

Facing the future: the 2024 presidential election

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Ceci Heinen talks to University of Minnesota experts to tackle election worries, focusing on how voting affects human rights and democracy, stressing the need for reliable news sources, and the importance of students taking part in the democratic process.

CECI HEINEN: Hello everyone! My name is Ceci Heinen from the Minnesota Daily, and you are listening to In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

Like many of my fellow Gen Zers, I have been feeling very apprehensive and honestly despondent about this upcoming election. I've spent too much time worrying about "what ifs." Such as, "what if this candidate wins and this happens? But what if the other candidate wins and *this* happens?" It's a never-ending cycle. To quell my worries and confusion about the first presidential election in which many of us students will ever vote, I spoke to three UMN experts from different fields to get their take.

Carrie Booth Walling, head of the Human Rights Program and a faculty member in the Institute of Global Studies here at the University of Minnesota, outlined how our votes can directly impact our human rights and the rights of others outside the United States.

CARRIE BOOTH WALLING: Voting is a vehicle. It's a way to protect all of our other rights. The people that we elect and the decisions they make have really dramatic implications in terms of our daily lives and the policies they promote. The laws that they either support or repeal have impacts on whether our rights are protected, or whether they expand or whether they retract.

And also because the United States is so influential around the world, the people that we elect and the decisions they make about our rights also have global significance because other countries watch what we do. We can either help promote and legitimize human rights and democracy elsewhere, or we can lead to the discrediting of it.

HEINEN: Booth Walling also explained the exact rights that are on the ballot this election, which could impact us directly here in Minnesota.

BOOTH WALLING: I think of right to climate and the environment, healthy and sustainable environment, LGBTQ+ rights. So a whole set of rights around equality and access to health care, women's gender equality and women's reproductive rights, or reproductive rights for people who can get pregnant, are on the ballot. Access to health care.

We live here in our own community. This is one of the largest refugee resettlement communities in the United States and so immigration and our policies around protecting

refugees and refugee resettlement. Those things matter for our neighbors and for many of the students on the campus.

HEINEN: Another human right that is on the ballot is one guaranteed to us by the First Amendment: the right to a free press. Gayle Golden, a senior lecturer at the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication, shared her concerns regarding a potential second term under former President Trump and what it could mean for the journalism industry.

GAYLE GOLDEN: If you go back to the Trump administration, when you're talking about kind of the challenges to free speech, the challenges to journalism, the challenges to kind of the truth and what this country was really facing during that time. I think if we have another Trump administration, those challenges are going to be magnified.

And so I'm really concerned as a journalist about what happens if we reelect or if Donald Trump wins the election. Really this isn't a partisan issue so much as it is just really looking at kind of the character of the president and also his agenda.

What Trump wants to achieve from a policy standpoint, there may be things that I might regard from his policy platform that might be reasonable, but I, as a journalist, have a difficult time having a conversation around that because of the tactics that he uses to get there. I don't think that, you know, that it's helpful in a republic, in a democracy, to have a leader who is constantly relying on the spread of lies and the denigration of a free press to, to govern. And I think that's the danger that we're in.

HEINEN: In the face of this kind of danger Golden fears, it can be easy to turn off the news or shut off our phones and try to forget about the struggles of those in other countries. It's tempting to believe that far-away conflicts will not affect us. However, history has shown that not to be true.

BOOTH WALLING: I would say that our human rights are best protected when the human rights of other people are also protected because some of the biggest crises we're facing, like immigration and refugee crisis, are people fleeing from these conflict zones and fleeing from authoritarian regimes. And so if we want to address an issue like immigration, for example, part of addressing underlying causes is making sure that we are voting for and supporting a world in which human rights, democracy and rule of law are protected and conflict is diminished.

HEINEN: Issues at the top of everyone's minds are the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, as well as Israel and Palestine. According to Booth Walling, there are as many as 20 areas around the world right now where mass human rights violations are happening. As a human rights specialist, she shared her insights on how to find a candidate whose policies and views will help defuse conflicts and ensure human rights for all.

