

# **2023 State of the Union Essay Contest Winning Essays**



**U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders**

**Winner**

August Howe (Twinfield Union School, Junior)

Misinformation

**Second Place**

J Lahue (Burr & Burton Academy, Freshman)

Political Polarization

**Third Place**

Keenan Wallace (Twinfield Union School, Junior)

Unions & Labor Rights

**Finalists**

*(in alphabetical order)*

Jacob Antonovich (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Senior)

Andrew Barrett (Oxbow High School, Sophomore)

Alexander Califano (Craftsbury Academy, Junior)

Leah Kuhnert (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)

Ella Mattei (Northfield Middle & High School, Freshman)

Leila McMillian (So. Burlington High School, Freshman)

Alaina Rogers (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Junior)

Hannah Smiley (Milton High School, Sophomore)

Joshua Stearns (Hanover High School, Junior)

Lyla Trigaux (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Samantha Urbina (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Junior)

Gretchen Wertlieb (So. Burlington High School, Freshman)

**Winner**  
**August Howe (Twinfield Union School, Junior)**

This past Sunday, January 8th, 2023, rioters stormed official capitol buildings in Brazil. The incident parallels in many ways the January 6th attack on the U.S. capitol, the two year anniversary of which had passed just two days prior to the Brazil riot. Both events were caused, in part, by misinformation campaigns waged primarily on social media platforms. Both instances are extreme examples of what can happen when misinformation forces people into action against problems that don't exist. Both instances are proof as to why the rise of misinformation and fake news on social media is one of the major problems facing our country.

The past twenty-five years have seen the rise of the internet and subsequent social media platforms. Starting out as a place to connect with people on a personal level, these platforms have grown to dominate the online landscape and now serve as many people's primary source of information. They have strayed from their original purpose, developing into money generating machines that rely on user's constant engagement. Tapping into people's psychology is the main way social media platforms and those on it obtain such participation, and unfortunately, negative and emotionally-manipulating content is what gains the most attraction. As a result, social media platforms breed negativity, division, and ultimately, distorted opinions that turn into mis- and disinformation and fake news on just about every subject out there.

The solution to such a problem is complicated and far from perfect, but there are still a few options. Social media platforms are essentially news sources at this point, yet they are not held to the same legal standards. News sources are liable for the content they release, social media platforms, however, are exempt from such liability by Section 230, a law passed by the U.S. Congress that protects all providers and users of interactive computer services from liability for the content on these platforms, regardless of whether it is true or false (Electronic Frontier Foundation). Originally created to protect internet user's speech, Section 230 now enables people to exercise their freedom of speech and introduce mis- and disinformation into the media stream without consequence. By repealing Section 230 and holding social media companies responsible for the content on their platforms, we will hold them to the same standards as established news outlets, and force them to do more to stop the spread of misinformation on their platforms.

Equally as important as holding companies accountable is encouraging the education of the general public on media literacy and critical thinking skills to identify misinformation and fake news. An educated population is essential to a well-governed population, and that education must now include media literacy. Programs should be implemented in schools, starting as young as elementary students, to teach how to identify fake news and be media literate.

Regulating social media platform like standard news outlets, and educating the general population are the best ways we can defend our country's democracy from the threat of misinformation in social media.

**Second Place**  
**J Lahue (Burr & Burton Academy, Freshman)**

Political polarization, or the divergence of political beliefs away from the center towards ideological extremes, is a prominent problem and a threat to democracy. Americans continue to create more divides between people who have opposing views, and the result, an astounding lack of empathy plagues our country. The 2019 government shutdown and the violent January 6th insurrection were both major consequences that stemmed from political polarization. This rise of extreme ideologies can be attributed to various factors, such as media partisanship, hostility between political opponents, and economic inequality. These factors then lead to congressional gridlock, lack of trust, an increase in violence, and, most importantly, a lessened sense of community. But, there are steps that, if taken, could stop polarization at its roots.

To solve political polarization, I propose a new bill, titled The Unity Act, to address the underlying problems. This bill would create forums to unify people and cultivate common ground by promoting dialogue and understanding and addressing economic inequality. While political polarization is a scary threat to democracy and the nation we live in, we can bridge the divides with the following measures.

