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Volunteering with Vote Yes for MPS

6/10/2020

By Chloe Smith

On April 7, Milwaukee voters passed the [Vote Yes for MPS referendum](#), which will raise \$87 million in funding for Milwaukee Public Schools over the next 4 years. Throughout this semester, I had the privilege of working as an intern on this campaign.

My responsibilities in this campaign were mostly writing-based—emails to the campaign’s network of supporters, text outreach, copy editing—but I also did quite a bit beyond that, like [canvassing](#) and assisting with filming testimonials at schools. (Of course, I was only a tiny facet in the immense amount of work that went into this campaign).

Spending a semester working on this campaign has helped me learn so much about the political and educational climate in Milwaukee and Wisconsin at large. I’m not from this city, and while I’ve always been well aware of certain educational struggles in my home state of Illinois, I did not know much about the issues affecting Wisconsin.

MPS is the largest school district in the state of Wisconsin, serving over 77,000 students. However, despite its size, the district received significantly less funding per student than neighboring school districts like Shorewood or Whitefish Bay. This lack of sufficient funding led to students and teachers alike not receiving the resources they deserve.

This referendum was not only necessary for supporting our students and teachers, but also long overdue. Before the 2020 vote, MPS was one of the only school districts in the state that had not passed a referendum to increase funding in recent years—the community hadn’t even had the opportunity to pass an increase in funding since 1993.

I’ve always considered myself pretty aware of issues like this, and before this internship, would have called myself rather politically active. However, working on this campaign has completely changed my disposition toward political issues. It’s really easy to think you’re doing enough by voting a certain way, by sharing certain posts on social media, and having conversations with people we know. But we so often forget—myself included—that these problems go so far beyond numbers on a page.

I’ve learned that it’s vital to remind ourselves exactly what we’re fighting for. The best way to do that is volunteering, in any capacity you can, whether it’s signing a pledge or petition, canvassing door-to-door in the community, or making phone calls to voters.

I spent so much time in this position talking with teachers, parents, students, and community members about what this vote means to them. I feel invigorated to continue to volunteer for other issues that matter to me.

While the referendum passed with overwhelming success, the actual process of the election didn't feel so positive. After the Wisconsin Supreme Court ([all of whom had, interestingly, voted absentee](#)) struck down Gov. Tony Evers' order to delay the April 7 election, many voters were forced to choose between their health and their civic duty. The fact that so many voters still showed up, masks and all, is another reason I'm proud of this city, but I'm disappointed that it was a decision they had to face in the first place.

It says a lot about the educational needs of our community that so many were willing to [put their health on the line](#) to vote in this election.

I plan on participating in more campaigns, to whatever extent I can. I'm sure a few of them won't be successful. But we have to try. There's a lot of practical things I learned in this internship, but what I find most important is the necessity of going out of your comfort zone. The best way to learn about community issues and activism is to get out there and advocate for what you believe in in hands-on ways, meeting and working with the people you're fighting for and with.

During my time in this internship, I was continually blown away by the passion, collaboration, and warmth of everyone I worked with and even met in passing. I'm so proud of the city for passing this referendum, but even if it hadn't, I'd come away from this experience proud to now call Milwaukee home.

I realize how lucky I am that my first experience with something like this resulted in a winning campaign. Perhaps I'd be feeling differently if the referendum hadn't passed. But then I think about the people I met: my supervisor, who was kind and enthusiastic, and taught me so much about community organizing. The parents and teachers I met canvassing, who thanked me profusely for taking what was just a bit of my time to try and help students. And the students themselves, answering doors with their parents or posing for social media photos for the campaign, who served as reminders of why we were working in the first place. And then I realize, I'd do it all over again, even if the referendum hadn't passed.

Working on a campaign is hard enough. Working on—and concluding—a campaign in the midst of a pandemic brings a whole other set of hurdles and uncertainties. But even through a [ridiculous](#), rainy election day, Milwaukee managed a huge victory. This city and its voters did right by its students, who deserve a fulfilling, equitable education, regardless of their zip code.