

PROPPING UP DEMOCRACY

It will require participation, effort, and a willingness to listen and compromise.

Generation Z stands ready.





YOUTH MOVEMENT

Tomorrow's leaders strive to improve the state of American democracy

BY LILLIAN JOHNS

In *Federalist No. 10*, James Madison warns of the rise of factions in a democracy, arguing they work against the common good, sow division among its citizens and undermine progress.

The political climate in the U.S. today is rife with division and incivility — a sentiment shared by junior Brielle Farnen, a double major in Political Science and Sociology.

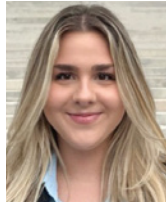
“The state of our democracy is weak, and I’m unclear on when it will be strong again,” she said.

College students have long been leading voices in demanding change in the U.S. and around the world. JMU is doing its part by offering courses in political science, public administration, international affairs and related disciplines, as well as student organizations and activities that promote the free exchange of ideas.



Students, including SGA Student Body President Brielle Lacroix (left of Duke Dog), on Election Day in November 2023

Farnen said her classes and professors have developed her critical-thinking skills and led to a deeper understanding of her own views. She is confident that her generation can put American democracy back on track.



BRIELLE FARNEN
junior

“We need teamwork across all fronts, led by rational people with open minds,” she said. “We need to work together. We need to be open to hearing others’ opinions and have the ability to respond with compassion. We need to be empathetic toward others.”

One way young people in America are contributing to democracy is by exercising their

right to vote. Dukes Vote, a student-led effort in the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement, is a nonpartisan voter education and registration drive targeted at both in-state and out-of state students. JMU is recognized by the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge as a Gold campus for high levels of student voting rates and engagement.

“Voting matters, no matter what election it is in,” Farnen said.

It’s also the responsibility of citizens to educate themselves on the issues, according to Declan McAlevy, a junior Political Science major in the Pre-Law Program, and a member of the JMU College Democrats. “I chose to study politics because it helps me to understand the world around me and [feel] like I can make informed decisions,” he said.

For McAlevy, this means paying attention to the daily shifts in politics and engaging in a learning community with a wide array of opinions.



DECLAN MCALEVY
junior

McAlevy says when young people fail to notice troubling changes, the system suffers. “The youth of America do need to take a certain level of responsibility, as we are the ones inheriting the planet,” he said. “First and foremost, we need to pay attention.”

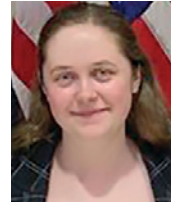
He suggests getting involved at the grassroots level, pushing and implementing changes locally, then building them out on a national scale.

Democracy is not a spectator sport, said Bonnie Pohland, a double major in International Affairs and Economics and president of the JMU chapter of The Alexander Hamilton Society, a nonpartisan,

national organization dedicated to advancing the Hamiltonian perspective of strong and principled American leadership in global affairs.

Pohland believes people are right to be concerned about the increasing political polarization in our country. But even in the face of conflict, she says, you cannot ignore the positive things happening.

“We are witnessing rising tensions, yet I also see ongoing, collaborative, meaningful efforts in my local communities and across the nation,” she said. “Generation Z holds a



BONNIE POHLAND
junior

diverse set of political opinions, yet there is much that we’re united on. Many of us agree on the need for campaign reform, ranked-choice voting, term limits, additional accountability and oversight.”

Reagan Polarek, a double major in Communication Studies and Political Science with a minor in Civic Leadership, serves as a Madison Center Democracy Fellow, Student Government Association senator and previously as the 2026 class president.

“I grew up in the political world and am grateful to understand how democracy functions,” Polarek said. “I have seen examples of great political leaders who want to make the world a better place, and I want to do the same thing.”

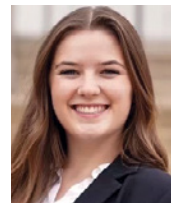
James Madison played a pivotal role in shaping the great American experiment,

and as Pohland reminds us, every experiment involves a significant amount of trial and error. Our democracy is constantly evolving, with each generation adding their own perspective.

JMU students are experiencing this evolution firsthand, and many are inspired to create change for the better.

“There is a newfound energy and engagement, particularly among younger voters who are increasingly participating in protests, voting and advocating for others’ rights,” Polarek said. “This shows that, while our democracy is being tested, there’s a strong desire to protect and improve it.

“I believe that if we can harness this energy and focus on rebuilding trust and promoting civic education and involvement, we can strengthen our democracy for the future.”



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