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Start Changing the World by Voting

By Paulina Sosa

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Second grade teacher Laura Vasquez helps students sign in during Kids Vote at Pena Elementary in Brownsville.

Photo: Brad Doherty, Associated Press /The Brownsville Herald

The debates and disagreements between the Republican and Democratic Party are more divisive and aggressive than ever. Now is the perfect time to be politically engaged, yet not enough people are voting, speaking out or even staying educated on the issues.

The times have changed significantly since the 19th and 20th centuries when people of all backgrounds and ages were advocates in historic movements,

such as women's suffrage and the civil rights movements.

We now live in a society where politics has become solely a game of rhetoric and name-calling. A divided arena that is unmoved by calls for collaboration and synergy.

The middle and lower-class groups of our nation have become a focal point in today's politics because, simply put, they are the biggest demographic and a growing voice in our country. But we still need to see more people — especially young people — from these groups become politically engaged.

I was born and raised in Brownsville. Despite the high level of poverty in the city, most people I talked to were passively disgruntled at the political system rather than engaged, educated and active. Most could not even name their city's mayor.

But I realized that the reason for such low civic engagement was not because of the city's poverty level, education system, or even the lack of economic growth and opportunity. It was because of the people's lack of confidence in the system. This led to utter apathy — especially among most of the youth in economically challenged communities across the country.

Political apathy is most prevalent in the country's younger demographic, about 18 to 30 years of age — otherwise known as the Millennial Generation. I realized that understanding the reason behind this apathy is crucial to improving political engagement. When looking into the underlying cause of political disengagement, there are a number of factors to consider: They did not grow up in a politically engaged home, were not educated on the impact policy had on them as individuals, or did not understand how they could make a difference.

When asked, most people tell me they don't want to bother with politics because they feel their voices do not matter to their elected officials.

They believe that because they don't have a lot of money or power their voices wouldn't make any difference. And it is this very misconception that prolongs the cycle of apathy and low voter turnout from this demographic, leaving elected officials less aware of their opinions and concerns.

Disillusionment and corruption have caused apathy in the majority of our country's low socioeconomic communities and in our country's young population. Too many people claim they do not have the power, the money, or the voice to make any real impact or change in politics. But the good news is that we all truly do have the power to make a change. If we are the future, we can determine what the political system will look like. And you can start by voting this election.

Every person needs to realize that elected officials' purpose is to properly represent their constituents. If voters, specifically the 18-30 year old voting bloc, realize their

potential voice and follow their civic duty to vote and be politically engaged, then elected officials will more properly represent their constituency. This is how the cycle of apathy will change.

I believe that if the millenials become more politically engaged, our elected officials will more highly regard our voice. This hope requires an integrated and cohesive effort among the community, elected officials and universities.

The University of Texas at Austin (UT) is home to a diverse student body from all different backgrounds, communities, and socio-economic levels. As a student in the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) program at UT, the goal of which is to educate citizen scholars, I know voting and being engaged are powerful examples of how we can “leverage our knowledge for social good.” So my challenge to everyone, no matter what your story may be, is to vote, be civically engaged, and voice your opinions to your elected officials. The Millenial Generation is the future. It is up to us to decide what our future will look like. Remember: “What starts here changes the world.”