The first way the bill would eliminate polarization is by targeting economic inequality. By increasing the minimum wage to just 10 dollars and 10 cents, around 4 million people would be taken out of poverty. Similarly, investing in education, especially Pre-K, would improve economic mobility. Furthermore, The Unity Act would expand the Earned Income Tax Credit to bring children above the poverty line. These reforms would solve economic inequality, a major cause of extreme ideologies because inequality leads to social divisions.

With the investment in education, the bill would also encourage middle schools to teach media literacy and how to differentiate between fake and factual information. Teaching this important skill at a young age would lessen the negative effects of misinformation. The bill would also recommend schools teach tough topics to create more dialogue and thus reduce the risk of extreme partisan views.

While these reforms would address the underlying problems, the major initiative would target polarization through Citizen Assemblies. Citizen Assemblies would be held in the counties of each state monthly. They would bring people together to speak about divisive issues that need to be addressed. Assemblies would select participants in the same way as jury duty so they could engage in political deliberation with their ideas directed towards the state and national government. These assemblies would effectively establish common ground to reduce extreme partisan views.

In conclusion, political polarization is an increasing problem that undermines democracy through issues like lack of trust and a lost sense of unity. By correcting economic inequalities, bettering the education system, and introducing Citizen Assemblies, polarization can be slowly eliminated. If passed, The Unity Act would create a bridge to improve the welfare of American citizens by cultivating common ground. Especially as newer and more partisan issues emerge, it is imperative that we strive towards a more cohesive nation by addressing political polarization.

**Third Place**  
**Keenan Wallace (Twinfield Union School, Junior)**

One of the most pressing issues facing our society today is the issue of labor rights. Recently there has been a slew of confrontations between workers and corporations, from Starbucks and Amazon to the threatened rail strikes earlier this year, 2022 has been tumultuous. The way that each of these confrontations were negotiated either within the corporation or, in the case of the rail strikes, by the United States government sends an important message, our workers' rights are not the priority.

In November of this year Starbucks employees organized a walkout at more than 100 Starbucks locations in protest of Starbucks repeated refusal to negotiate contracts with labor unions. Many workers cited being underpaid, understaffed and overworked. But Starbucks has been adamant in their anti-union stance, giving pay increases selectively to locations that had not voted to unionize, firing union organizers, refusing to negotiate contracts with union representatives, and taking steps to prohibit union elections at its stores. Unfortunately this union busting attitude is not exclusive to Starbucks. At Amazon, one of the world's largest corporations, the same issues repeat themselves. Low pay, oppressive and, at times unsafe working conditions, as well as aggressive anti-union policies are also apparent there.

Earlier this year the 12 largest rail unions threatened to strike in protest of low pay and a lack of paid sick leave. Because of the massive economic impact a strike like this would have the US government stepped in. In November President Biden brokered a deal between the major rail unions and the rail corporations. This deal promises a 24% wage increase over the next five years, but it critically lacks any guaranteed paid sick days. This lack of sick days led four of the 12 major unions to reject the deal. Despite this Biden stepped in and asked Congress to impose the deal onto the Unions, disregarding their decision. This sets a precedent for corporations like Starbucks and Amazon to disregard labor unions.

The framework for the solution is already in place. The NLRB is an agency that was created to enforce the NLRA (National Labor Rights Act). This agency is responsible for helping organize unions and they step in when corporations violate the NLRA. Unfortunately the NLRB is tremendously underfunded and since 2014 it has received no budget increases, resulting in an effective budget cut of more than 20% due to inflation. Additionally, under the Trump administration the agency's leadership was gutted, further challenging the fight for unionization. Under Biden the NLRB's performance has increased, but it is not enough. By increasing the NLRB's funding, its ability to organize unions, achieve justice for wronged workers and keep corporations in check would increase dramatically.

Increasing funding for the NLRB is a simple, low cost solution to a problem that has plagued the American working class for decades. A stronger NLRB would not only be a boon for workers, but also a valuable tool for the government to check the ever increasing power that corporations hold over our democracy.

