

**OOMElection2024 Episode 5:
ARE YOUNG PEOPLE BEING HEARD?**

Poojasai: From PBS News Student Reporting Labs

Nico: And WETA

Poojasai: This is on *Our Minds: Election 2024*

Nico: With Nico

Poojasai: And Poojasai

Nico: A podcast by teens for teens covering what really matters

Poojasai and Nico: To us.

[theme music fades]

Poojasai: Hey Nico

Nico: Hey, Poojasai How's it going?

Poojasai: Um It's going pretty good. You know we're getting closer and closer to the election. How do you feel about that?

Nico: My gosh. I mean, the election is just a couple weeks away, and honestly, I'm feeling a little stressed out. We have such different candidates this year, right? It feels like these two political parties haven't been farther apart. And I mean, I think it's just a scary moment for our country. We're so divided. And I just hope that we can come together, despite this. But what about you, Poojasai?

Poojasai: I think it's just crazy to think that history is going to be made in like three weeks. November 5th, like, I'm going to turn on the TV. I can just I just see me and my dad and like glued to the couch watching, like, the votes come in. Like, I see it. I envision it, you know? But, you know, Nico, what this episode's really about, do you feel that young people are being heard?

Nico: Hm, I think that's a question we're going to answer today. And that connects to what we're exploring, which is how are young people voicing their experiences and opinions

Poojasai: First, we're joined by special correspondent Khadeejah Khan, who has been researching and reporting on how the Israel-Hamas conflict is affecting young voters. Hey, Khadeejah, thanks for joining us.

Khadeejah: Hi Poojasai. Thank you for having me.

Nico: So tell us, who did you interview about this topic? What perspectives were you looking for?

Khadeejah: Yeah, so reporting on this issue is incredibly important for me to bring in perspectives that represented the array of voices and nuances in this group. I found that much of the coverage recently has been kind of from a place of division from the issue as between Israeli and Palestinian groups¹. Safety versus free speech. But in my reporting, I learned that a lot of these groups actually intersect and that there's a lot of solidarity that's formed between all of these groups. So some of the students who I talked to and include a student at University of Southern California, Daphne Yaman who is a Turkish-American student, and she's also an organizer with Trojans for Palestine at USC. I also talked to Aharon Dardik, a Columbia student and an organizer with Columbia Jews for Ceasefire. And Sari Eisen, a student at Northwestern and the president of the university's Hillel, which is a Jewish campus organization and it serves as an educational resource and a professional network.

Poojasai: So all three of these young voters are college students. So what were their experiences like during the college protests?

Khadeejah: Yeah, so Daphne and Aharon both participated in their college pro-Palestine protests, encampments, and they talked about their experiences, especially with censorship from the university and also the environment. Here is Daphne's experience.

Daphne: It was actually absurd in my opinion, how quickly USC reacted first to the encampment². LAPD and the campus police was not only used as like a

1

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/26/many-israelis-say-social-media-content-about-the-israel-hamas-war-should-be-censored/> and <https://www.npr.org/2024/05/06/1196980771/israelis-and-palestinians-are-in-separate-media-realities> <https://theintercept.com/2024/01/09/newspapers-israel-palestine-bias-new-york-times/>

2

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/05/police-palestinian-solidarity-camp-usc#:~:text=>

physical threat, but it was also psychologically very intense. There was a helicopter right above the encampment³. So that was just like an insane experience to constantly be worried about being arrested.

Khadeejah: I also talked to Aharon Dardik. He's a Columbia student and he grew up in the West Bank and underwent mandatory military training in Israel, and when he refused to serve in the military, he spent four months in military prison.⁴ Free speech is something he's incredibly passionate about because that's something he didn't have access to⁵ and also because of how America prides itself in the rights granted by the First Amendment⁶. Aharon found a lot of community and a lot of solidarity with groups that he organizes with, such as Colombia Jews for Cease Fire⁷. But last year at Columbia, he was part of organizing an event called "A Discussion Concerning the Collective Liberation of Israelis and Palestinians." And here's what he said happened about that event.

