

Abortion and Gun Violence Dominate U.S. College Students' Election Choices

In the hotly contested midterm elections, college students are walking a fine line between political party interests and social issues. Nothing will stop them.

By Mathias Ssemanda

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Devan Ghai (Left) and his colleague at a voter educators booth at Penn State's HUB-Robeson Center

Americans across the fifty states went to the polls on Tuesday, 8th November 2022, to determine who will take control of Congress in one of the most contested midterm elections in the United States. History has already been made in various states, including the election to the senate of the first Gen Z representative. The election of Maxwell Alejandro, who will represent Florida's Orlando area, is not a mistake but projects the rise to the occasion of this group of Americans whose voices have only been limited to

TikTok and other social media applications. In colleges across the United States, it was seemingly straightforward: young voters have chosen to represent their interests, not what political parties stand for.

Pennsylvania State University launched a voter campaign that charged up students in the run to the poll day, and it was through this campaign, dubbed PSU Votes, that many students requested mail-in ballots. Many stormed polling stations on voting day to cast their votes. Tim Balliett, 50, Penn State's Director of the Center for Character Conscience and Public Purpose, was leading a team of voter educators stationed at HUB-Robeson Center, the only voting area on the University Park campus. "It's one of the most important duties we have as citizens," Mr. Balliett said on why he thinks voting is essential. Balliet, who used to be Penn State's Ethics Officer, confirmed with this newspaper that voter turnout at Penn State has been increasing in the previous years, with a 38% turnout in the 2018 midterms and a 68% turnout in the 2020 presidential elections. In this election, there is an expected sharp increase in college student voter turnout across the United States because issues like abortion, gun violence, and climate change have increasingly dominated public discourse among young Americans.

Voters interviewed by this newspaper on poll day unanimously agreed that the previous decisions by political institutions, including political parties and the Supreme Court, have influenced their reasons for voting. The reversal of *Roe v. Wade* did not go well with most college students, and Penn State, one of the largest and most diverse campuses in the United States, clearly painted a picture of what other college students are voting on. Hannah Sontag, 19, who voted for the first time, says the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* pushed her to vote, and to show her determination to defend her rights, she voted early through Mail-in. "I voted to preserve the right to abortion and to choose what happens to my body," Hannah Sontag emphasized why she voted for democratic party candidates Shapiro and Fetterman. Sontag hinted at gun violence and climate change and rebuked politicians that have made it a habit to promote climate change denialism. "I also think climate change is a big issue. We need stricter gun laws and protect the environment". Hannah Sontag is a member of the Penn State College Democrats and an organizer who was at the HUB-Robeson Center to direct voters to the voting booth.

Parents across the United States played a vital role in encouraging their college-going children to vote. It was not different at Penn State, where many students who voted early were encouraged by their parents or the university's PSU Votes campaign. Ms. Kali

Mashayekhi, 20, a major in Psychology, says her parents encouraged her. "Though they live in Los Angeles, they encouraged me to vote. I changed my location to Pennsylvania and now vote here. Asked about the issues she voted on, Mashayekhi said, "I just do not like Dr. Oz. I like helping people and feel republicans aren't doing that"

Whereas the number of college student voters increased compared to previous elections, many young voters did not turn up on the poll day for many reasons. Devan Ghai, 21, a 4th-year undergraduate majoring in Mathematics, did not vote despite being a voter educator at HUB-Robeson center. Asked why he was involved in directing voters and was unwilling to cast his ballot, Ghai said, "I do not believe in it. We can make the world better, but I do not believe that is how it should be done" Ghai seemed to imply that elected officials do not necessarily advocate for transformation and change. Ghai later revealed that he was doing this voter education as community service from a court judgment in a misdemeanor whose details cannot be revealed for the interviewee's privacy.

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