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During the final week of the 2020 election, I barely slept. I was constantly checking news updates and anxiously watching states flip between red and blue. In particular, I was paying extremely close attention to swing states such as Pennsylvania and Georgia, because they would turn the tide of this election. When PA's electoral votes were finalized, I felt relief wash over me, and my interest in why the state swung democratic grew. I had a hunch that young voters in Pittsburgh played a crucial role in PA's flip.

Voter turnout for young adults has increased by more than 10% since the 2016 election. According to Pew Research Center, in 2020, 41% of people who attended protests during the BLM movement were between the ages of 18-29, despite only making up 19% of the total US population. These statistics demonstrate how younger populations are increasingly becoming involved in politics.

When I consider what I would like to change in the world, it would be to foster political activism in young people. I want activism to be a pillar in all lives and I believe schools should play a role in facilitating this. My activism began when I became interested in policies surrounding college affordability, leading me to Bernie Sanders' solutions and immersing myself in his campaign and politics in general. It only took a small spark to ignite my political activism and I believe everyone should have this chance. As a member of [COUNTY] Young Democrats, I have debated, phone banked, organized protests, and worked on educating myself and other students in order to create change within our own school and society.

Lack of information is what prevents students from being involved, because they are unaware of what is going on in the world. Exposing students to political realities at a young age will encourage them to become informed and engaged citizens, who will take up activism on their own. I believe schools should develop policies that encourage teachers to lead political discussions and normalize politics in school.

Social issues such as immigration, abortion, and racial justice are often viewed as political topics, and therefore silenced in schools. However, by politicizing these important matters, we hinder the ability for people to have these conversations normally. Bringing "taboo" political issues into the classroom would help normalize conversation about these topics.

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To accomplish this, schools need to update their curriculums to incorporate modern material like social issues, current events, and local politics. During junior year, my AP Language class did this really well by linking Fredrick Douglass' autobiography to the vestiges of slavery in modern America. This quickly became my favorite class because it wove together the past and present. For example, we discussed how the church has been a source of both oppression and refuge for black communities in the context of the Charleston church shooting and Douglass's narrative.

In my vision to change the world, I would train teachers to lead discussions in a non-partisan way. In this environment, students would learn about the different perspectives that surround an issue. I would also dedicate at least thirty minutes of class time each week to teaching current events for all grade levels. Even 30 minutes could inspire a previously disengaged student to become an activist about an issue that they would not otherwise be exposed to. If schools were able to adopt some of these changes into their curriculum, I know that students would become more motivated to fight for the issues they believe in.

Schools not only need to provide the resources for education, but also give students the freedom to go out on their own and get involved. To do this, schools should allow 5 excused absences per semester so that students can participate in town halls, rallies, and protests. An absence policy like this was implemented in my county, which excused students (one day a year) for civic engagement. This was particularly beneficial during summer 2020, when there were many BLM protests. My county took a step in the right direction, but one day per school year does not capture the actual time needed to be an activist. The policy I'm proposing would allow students to be activists without having to sacrifice their education. If schools nationwide adopted these policies, I believe the next generation of students will be even more empathetic, and create an impact on the world around them.