**Finalists**  
*(in alphabetical order)*

**Jacob Antonovich (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Senior)**

My grandfather, Robert Antonovich, got drafted into the Korean War where he served in the Army. At the present moment he lays dying, at home, and without much dignity. My grandfather is in dire need of hospice as he goes through his last stages of life but at 88, he is unable to afford privatized healthcare and my grandma (aged 90) is of little help. Fortunately, as a result of my grandfather's service he is entitled to receive benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). What upsets me is that where a privatized hospice service could be there in 24 hours, after almost two weeks, the VA is still unable to get anyone there to help my grandfather walk through his last life with the dignity he deserves.

Beyond my grandfather, millions of Americans who put their lives on the line to serve this country are stuck without much dignity. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless; between 130,000 and 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night which represents between one fourth and one fifth of all homeless people. After putting their lives on the line, why are so many veterans being dumped on the streets in such poor conditions? Many of these problems could be fixed by providing proper funding and ensuring that the security of veteran relief organizations is a top priority. For instance, of the \$300 Billion budget for the VA only about 1% was spent on homeless care programs. The VA's budget is even less for community care, which covers hospice services. Based on the 2023 Budget submission for the VA, less than .0004% of the budget was allocated to community care. To make matters worse, hospice care is only a portion of that already small percentage leaving very little money to help those in need.

The poor treatment of veterans is a major problem in this nation. To fix this, I suggest that more money be allocated to these specific areas of the VA as to ensure that no veterans are left homeless, and that all who served have a chance to live the remainder of their lives in dignity rather than the abject squalor that many are forced to live in today. I am still hoping that the VA will be able to get hospice care to my grandfather before it's too late, but with how a large portion of veterans in this nation are currently being treated, I'm not so sure. I hope that through the hard work of our nation's legislators, no veterans will ever be left behind like the thousands of veterans who are homeless today or my grandfather who is yet to receive the care he needs at a price he can afford.

## **Andrew Barrett (Oxbow High School, Sophomore)**

Mental Health America (MHA) unveiled in 2019-2020, that "20.78% of adults in America were experiencing a mental illness." Mental health awareness is a minuscule topic compared to most political conversations, but it cannot be disregarded. Millions of American citizens face mental illness; most go without treatment due to the expense and shortage of mental health professionals. Mental health is prominent in society, and its awareness needs improvement. What is the solution? Increased funding for mental health care, and early schooling on mental health is crucial for advancement.

Lately, due primarily to the pandemic, there has been a spike in mental illness. Mental illnesses like depression can disrupt people's capacity to function, whether at school, work, home, or social life. As of 2020, 12.1 million adult Americans experienced profound thoughts of suicide. Additionally, MHA states, "half (54.7%) of adults with a mental illness do not receive treatment," and "59.8% of youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment." Mental illness can lead to substance use disorder, proving hazardous to those suffering from mental illness and potentially to others around them. Society needs to be a safe place where individuals are comfortable and capable of seeking support.

The leading solution to the mental health crisis is better funding for mental health care. Funding would come from America's military spending. According to World Population Review, America has the highest military budget and is greater than the following ten countries combined. There is a shortage of mental health specialists, and seeking aid is unaffordable for most. A large portion of adults (42%) with a mental illness "reported they were unable to receive necessary care because they could not afford it," according to MHA. Therapy and care are too expensive for most people, proving problematic in overcoming mental illness. Therapy presents a sense of hope. Dr. Lloyd Sederer, a psychiatrist, states, "When there is hope, there is reason to participate in treatment, to learn to manage the disease, and to reach for life when faced with setbacks." Altogether, funding for treatments and mental health care would help reduce the mental health emergency in America.

Along with funding for mental health care, social standards need to change. There cannot be a stigma around mental illness. People should feel comfortable and aware of mental illness. Education on the matter is critical to accomplish this because mental illness is real. If taught the subject at a young age, people are provided awareness, and they will feel comfortable seeking help and helping others.

Mental health is an immensely influential element of every person's life.

## **Alexander Califano (Craftsbury Academy, Junior)**

In recent months, the Supreme Court has been at the center of American political debate as it prepares to rule on a number of crucial cases. Among these is *Students for Fair Admission vs. Harvard* in which the Court will decide the future of affirmative action.