Aharon: And when we posted a promotional promotional post on our Instagram about it, We had to not only take it down, but make the event⁸ private because of how much backlash we were getting.

Nico: Certainly speech on college campuses has become a really contentious topic. The students that you're referencing, they describe the tension between, whose voice, you know, is amplified versus whose is not allowed to be heard. And I'm curious, how do students that you talk to describe the tension between free speech and hate speech on campus? What's considered what? And how this is driving the discussion on things like the protests we're seeing on college campuses.

[Police%20have%20dismantled%20the%20student.demonstrators%20slept%20in%20the%20tents](https://calmmatters.org/commentary/2024/05/usc-students-gaza-protests-perception/). And <https://calmmatters.org/commentary/2024/05/usc-students-gaza-protests-perception/>

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<https://dailytrojan.com/2024/04/25/the-initial-gaza-solidarity-occupation-at-usc-and-the-aftermath-as-it-happened/>

⁴ <https://momentmag.com/formerly-imprisoned-american-israeli-columbia-student-calls-for-ceasefire/>; <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/02/28/jews-are-not-a-monolith-cu-jews-for-ceasefire-reflects-on-its-founding/> https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2024/06/25/a_soldier_and_a_conscientious_objector_two_us-born_israeli_citizens_on_the_war_and_campus_protests_151149.html

⁵ https://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/speech_in_israel_is_not_free.php

⁶ <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/back-to-basics-on-the-first-amendment/>

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<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/02/28/jews-are-not-a-monolith-cu-jews-for-ceasefire-reflects-on-its-founding/>

8

<https://columbiabarnardhillel.org/event/collective-liberation-of-israelis-and-palestinians-a-discussion-hosted-by-aharon-dardik/>

Khadeejah: Yeah. I also talked to Sari, who is the president of the university's Hillel at Northwestern. And here's what she had to say about free speech and hate speech.

Sari: I think free speech is critical on a college campus. People of our age should be able to express their opinions and support causes that they care about and also instances that seemingly free speech crosses a line into hate speech and there's true evidence of that. That needs to be addressed by university administration and students who express that that is making them feel unsafe or unwelcome, their views need to be taken into account as equally as the free speech arguments.

Nico: So how are these issues affecting how these college students might vote? Did they talk about that?

Khadeejah: Sari did not express how she is going to vote. But Daphne did tell me that she's voting third party. Here's what she had to say.

Daphne: I was a lifelong Democrat. Every summer in high school, I interned with different Democratic politicians in my area, whether it was state senators or state representatives. When I came to college, I immediately joined the Trojan Democrats at USC. The case of Palestine has really kind of opened up my eyes to the fact that both the Democratic and the Republican parties are both very conservative. And I don't feel represented by either party in the slightest.

Khadeejah: Aharon told me that he's planning to vote for Harris this election, largely because he believes that the administration can change their policies and is more willing to listen to the concerns of constituents. But he made this point really clear.

Aharon: We don't really have time to think about this as a question for the next presidency. We don't have time until January of 2025 to solve this. People are dying now.

Nico: How are young voters prioritizing this issue in the upcoming election, and what kind of political action are they demanding immediately?

Khadeejah: So this issue is really important to young voters right now. And as for young voters, there was a study from the Harvard Kennedy School, and that study said that youth are keeping up who are keeping up with the issue. Support a permanent ceasefire by a margin of 5 to 1⁹.

Poojasa: Thank you so much, Khadeejah.

Khadeejah: Thank you so much for your time!

[music]

Poojasai: It's so interesting how certain experiences in our life can really shape our political identities. That seems true for the people Khadeejah spoke with. Is that true for you too, Nico?