BOOTH WALLING: What are their views about the rule of law about democracy, about human rights and the role that that needs to play in foreign policy? And so when you look at the candidates, I think you need to take seriously both their political platforms, but also the statements that they make about whether or not they support allies. Whether they want to be members of NATO, for example, and want to protect the idea that governments should not be invading other governments, right?

And whether or not candidates will support coordination and collaboration with other countries because many of these problems cannot be solved by a single state and require global engagement, often through the United Nations. And so are the candidates supportive of the United Nations? Will they follow the guide of international courts and tribunals as in both? The Ukraine case and the Israel Palestine case. International courts are investigating mass atrocity crimes.

HEINEN: Now that we know what is at stake in this election, where can we start to find information about the candidates? Finding the right sources can be challenging, especially for Gen Z, who grew up in the era of social media. Golden shared information from a recent Pew Research study that more and more adults under 30 are regularly getting their news from TikTok.

GOLDEN: I get TikTok. I understand the value and interest of TikTok. It's fun. Okay, but the reality is that if you're predominantly getting your news from TikTok, you are at risk of getting news that is not that reliable. Some of it might be, but some of it might not be.

So you have to become a discerning consumer of news. And so is this, is this a TikTok video that's produced off of a credible news source? Is this vetted? Can you trust it? Or is this something that is mostly just designed to give you a very surface understanding of something that you're really not going to be able to get deeply informed from?

HEINEN: Friends my age often stray toward easily accessible sources of news such as Instagram, Apple News and X, formerly known as Twitter. Although finding well researched and reliable sources of information can be much easier said than done. Luckily, the experts provided some valuable advice and recommendations.

BOOTH WALLING: So one of the best resources students can use if they want independent verified information is the League of Women Voters. They're independent, nonpartisan, they do research on the candidates and on issues, and you can go to their website. They have an easy access one called vote411.org And you can find your voting location. You can see your sample ballot. You can see every race and the candidates and what their positions are.

And if they're interested in learning about human rights and voting, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International also have online voter guides that help students think about the kinds of questions they might ask and the kinds of positions that they're looking for.

And an exciting project, the human rights program is working on with our excellent student researchers this summer is we're producing a voter toolkit, which will have step by step guides on how students actually vote and what their rights are in Minnesota, but also human rights lens on local, state and federal issues.

And TurboVote, students can sign up and they can get text messages reminding them about when and where to vote, getting an absentee ballot if they need one. The great thing about the state of Minnesota is you can do same day voter registration.

HEINEN: Christopher Phelan from the Economics Department said that students can access comprehensive information regarding the ever-complex and daunting economy, something that's always on the ballot. His biggest piece of advice was simply to take an economics course!

CHRISTOPHER PELAN: Honestly, I think what we do is good. I think we teach useful stuff, but in general, reading up on economics is actually not a, it's not a waste of time. Reading, I don't know, the general mainstream. That's another thing that's true. I mean, they try to talk about, you know, there's these right wing economists and left wing economists. We're not that far from each other. There's things that we generally agree on.

HEINEN: He also gave some tips on where to find resources if taking an econ course is not written in the stars for you.

PHELAN: I go straight to the statistics. Like there's something called FRED, the Federal Reserve Economic Data, which is wonderful. If you want to read popular stuff on, actually no, econ Twitter is not bad. If you, you know, if you actually look at the, who's writing it and see, "is this person actually a professor somewhere?" And not just some nut case. It's not bad to get a range of views.

HEINEN: For me, the best advice came from the journalist of the group, Golden, who has extensive experience with finding credible sources and had some inspirational advice for college students when it comes to voting.

GOLDEN: Well, look, the reality is, first off, my main tip is play off of your passion and don't be afraid of your passion. Right now, young voters have a lot of passion, okay. Young people are probably the biggest asset that this country has.

And nobody wants to squelch that. You need to understand that if you feel passionate about something that is power and not voting is a way of giving up your power, right? So I know we're getting maybe a little ahead of ourselves, but I would say channel your passion to becoming informed.

Read stories, follow the news, because if you do, it becomes a story that you become more interested in. After a few days of coverage, you'll start to see, "Oh, I get it. I get the story and how it's unfolding. I get the players. They don't seem like foreign names to me now. These issues seem like they're tracking."