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was signed into law by Lyndon Johnson, legalizing affirmative action in the United States with the goal of preventing discrimination in hiring practices. This protection was later extended into the realm of college admissions. The ability of universities to use affirmative action as a tool to level the playing field for historically disadvantaged groups is now in jeopardy. Those who oppose affirmative action argue that by favoring historically disadvantaged groups, universities discriminate against other groups. That is simply untrue. The goal of these practices is to promote student diversity, which benefits all of us by expanding our intellectual horizons and inviting us to view the world from new perspectives. The diversity that affirmative action policies foster is responsible for spreading knowledge of and empathy for people from all walks of life and all races and cultures. If the Supreme Court outlaws affirmative action, it won't just be historically disadvantaged groups that will be hurt. We would all suffer by losing an invaluable part of the educational system.

To prevent the Supreme Court from restricting the range of educational opportunities available to racial groups already struggling to make their way in this country, Congress should make good on its endless promises to help Americans by taking concrete action. This year, the Respect for Marriage Act codified the right of individuals to enter into interracial and same-sex marriages, protecting them from the caprices of the Supreme Court. Congress should similarly codify affirmative action policies. Such codification would ensure that affirmative action can fulfill its intended purpose of advancing historically disadvantaged groups while, at the same time, giving America's future leaders a chance to interact regularly with students who represent the diversity of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and ethnicities that make American universities the best in the world and which have made this country strong. Furthermore, by allowing policies that help historically disadvantaged groups succeed, we will be living up to this nation's founding ideal - the notion that all men are created equal. We can help make that dream a reality by reversing the effects of race-based prejudice, discrimination, and violence.

If the Supreme Court decides to end affirmative action, Congress must move to protect the rights of educational institutions to craft admissions policies that would ensure that applicants aren't punished for their race, ethnicity or lack of resources and that future generations of students aren't deprived of the diversity of thoughts, opinions, and ancestries that have made America such a powerful force for good.



## **Leah Kuhnert (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)**

Climate change is perhaps the most unavoidable issue facing our world today, yet is often pushed off by lawmakers worldwide in favor of other issues. Although fixing climate change is a complex task, addressing environmental impacts by sector is an important step towards taking much-needed action before the effects of climate change are irreversible. According to the EPA, agriculture accounted for 11% of US greenhouse gas emissions in 2020. This is why, as a country, we must take action to decrease industrial agriculture and turn towards regenerative farming techniques.

Governmental subsidies are what currently drives the dysfunctional system of industrial agriculture. The Agriculture Act of 2018 section 1202 outlines the crops eligible for governmental subsidies, which include "...wheat, corn, grain sorghum, barley, oats, upland cotton, long grain rice, medium grain rice, soybeans, designated oilseeds..." etc. These subsidies have effectively supported the growth of specialized farms that mass produce only one of these crops. The problem with this is that over-tilling and a lack of crop diversity in these industrial farms destroy the health of the soil. This renders ineffective the natural process of carbon sequestration that relies on healthy soil, contributing considerably to climate change.

An essential step that can be taken is to re-evaluate how subsidies are used and how they impact the environment. These subsidies have created a system that primarily benefits commercial agribusinesses in the long run. Meanwhile, it disadvantages small farmers who raise a diverse range of crops and livestock. When prices for industrially produced foods are driven down by subsidies, small farmers are forced to lower their prices in response, causing losses in revenue. It isn't necessary to get rid of agricultural subsidies altogether, but it's critical to change how they're used. Instead of offering permanent funds to artificially prop up monoculture, subsidies should be used as a specific and short-term tool to support farmers in switching to more regenerative and diverse crop production.

A study by the University of Vermont found that regenerative farming methods, such as rotational grazing, crop rotation, and cover cropping result in the sequestration of atmospheric carbon, unlike specialized farming methods. Regenerative farming techniques contribute to a more sustainable agricultural system while also helping mitigate the effects of climate change.

Switching to regenerative farming practices also makes economic sense. By growing a more diverse selection of crops, farmers are less vulnerable to revenue loss in cases of a failing crop. Additionally, regenerative methods allow farmers to do more with less land, which means spending less money on farmland. Effective land use increases the health of the soil and extends the lifetime of the farmland, and the rotation of crops and livestock ensures a more sustainably symbiotic system. Regenerative agriculture will contribute to the stability of farmers in America, while also reforming the food economy. Most importantly, this change will help to mitigate the imminent destructive effects of climate change that we're facing now more prevalently than ever. It's time to end our subsidy system that rewards irresponsible and unsustainable farming.