Nico: You know, over the past year and a half, I've actually gotten a grant to write a history book about activism in San Jose, which is the city I live in in the Bay Area. In the research I've done, interviewing hundreds of people that really holds up for the entire community. What about you, Pooja?

Poojasai: Well, I'll be honest, Nico, I have no clue. I really wasn't involved in anything. I really thought about activism before we even started this podcast, to be honest, because, you know, I don't want to say my parents don't care. It's just it's just not something that's on top of their mind. And in a lot of like the places I've lived, like maybe we are active and like there's a lot of activism and protests happening, but I just never see that stuff. And I think that's why I like, I love journalism because I'm like, it's the way I can slowly get more into things, you know?

Nico: I totally agree. And I think the amazing thing about activism is it's so immensely personal. Like, for example, my parents did do a lot of protesting and a lot of activism when they were growing up in San Jose, right. And, you know, to be able to write about activism, it's almost like giving back to them, right, acknowledging their experiences and letting them know that what they went through to make sure that I can live the life I live.

[music]

Poojasai: Up next, we have a personal story from student reporter Harrison Tran from Savannah, Georgia. He recounts an experience trying to voice opposition to a local bill and how that experience has shaped him.

[music]

[anent%20ceasefire%20in%20the%20Israel%2DHamis%20war%20is%205%2Dto%2D1%20in%20favor%3B%20majorities%20of%20young%20Americans%20sympathize%20with%20the%20Israeli%20and%20the%20Palestinian%20people...-While%20only%2038](#)

Madeleine: *We drove 250 miles from Savannah, Georgia to experience the excitement of being a part of our state government. We were told we had a voice, and not three hours later, that voice was freely denied.*

Harrison: That was my friend Madeleine Pelli. You can hear how upset she is, right? Ok here's what happened... Back in the spring of 2022, what was supposed to be a normal meeting of the Georgia Senate Education and Youth Committee took a turn when the committee chairman did this to a group of young people:

Sen. Lester Jackson: *Can they speak on it? Can we allow them to speak, Mr. Chairman?*

Chairman Chuck Payne: *No— uh, we don't have time for that. We're gonna have to move on.*

Harrison: That was Senator Lester Jackson asking Chairman Chuck Payne¹⁰ if a group of students—including me—could speak up against House Bill 1084. Across the United States, “culture wars” have taken center stage in education¹¹. In Georgia, House Bill 1084, called the “Protect Students First Act,” or the ‘divisive concepts’ law, limits the discussion about race in classrooms. Supporters of the bill said it’d prevent racial discrimination in classrooms¹², allowing transparency in the school curriculum for parents’ review.¹³

However, I and other members of Deep Center’s Action Research Team, which is a local youth-centered nonprofit in Savannah, Georgia¹⁴, were strongly opposed to this bill because of the vague language that could confuse educators. The bill could limit teacher’s ability to teach students’ a comprehensive history and lead to self-censoring for fear of losing their jobs.¹⁵

Deep Center’s Action Research Team and I wanted to voice our opposition to this bill. We had stayed up until one in the morning preparing our testimony before arriving bright and early at 9 AM for a meeting that was in the afternoon. We had toured the State Capitol, where we spoke briefly with the chairman of the Senate Education and Youth Committee, Chuck Payne¹⁶, outside the Senate chamber about our concerns with the House Bill 1084.

We arrived even earlier to the committee meeting to put our names down on the

¹⁰ <https://vimeo.com/693233719?&signup=true#> = (1:14:50 - 1:18:32 - Payne says there is no time for public comment)

¹¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/US/culture-wars-identity-center-politics-america/story?id=100768380>

¹² [Myth vs. Fact: HB 1084 – A Bill To Protect Kids from Racial Discrimination](#)

¹³ [Georgia Gov. Kemp signs bill into law that limits discussions about race in classrooms](#)

¹⁴ <https://www.deepcenter.org/programs/youth-leadership-team/action-research-team/>

¹⁵ [Critics of Georgia's new 'divisive concepts' law say it could cause confusion](#)

¹⁶ https://ballotpedia.org/Chuck_Payne

testimony sign sign-up sheet. But we never got to speak; we never got to share our opinions with the rest of the senators. Just four days later, the Senate voted on the bill. It passed.¹⁷

That day, we came to testify and left confused, frustrated, and upset. We had been silenced. Madeleine Pelli was a senior in high school and a member of the Action Research Team when this happened.

