

Bill Nemitz: This is what teen democracy looks like

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Just when I needed it most, my faith in the future of our democracy got a boost last week.

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No, it wasn't the latest round of polling data. Nor was it the presidential debate that, lo and behold, actually turned out to be a debate. (Nice job, moderator Kristen Welker.)

It came from a group of teenagers.

"I'm going to be honest here," Finn Veerkamp, an 18-year-old senior at the Waldorf School in Freeport, told me in a phone interview. "Part of the pitch is, 'You miss school! You make money!'"

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He was talking about serving as an election worker, which he'll do for the third time come Nov. 3. And rest assured that his interest extends far beyond the break from the classroom and the \$12-an-hour, minimum-wage paycheck.

"Those are two things that appeal to a lot of people that may not be as interested (in election work)," Veerkamp said. "And it's sort of a clever trick because then, once they're there, there's the opportunity to be like, 'Oh, this is actually very cool work.'"

Veerkamp is an organizer of [Youthwork Makes the Boothwork](#), one of those innovations that makes you wonder, "Why haven't we been doing this all along?"

It's the brainchild of Emanuel Pariser, a longtime Maine educator who currently serves as a consultant for the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences in Hinckley. It came to him while pondering the impact the COVID-19 pandemic might have on the presidential election – particularly when it comes to poll workers who are typically older and thus more susceptible to the coronavirus.

"It just struck me what a perfect opportunity for teenagers – who are the lowest-risk group and also the lowest-turnout group for voting – to kind of play an important role in our democracy," Pariser said.

During the summer, Pariser formed a planning committee made up of fellow educators and approached the Maine League of Women Voters, which already was hard at work registering high-school-age voters. Once word got out about an effort to take that up a notch and actually help run the election, Veerkamp and four other high schoolers stepped up to form a steering committee and, they hope, infuse new blood into a system that sorely needs it.

“Don’t blame it on the pandemic,” Secretary of State Matt Dunlap, who recently met with the group via Zoom, said in an interview last week. “This has been a systemic problem for a long time. There’s a lack of poll workers – and that’s why you’ve seen polling places being consolidated over and over and over again. They just don’t have the people to staff them.”

The jobs are many. In addition to checking off voters’ names and handing them their ballots, a typical polling place needs people to direct traffic, help with the voting machines and, now more than ever, constantly sanitize the voting booths.

Then there’s the flood of absentee ballots that need to be processed before they are actually counted after the polls close. Marshwood High school senior Vivian Burnham, 17, of South Berwick, will train for that task on Monday.

“It’s something that really matters a lot to me,” Burnham said. “I seek to be kind of an example to other young people to do this kind of work, to kind of build the next generation of people who are interested in being civically engaged.”

Election workers must be registered voters. Maine’s minimum age to register is 17, although one needs to be 18 to vote in a general election. Seventeen-year-olds can vote in a primary if they’ll turn 18 before the general election.

Emma Haims won’t turn 17 until December. But that’s not stopping her from getting involved now – while she’s too young to work at the polls, she’ll spend parts of the coming days canvassing some of Maine’s 503 municipalities for the League of Women Voters to see what they need as the Election Day fast approaches.

Haims, a junior at the Waldorf School in Freeport, has nothing but admiration for the veteran election workers who have been at it for 20, 30, even 40 years and beyond.

“It really does show that there are some people who are really passionate about it,” she said. “And that’s inspiring.”

How far Youthwork Makes the Boothwork can go in reshaping Maine’s elections remains to be seen – organizers haven’t had time yet to gauge how many visits to their website have actually connected Maine teens with their local voting places.

But to founder Pariser, this is only the beginning. He envisions a time when students might receive academic credit for working at the polls – what better way to learn how democracy works than to actually do it?

“There is something very special about working that day,” Pariser said. “The work itself is kind of rote and repetitive, but what the process is a part of is so critical.”

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Finn Veerkamp, the senior from Freeport, already knows that better than most his age. He registered to vote last January and, when the presidential primary arrived in March, helped organize a plan at his school so eligible seniors could go to the polls in small waves to vote and then stick around for an hour to observe and help out.

Veerkamp went on to work the polls at the state primary election in July and will be back at it next week because that’s his future on that ballot. Or, as he put it, “We have the most stock in any election because we’ll be living with it for the rest of our lives.”

Besides, it’s actually fun. Veerkamp has been struck so far by how upbeat people are when they come to the polls, how something about participating in an election seems to put a little more spring in their step.

“The little interactions you get to have with people are fantastic,” he said. “Regardless of party or anything, everyone seems in the moment to be happy to be there, happy to engage in conversation.”

Not bad for 12 bucks an hour, huh?

“Frankly,” replied Veerkamp, “I’d do it for free.”

Someone should clone that kid.

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