## **Ella Mattei (Northfield Middle & High School, Freshman)**

It is a basic human right to have access to healthy, affordable food to create the best future possible for future generations. Food accessibility is getting worse and worse each year, even in a farming state such as Vermont; food is getting more expensive to transport creating a higher price. This inevitably causes problems for people with a low income to have access to healthy food. Food deserts are an increasing problem in poor neighborhoods and towns, and they don't have enough money to fix them. Food deserts are generally associated with low-population areas, abandoned or vacated homes, high unemployment- rated areas, or less-educated people.

Food deserts are more common in Black neighborhoods according to a 2014 study from Johns Hopkins University. They found that black and urban areas have a severe lack of supermarkets while white areas had the most and mixed- race areas were a mixed bag. The idea of people not getting their basic needs met because of a characteristic of them such as their skin color is mind-blowing. America claims to be a great country but won't feed people because of the color of their skin. More than 39 million people in America suffer from hunger each year and about 9 million of them are children. In America, we are supposed to protect our citizens and the fragile minds of our youth. Instead, there are children starving and we have not made much progress to solve this nationwide problem. Here in Vermont, 1 out of 4 people know somebody facing food insecurity, and 2 out of 5 Vermonters are facing food insecurity personally.

To fix food insecurity, we must invest our nation's resources to support healthy food access to all populations. 60 years after LBJ's War on Poverty, it is embarrassing that the richest nation on Earth, which feeds other countries, could possibly have people starving. If the government were serious, it must invest in local community-based solutions. Urban farms in places like Detroit should be a model for the rest of our country's food deserts. Creating food- sharing programs, and making more federal food assistance programs should also be a priority for this new Congress. They should also create more food pantries where people can donate food.

Many people would argue that it would be too expensive to fix this national crisis because it would cost around \$37 billion a year until 2030, but America is the wealthiest country in the world and if we can afford to have the most nuclear weapons when each weapon costs \$8.4 million, we are capable of feeding our citizens. Everybody deserves a chance at being fed.

## **Leila McMillian (South Burlington High School, Freshman)**

Equality, respect, and understanding are things that everyone deserves even, if not especially, those who are psychologically or physically different. People with disabilities or neurodivergence are often ridiculed or avoided because they process and navigate the world around us differently. It is my opinion that if other people actually understood more about what it is like to be different than a "normal person", then they might sympathize more and bullying or other mistreatments might become less of a problem.

According to an NPR article; "A new study suggests that nearly a third of children and adolescents with disabilities has experienced violence - defined as physical, emotional or sexual abuse as well as neglect. It's everything from being struck or verbally attacked by a family member to cyberbullying. And they're reportedly twice as likely to experience violence as young people without disabilities." Because of the greater likelihood of being bullied for being different, people might be less inclined to say anything if they need help for fear of being ridiculed. A person might hide their actions or needs to fit in with "normal" people, but if they really need help and are too afraid to ask for it, then serious problems like fights or school shootouts could break out more often.

People with neurodivergence or disabilities are often seen as abnormal and people make such a big deal out of their differences that it pretty well separates them from the rest of society. According to NPR; "A tremendous number of kids are affected. An estimated 291 million children and adolescents - slightly more than 1 in 10 - have disabilities such as hearing or vision loss, epilepsy or intellectual disabilities." Our kids should not have to be the subject of other's disgraceful humor, or be the butt of their jokes. They should be able to grow up in a world that accepts people for who they are, not what they are or what other people think they are. They should have equal chances to work in good jobs as any other person, because they are people too and should be treated as such.

Some people might not see the problem as it is though, people all over the world have been accused of witchcraft because of their differences, or have been called cursed. "It is not an easy issue." Says Fran Kritz, a health policy reporter based in Washington, D.C. "We're talking about something that has multiple causes and can't be treated with a vaccine or intervention. We have to create new social norms and educational, social service, health and other systems that prevent and respond effectively to violence against children with disabilities. We need to ensure that systems are sufficiently supported financially and that personnel have ongoing training." We are people too and we all deserve equality and respect as anyone does.