Madeleine: I thought that I would at least get to have my voice heard in a democratic society where, hopefully, free speech and like advocacy for your own beliefs is encouraged but it really just felt like they didn't really want to hear what young people had to say at the time. And I think that really shocked me and kind of broke a little bit of the innocence and excitement I felt that I had been taught about in, like, my AP government classroom the year before. It kind of made me realize this isn't really how it all goes down.

Harrison: In reporting this story, I emailed Chairman Chuck Payne to ask him why we weren't allowed to speak that day. His office sent back a one-sentence email saying he was not available for an interview, and did not respond to questions.¹⁸

Georgia State Senator Elena Parent, who sat on the committee, was also upset by our being silenced. She posted videos of our reactions on X, formerly Twitter, and those videos got a lot of attention. Here is part of the video Senator Parent posted of me:

Harrison: *For far too long, Georgia's history has been the subject of erasure.¹⁹ Now, various groups are attempting to change what is taught in Georgia classrooms.²⁰*

Harrison: I asked Senator Parent about the move by her and her team to amplify the student's voices on social media.

Sen. Elena Parent: Me and my staff—we thought, if these students came all this way to be heard, well, maybe those legislators don't want to listen, but plenty of people in the public will want to listen and applaud them for their— their activism and advocacy. It backfired on them. You know what, you try to shut people's voices down? If people find out about that in the public, they are not happy about it. They do these things because they think no one— no one will know, no one

¹⁷ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/61477>

¹⁸ https://drive.google.com/file/d/15jvRFR_pGzgLWit2K421O3Z22FZSCaUK/view?usp=drive_link

¹⁹ [Lost Cause Religion: New Georgia Encyclopedia](#)

²⁰ [How Southern socialites rewrote Civil War history](#)

²¹ [Georgia Senate passes bill that would limit discussions about race in classrooms | CNN Politics](#) and [Unbanning History: Georgia teen organizers fight back against school censorship | Southern Poverty Law Center \(splcenter.org\)](#)

will pay attention, no one will care.

Harrison: This spotlight even got us acknowledged by former Georgia Democratic candidate for Governor Stacey Abrams, saying on X, “Let’s get this straight: the GA GOP censored HS students who had the maturity & academic integrity to attempt testimony against a bill to censor education, likely based on what they learned about the proud history of protest + speaking up for civil rights...in school.”²²

With this newfound attention, organizers put on a press conference the following day to give students a platform to finally deliver their testimony.

Jalen: *How long has it been since any one of you have been inside a high school history class? Because for me, it was last Friday.*

Leory: *I was given hurt like no other by elected officials who are tasked with working for my best, and they failed.*

Harrison: That last voice was fellow student Leroy Spann and, before that Jalen Connor. With the election next month, candidates from both major parties are vying for young people’s vote. My friend Madeleine, who was there with me that day as a member of the Action Research Team, is eligible to vote. Here’s how the experience of being ignored is affecting her this election:

Madeleine: I think I was just coming of age when that happened to me in terms of becoming a voter. So I think that definitely shaped the way that I think– I view politics from then to now. I try to put my vote somewhere where I think people will actually want to listen to me, or listen to my concerns, especially to like the concerns of young people.

Harrison: For me, as a young person, this election is crucial. Having been silenced by my own elected officials, I’ve come to realize that democracy and freedom of speech go directly hand-in-hand and are, arguably, at the forefront of this election. The censorship of speech has become all too common now, especially with book bans and college campus protests²³. Though I am not eligible to vote in this upcoming election, I’m frustrated to see that everyday Americans and young people are denied the ability to share their perspectives about the world and participate in working towards advancing equity and justice.