HEINEN: Now that we know what we are facing and how to find sources to inform our votes, I asked the professors who have voted in many presidential elections a question that is common among us students: why is it important for college students to vote? Especially when a good chunk of us feel discouraged about the election.

GOLDEN: I think this is a critically important election and to turn away from it just because it's confusing or discouraging or because the men are old, and because it doesn't feel like there's a good choice there on its face. I don't see that as a useful or helpful choice by anybody. I think we really have no choice, but to lean in. That's my view.

None of this is going to be served up for you automatically, in an easy to digest format that is suddenly going to pop into your brain and make it all very super simple for you to make a decision. I'm not sure why anyone would expect that. Having, you know, a democracy and a free republic is hard work by every person who lives in it.

And students are privileged to be able to have the critical thinking capacities, the time and the ability to go and do the work to get involved and to, and to lean into this. And I think that we have the privilege of having a, you know, hardworking journalists that make this information available to them. So I would say you have a great opportunity to do that.

HEINEN: Although voting can be confusing, it also motivates and brings joy to many. It can be easy to forget how lucky we are to have a vote in the first place. We take for granted the ability to have a say in our government and fight for what we believe is right, not every country has this level of freedom.

For example, in Eritrea, not a single election has been held since the country gained independence twenty years ago. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), Eritrea has no freedom of expression, opinion and faith. It is also important to note that many countries around the world that hold elections still put up barriers to women's votes.

Afghanistan, for example, [made it mandatory for photos to be taken of all voters at polling stations](#). This was an issue for women in more conservative areas who cover their faces outside the home and cannot show their faces to men outside their families. Some think this mandatory photo was put in place to discourage women from voting. Hearing these examples of people who lack a voice in their countries' governments reminds us of how fortunate we are to have and exercise the right to vote.

BOOTH WALLING: Yeah, I think it's a great honor to be able to participate in the election. And so for first time voters, I hope that they'll be excited about the right and the opportunity to vote, even if they're not as enthusiastic about the candidates. I think part of how we get different candidates is by showing up to vote and influencing the process as much as we can.

I think voting is just one of many ways to use our voices and to exercise our rights. I also think it's a way that we claim power and that if we refuse to claim our power, then someone else will claim it for us and those someone else will make those decisions. We actually have not only a constitutional right to vote, but the right to vote itself is a human right. So the right to participate in the governance of your country.

HEINEN: For others, the idea of voting inspires less excitement and more a strong sense of duty and responsibility the way Phelan feels.

PHELAN: Lots of people have sacrificed a lot in the past to give me a say in my government. And so I treat it as a moral obligation. And that's really the only way you can, I think, that you can justify voting. It's the right thing to do.

It's your responsibility. We have a lot of times, we tell young people, "This is your right, that is your right." And usually we're right. This is your right or that is your right. We don't talk enough about, "You should do this costly thing because it's your responsibility."

HEINEN: Young people may get sick of hearing, "You are the future," and the like from those older than us. I know I do. It's a lot of pressure being the future. Feeling as though we must make the right decision for us 20 years from now, and those younger than us. Feeling like we were dealt a bad hand to begin with. However, Golden said we shouldn't give up.

GOLDEN: Yeah, I mean, I think I already said it, you know, the reality is, if you don't vote I guess you get the country you, you sort of deserve in some ways. I mean, I don't mean to sound punitive. I understand the despair. Let me just say, I get it. Sometimes it feels really overwhelming and I'm not judging anybody.

It feels overwhelming. It feels depressing. I've lived a long time and I've seen it. I've kind of lived on the, the end of things where I've watched people of my generation do things that I have not agreed with. I have pushed back for, for many, many years. But that doesn't mean that I get to stop pushing back, right?

Because if we don't keep pushing, if we don't keep fighting, I'm not sure where we are. And this generation, you all have the opportunity to continue to push and shape for the future. If you stop, especially now, you know, I'm not sure where we're going to go. So don't. Keep going. You're the now, actually. You're not even the future. You're the now. How's that? You're the now, like, it's now.

HEINEN: This episode was written by Ceci Heinen and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening in. If you have any comments or questions, feel free to email us at podcasting@mndaily.com. I'm Ceci Heinen, and this has been In The Know.