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### We Are Not Too Young to Begin Now

The current political climate in America runs deep with polarization and tribalism. The nation's youth faces a formidable task, for it is easy to turn a blind eye towards the problems threatening democracy and many of us have not been exposed to civic discourse in a constructive way, if at all. To mitigate or avoid events like January 6th, we must instill stronger values of citizenship, engage in more productive dialogue and habits regarding political opinions.

From my experience in Piedmont, there is a lack of appreciation for public service in my generation. It is more indifference than disrespect; after all, the value of citizenship and our policy making processes are taught for only one semester as part of a required Civics class. Instilling this value will increase respect for public service, our political system, and it will also reinforce the importance of civic participation. For a strong democracy to function, voter participation is crucial, and understanding the value of citizenship will increase the chance of voting, as well as the likelihood of encouraging others to vote. During the last national election, I wrote letters for people all across the country urging them to vote. I saw firsthand how ubiquitous abstention is: the people I appealed to came from many different backgrounds, races, ethnicities and political affiliations. My generation must better understand the value of citizenship, encouraging each other to participate in civic discourse and politics, furnacing the engine of democracy.

Solving the issue of polarization requires a societal shift in how we interact with one another and how we form our own beliefs. School is the perfect medium to mitigate the hostility caused by differences of political opinion that led to violence. Class and group discussions should reinforce open-mindedness and respect. The distinction between having respect for

expressing one's opinion without necessarily agreeing with the said opinion cannot be overstated. Common ground can always be found and students need educators and community support to make sure that these skills are practiced in the classroom as often as possible. Piedmont is not immune; a majority liberal community where I have observed many students reluctant, even unwilling, to hear different points of view. What my generation can do is to engage in discussions to learn and understand rather than debate and score points, striving to find common ground and collaborative solutions.

It is also important to think critically about our own opinions. With politics enmeshed in social media, confirmation bias and echo chambers prevent exposure to differing viewpoints -- the bane of democracy. We also should challenge the policy beliefs of our politicians, regardless if one supports them or not. We have all seen what can happen when the many blindly follow the one. Supporting ideals instead of specific politicians will counter tribalism and polarization.

The events of January 6th are a warning to my generation, but with an improved culture of civic participation and productive discourse, encompassing respect and critical thinking, we can strengthen the bonds of democracy for future generations.