[music]

²² <https://x.com/staceyabrams/status/1508639958793441281>

²³ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/experts-say-attacks-on-free-speech-are-rising-across-the-us> and <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2023/september/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-book-bans-sweeping-the-us/> and <https://www.forbes.com/sites/meglittlereilly/2024/04/30/free-speech-advocates-urge-restraint-from-college-s-amid-protests/>

Nico: What can be taught in schools is such a hotly debated topic.²⁴

Poojasai: I know, sometimes I feel like schools should kind of just give the students the right of all of what can be talked about and what can't be talked about because we as students might want to have these important conversations that, yes, adults might not want to.

Nico: So there's actually a movement growing across the United States right now called Vote 16, in which, you know, young people will be able to vote in school board elections and even some city elections if they're over the age of 16.²⁵ It's an interesting possibility, and I know it's happening in some cities near me, like Berkeley, where it's already passed in.²⁶ So super cool.

Poojasai: I know some schools around the country are holding mock elections, which can be a way to teach students about the power of voting. But sometimes, depending on *how* government is taught in schools, students can end up feeling disempowered. Up next, we have student reporter Imania Mohamed and fact checker Yasmine Sakr about how they were taught about elections in school. Here's Imania first, then Yasmine...

[music]

Imania: The first time I learned about political parties, in fourth grade, I was like in my history class and we started a new unit learning about political parties. So I just remember my textbook page being split down the middle of like one side being red, one side being blue. And it was just showing different facts about the Democratic and Republican parties. And our teacher actually had us raise our hands to show like which party we identified with more. And I just remember feeling like this, like really polarized the class. And it just solidified the fact that there were only two political parties.

Yasmine: Yeah, I have a really similar experience. So for the 2016 election, I was in fourth, fifth grade and our teacher had us like do a mock election. So we either got to vote for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. And I felt really like peer pressured because, you know, in Arkansas, most of the people are Republican²⁷,

²⁴ <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/opinions-of-teaching-controversial-topics-in-schools/>

²⁵ <https://www.vote16usa.org/>

²⁶

<https://www.oaklandca.gov/news/historic-first-for-california-16-and-17-year-olds-in-berkeley-and-oakland-able-to-vote-for-school-board-in-november-2024>

²⁷

<https://www.270towin.com/states/Arkansas#:~:text=In%20recent%20elections%2C%20it%20has%20become%20a%20solidly%20red%20state%2C%20with%20the%20Republican%20margin%20of%20victory%20increasing%20in%20each%20of%20the%20last%20five%20elections.>

especially living in a really small town. So I definitely remember that really clearly and remember that there never really told us about like a third option. So yeah.

Imania: A few years later, I saw one of my parents mail in ballots and there was a third party option. I think it was the Green Party. And I was actually shocked because I didn't know that third parties were even a thing anymore. I just thought they were like kind of obsolete.

[music]

Nico: Yasmine is joining us now to talk about why we have a two-party system here in the U.S. Hi Yasmine!

Yasmine: Hi, Nico. Hi Poojasai!

Poojasai: Imania had mentioned the Green Party. I feel like I also don't hear much about third parties...

Yasmine: So third parties, like the Green Party do exist in the U.S. but one of the reasons we have a very entrenched two-party structure is because we use what's called the "first-past-the-post" or "winner-take-all" system when it comes to electing candidates.²⁸ Some other countries use a system called "proportional representation" – which can give rise to more political parties and more options for voters.²⁹

Nico: Hm, okay, can you explain that?

