major democracies still using winner-take-all exclusively for national elections, and nearly all British universities elect student government personnel with choice voting.

While the low voter turnout of 18-24-year-olds in national elections is seen as a crisis, these numbers are just as compelling in student elections. Each spring, there is usually an article or editorial about whether student government elections really matter. But under the winner-take-all electoral system, student governments don't represent enough of the students, and therefore, students don't vote.

Implementing choice voting and providing representation to all students would help reverse this trend. Winning a seat at the table is a powerful incentive to care about the decisions made there.

A recent graduate of the University of Iowa, John Russell is the student outreach coordinator at the Center for Voting and Democracy. For more information, visit <http://www.fairvote.org/schools/studhome.htm>.



Peter Utsey Emerald

Recounting the past

There will be no talk of war for me today because it is my birthday. I'm 26 today, and I can't help but think about the road that has gotten me here and the people who have helped to shape who I am. My birthday wish is to remember those times and people and how I've got where I am.

I look at myself and wonder about how I came to be the loud-mouthed columnist that you have come to know and love. Truth be told, I was the closed-mouth, shy girl who sat in the back of the classroom in her frilly dress and Mary Jane shoes. I was the girl whom most people never noticed. I was the girl who excelled in academics but wasn't very social. In short, I was the little girl most of us were.

Then came my time to blossom. I remember it distinctly: My mom came to my room and said she'd entered me in a beauty pageant. I thought it was a joke because my self-confidence was lacking. Even though my parents constantly told me to go for the gold, and to follow my dreams, I never thought I was good enough. Well, thanks to the Irish stubbornness of my mother and the fabulous person she is, I competed and became a finalist.



Salena DeLaCruz
Say it loud

After that first taste, I entered three more times and was slowly pulled from my shell of shyness and low self-worth. I was beginning to feel like somebody. After that I wanted to join everything; I wanted to do it all. That was my first step to independence and my own identity.

My eighth grade English teacher, Mrs. Halter, sparked my interest in writing and made me strive for greatness. She told me I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. She took each student and treated him or her as an important individual, not just a number. Oh, but that was only a taste of what I was looking for.

My freshman year in high school, I joined our newspaper and yearbook staff and was sucked into the vortex of writing and taking pictures. These were always my hobbies — but to do it as a job? It didn't stop there, oh no.

My sophomore year in high school, my drama teacher pulled what was left of me out of my shell by giving me the opportunity to lead students in our yearly "spookhouse" and direct student plays. I never looked back. I loved the spotlight.

Then my fatal downfall: I fell in love my junior year in high school, and nothing else seemed to matter. I could have attended the Art Institute of Seattle, but he wanted me to stay with him. He made me believe I wasn't good enough for him, and he was doing me a favor by staying with me. He made me believe I couldn't make it through college.

I became afraid of being alone, of being

without him. So, I didn't go; in fact, I waited three years before I made it back to school and even longer to get out of the shell he had shoved me back into.

In May of 1997, my younger brother was troubled by all of the "no skateboarding and rollerblading" signs and went to the city council for a solution. They told him they'd agree to get a skate park made in Molalla if he came up with a proposal.

My brother, then 14, didn't know what to do, so I stepped in. That month, I established a non-profit organization whose primary mission was to build a skate park. The park opened June 24, 2000.

I got involved because I saw a lot of myself in my little brother — I could see a great drive in him, a drive that at one time I was too afraid to follow through on, a drive that will propel him to do what he wants with his life and not let anyone hold him back. Way to go, Tim!

It might take a lifetime for most people to know even half of this information. I'm telling my story so everyone might stop and think of the people and circumstances that put us all where we are. Regardless of whether times were good or bad, they were defining moments. Had it not been for all the twists and turns in my life, I wouldn't be here, "Saying it loud."

Contact the columnist at salenadelacruz@dailyemerald.com. Her opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

ASUO elections letter policy

Letters to the editor endorsing candidates in the ASUO election are encouraged. Endorsement letters are limited to 200 words, and authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Candidates may not send letters endorsing their own candidacy, although they may endorse others. Letters will be printed on a first-come, first-serve basis and publication is not guaranteed. Letters must be received by 3 p.m. Wednesday, April 16, to be considered for publication. Submissions must include phone number for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.

Online poll

Each week, the Emerald publishes the previous week's poll results and the coming week's poll question. Visit www.dailyemerald.com to vote.

Last week: Do you plan to vote in the ASUO elections?

Results: 67 total votes

Yes — 58.2 percent, or 39 votes

No — 31.3 percent, or 21 votes

What elections? — 10.4 percent, or 7 votes

This week: What holiday will you be celebrating this Sunday?

Choices: Easter; 420; Both; Neither; What's 420?; Leave me alone!