## **Alaina Rogers (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Junior)**

The gun violence epidemic is an extremely serious issue facing America today, and it continues to get worse. According to the CDC and Pew Research Center, 45,222 people lost their lives to gun violence in 2020, which is the most recent year for which complete data can be found. As I have grown up, I have seen the number of gun violence stories hitting the news increase year after year. I have watched my school crack down on safety and lockdown procedures. I have been repeatedly made aware of the threats local schools have had to deal with in recent years, and I have seen the strain that gun violence has put on our country while nothing is done about it. Gun violence has been a prominent issue in America for many years, and it is only getting worse. It is time for us to take action.

There are steps our federal government can take to prevent gun violence. Common sense gun laws that limit access to these deadly weapons are crucial to ending this crisis. Universal background checks must be strengthened, and the loopholes that allow private sales, transfers of guns from one person to another, and sales of firearms at large gun shows to bypass background checks must be closed. According to FBI records, more than 300,000 illegal firearm sales were blocked by background checks in 2020. Background checks are effective when they are conducted and have earned bipartisan support from the vast majority of Americans. Eighty-eight percent of Americans support universal background checks. However, these background checks can only truly protect us if they are required at the federal level for all firearm purchases and transfers.

In addition to strengthening universal background checks, assault rifles and high- capacity magazines must be banned at the federal level. These weapons are designed with the purpose of killing other human beings and have no place in American society. Assault rifles and high-capacity magazines have the capacity to kill many people quickly, making them highly dangerous. There was a federal ban on the sale and import of assault weapons from 1994 to 2004, and studies show that mass shooting fatalities were 70 percent less likely during that time. A ban like this must be reinstated and the prospect has received bipartisan support.

Gun violence is a very complex issue. Many things need to happen to truly ensure domestic tranquility. However, the first and most crucial step is to enact common sense gun laws, and we must take action quickly. 2022 was a challenging year for both our country and the state of Vermont in terms of gun violence, with both the Buffalo and Uvalde mass shootings and skyrocketing crime rates in the Burlington area. As we wait to solve this problem, tens of thousands of people lose their lives every year. It is imperative that we take action, to protect our current generation and ensure that future generations grow up feeling safe and secure in their communities and their country.

## **Hannah Smiley (Milton High School, Sophomore)**

365 days. 648 mass shootings. 44,208 people dead due to gun violence this year alone. No family has been left untouched by the immense harm caused by gun violence. Everywhere we go, we live in constant fear of being attacked or losing someone we love. It has changed the way we as Americans live our lives. This isn't the so-called "American dream" so many speak of. In fact, gun violence has stripped the most important part of our Constitution from us; our right to live.

Our country has become, dare I say, accustomed, to gun violence. Some may even call it our "new normal". We're almost numb to the constant news of shootings all over the country. It seems as though we can't escape it, now more than ever. Pew Research Center states that since 2010, the number of total gun violence deaths has increased by 43%. These deaths include suicide, mass shootings, and homicide. When looking at these statistics, we often fail to realize that these "statistics" are actually real people. Real families. Real lives.

In order to see the full picture of gun violence, it's important to hear stories from survivors themselves. In a 2021 interview, Ashley, a Sandy Hook shooting survivor who was only seven at the time of the widely known school shooting, claims to have PTSD from this event. She said, "It was just a whole lot of anxiety that I had never felt as a 7-year-old. I had hardly even felt sadness...It kind of made us realize that the world's not all sunshine and rainbows, I guess." Ashley's story is heartbreakingly terrifying, yet it's not unique. Her story sounds like countless others who've described similar feelings of anxiety and trauma. Survivors feel as though they can't escape the terrors. How can we, as human beings, continue to let innocent people lose their lives to gun violence?

There are several solutions to the issue of gun violence in the US, the main one being stricter gun laws. For example, Japan, a country with one of the lowest gun violence rates in the world, has issued strict gun control laws. The process of purchasing a gun in Japan is both time-consuming and expensive. Those interested in purchasing a gun must undergo a multi-step process consisting of a gun safety class, recurring written exams, mental and physical health checks, an extensive background check, and gun storage inspections. According to The New York Times, in 2020, around 192,000 licensed firearms were purchased in Japan, which is fewer than the number of registered guns in Alabama. For context, Japan's population is roughly 20 times Alabama's population. America's obsession with guns has triggered an epidemic of hate and violence.