Yasmine: Yes, so for example here in America, when we go to elect our member of Congress, the candidate with the most votes wins that seat. Sounds simple, right? Like, the candidate with even just *one more vote* than their opponent wins it all– they get that seat in Congress. But in an electoral system with proportional representation– let's say for example the U.S. did this with Congress..... Instead of just the candidate with the most votes winning a House district, voters could elect multiple representatives and the seats would be distributed in proportion to the votes each party gets. So if the Green Party got 10 percent of the vote, they'd get 10 percent of the seats.³⁰

²⁸ https://ballotpedia.org/Plurality_voting_system

²⁹ https://ballotpedia.org/Proportional_representation

³⁰

https://fairvote.org/resources/electoral-systems/#research_electoralsystems101::~text=Under%20proportional%20representation%2C%20parties%20or%20factions%20gain%20seats%20in%20proportion%20to%20the%20number%20of%20voters%20who%20voted%20for%20them.%20For%20example%2C%20if%20a%20party%20wins%2040%25%20of%20votes%2C%20they%20would%20win%2040%25%20of%20seats%20in%20a%20proportional%20system.

Poojasai: How would proportional representation affect the way our government works?

Yasmine: A proportional representation could make it challenging to actually govern, since more political parties with different views have to come together and work to build consensus³¹, but it can give voters an incentive to choose options that may align more closely with their views. Because right now, with our current winner-take-all-system, many people feel that voting for a third party is a waste because that candidate is so unlikely to succeed.

Nico: Yeah that's interesting. Another thing I've been hearing about changing in elections is more places using something called "ranked choice voting." Can you explain that?

Yasmine: It's just like it sounds— instead of picking a single candidate, voters rank their preferences on a list— like first, second, third, forth and so-on. If a candidate wins a majority of the first-choice preferences, then the election is over...and that person just won outright. But, if no one gets above that threshold, the last-place candidate gets eliminated, and all their votes get re-redistributed to those voters' second-choice picks. And that process keeps happening until someone wins a majority.³² Another way to think about it is like having instant runoff elections— without having to ask voters to spend the time to go back to the polls again.

Poojasai: Don't some places in the U.S. already use "ranked-choice voting"?

Yasmine: Yes, "Ranked choice voting" is already being used in Maine and Alaska as well as 45 cities, and three counties³³... that's according to FairVote, an advocacy group that supports using ranked choice voting. Supporters say it helps give voters more options, and pushes candidates to try to appeal to more people and be less extreme. Critics argue it's confusing and potentially unfair since a candidate who gets the most first-place votes doesn't necessarily win³⁴.

³¹

<https://www.npr.org/2023/11/18/1194448925/congress-proportional-representation-explainer#:~:text=%22We%27ve%20seen%20how.two%20major%20parties.>

³² [https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_\(RCV\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_(RCV))

³³ <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting-information/#where-is-ranked-choice-voting-used>

³⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/08/us/ranked-choice-voting-elections.html>

Nico: That's so interesting! Thank you so much, Yasmine, for educating us about all this!

Yasmine: Of course!

[theme music]

Poojasai: Dude, Nico, we only have one more episode before the election.

Nico: I know that's crazy, but this is going to be an important one. We'll be diving into misinformation. How did they detect and guard against fake news and deceptive AI-generated election information?

Poojasai: Stay tuned.

Nico: *On Our Minds: Election 2024* is produced by Student Reporting Labs.

Poojasai: Today's segments were produced by Khadeejah Khan from Santa Clara, California.

Nico: Harrison Tran from Savannah, Georgia.

Poojasai: And Imania Mohamad from Metuchen, New Jersey.

Nico: Research and fact-checking by Yasmine Sakr from Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas and Becky Wandel

Poojasai: Music from Blue Dot Sessions.

Nico: This episode was produced by Lead Podcast Producer Briget Ganske, with help from Associate Producer Wyatt Mayes

Poojasai: Antonio Nevarez edited and mixed this episode.

Nico: Approval and oversight by Editorial Director Marie Cusick

Poojasai: And Executive Producer Leah Clapman.

[end of theme song]