



BENNINGTON COLLEGE

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Bennington Community,

Today as Americans are voting throughout the country, I find myself thinking back to last year's election and the attempt on January 6 to overturn the results. We came face to face with a deeply serious threat to our democracy.

The Bennington community [has been reflecting](#) on the January 6 insurrection in a class led by Brian Campion and Susan Sgorbati at CAPA where students and community members have met with our congressman Peter Welch, who was at the Capital that day, as well as historians.

One thing is for sure. College students and young people are more important than ever, especially as this country grapples with what happened and as we ask ourselves whether it was an aberration or the beginning of the unraveling of our nation.

Many have underestimated college students' commitment to voting as a vehicle for change. But students here at Bennington and all around the country are stepping up to make their voices heard.

According to a new study on college students and voting—[Democracy Counts 2020](#)—sixty-six percent of college students voted in the 2020 election, up 14 percentage points from 2016. The increase brought the voting rate of college students nearly in line with the rest of the population.

The survey, which was conducted by Tufts University and The Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, found the sharpest increase among the youngest voters, ages 18 to 21, many of whom were voting for the first time in last year's presidential race.

This is hugely important to the health—perhaps the survival—of our democracy, at both the local and national level. Activism at the polls is critical to thwarting efforts to restrict access to voting, to climate protections, and as we have seen this year, to even what teachers can teach in public schools.

As most of you know, every movement for social justice in this country has been fueled by student activism. Students and young people joined civil rights leaders to demand the franchise in the south. Students led the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War era. And more recently, from Occupy Wall Street, to rallies and marches following the murders of Michael Brown in St. Louis and George Floyd in Minneapolis, students played a significant role.

A piece in the [New York Times](#) yesterday points out that while our political culture is more nationalized than ever, local elections are also critically important. In many cases, local elections allow us to go beyond the political divide to find issues that we share, regardless of our party affiliation. In other cases, young voices can make a real difference where some are trying to use the ballot to put in place restrictive voting laws or state legislatures are trying to limit a woman's right to choose. Even local school board elections are important as some localities try to limit what can be taught in public schools.

Democracy, many have reminded us, is hard work. Changes in voting because of the pandemic made it easier for many to vote remotely. But registration drives were still critically important. The report found that a remarkable 80 percent of the students who were registered cast a ballot.

We live in a highly contested and difficult time. Civic engagement is at a record low. But I do believe that there's hope for change given how engaged young people are throughout the country. Political engagement and fighting for social justice has long been a part of Bennington life. But just as importantly we are seeing this at colleges across the country.

It is easy to be cynical about the political system in the country right now. But the best antidote to cynicism is activism. Voting is more than a tactic. It is a way to organize people, to create enthusiasm for change, to rally people around causes that matter and most importantly to get people to turnout for issues that matter to them.

We live at a time where local and national issues are woven together—climate change, equity, abortion and voting rights, among others. Organizing around the vote is about creating a movement that ultimately can win significant policy change but perhaps even more importantly protect an already frail democracy from people and forces that are committed to undermining the institutions that so many young people—and others—have fought for.

Laura Walker