We must act on the issue of gun violence by issuing and enforcing stronger gun control laws to make our country a safer place for everyone. This solution is vital to American life as we know it.

## **Joshua Stearns (Hanover High School, Junior)**

The most basic tenet of our democracy is that politicians are chosen by the people. First observed in 1812, gerrymandering has allowed politicians to define their districts to choose their voters, overriding the will of the people. Districts are as old as our nation and play an instrumental role in who victors up and down the ballot, thereby defining our communities. With the nation more polarized than ever, gerrymandering has become increasingly ambitious in the past decade.

In the Constitution, the framers stipulated that "the Number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty Thousand," but today the average congressional district has 747,184 constituents. The Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929 capped the number of representatives at 435. Since then, the population of our country has nearly tripled, causing an explosion in the number of Americans per congressional district. Beginning in 1967 with the Uniform Congressional District Act, every state was mandated to conduct elections for the House of Representatives using single-member-districts (SMDs). This requirement normalized gerrymandering as politicians throughout the country manipulated boundaries to select their voters and maximize their chances of victory in subsequent elections.

SMDs empower politicians of both parties, Democrats and Republicans, to gerrymander. Gerrymandering can be clearly observed after the 2020 redistricting in Democratic-controlled states like Illinois and Republican-controlled states like Wisconsin. Gerrymandering directly influences many of the important issues we face today, from abortion to gun control to climate change. While both parties gerrymander, it has tended to skew elections towards Republicans nationally, particularly because district manipulation in Southern states results in the disenfranchisement of people of color, one of Democrats' most important voting blocs. In Georgia, where Senator Raphael Warnock won a majority of the vote in 2022, Democrats won only 35% of the state's U.S. House seats. In contrast to SMDs, multimember-districts (MMDs) combined with proportional representation award each party a certain number of seats based on the percentage of the votes garnered. Using MMDs, Georgia Democrats would have been awarded about half of the U.S. House seats. Such is the case in many states. This representation discrepancy caused by gerrymandering could have wildly changed the outcome of the 2022 elections.

This method by which we select those who represent us in the peoples' house, intended by the founders to be representative, currently is undemocratic. Just because gerrymandering has been part of our political fabric for centuries does not mean that it should endure. Should we not choose to further democratize our nation?

Solving this systemic issue will not be easy - most institutionalized processes are difficult to reverse. But it is possible. To do so, we must begin with repealing these two congressional acts which have undermined our democracy, and we must transition to proportionally representative MMDs. To fully realize the possibility that is our democracy, we must also increase the number of representatives of the peoples' house, to ensure the fair, equal, and meaningful representation of every citizen of this great country. Because every American deserves equal representation.

## **Lyla Trigaux (Burlington High School, Freshman)**

Despite living in Vermont, one of the most progressive states when it comes to LGBTQ rights, I still see discrimination in my day to day life. In my neighborhood alone, there are hateful stickers plastered all over signs, claiming someone "can't be born in the wrong body." As a freshman in high school, I fear for my transgender classmates who are targeted by these stickers, and I also fear for those who have to experience discrimination like this in school, as well. School is supposed to be a foundation for building a healthy and happy life, but for the nearly two million youth in America who identify as LGBTQ, school too often becomes the opposite. Congress must pass bills like the Safe Schools Improvement Act to make our school system and our country a more inclusive place.

Bullying at school can not only prevent youth from learning, but it can also pose a threat to their wellbeing. LGBTQ youth are at an increased risk of being bullied. According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 32% of lesbian, gay or bisexual students said they have been bullied on school property, compared to 17.1% of straight students. This negative environment can lead to serious outcomes for these students, from failing to graduate to taking their own lives. According to the Trevor Project, the suicide rate of LGBTQ youth is more than four times higher than the suicide rate of straight, cisgendered youth, and feeling unsafe at school is a contributing cause. With lives on the line, we must take steps to make our schools safer for everyone.

The Safe Schools Improvement Act was a bill introduced to the House in 2021 aimed at stopping bullying and harassment in schools. The bill requires schools to enact policies to not only prohibit, but also prevent bullying and harassment based on protected categories like gender identity and sexual orientation. Preventing these incidents from happening in the first place is what makes this bill a good solution. While supporting LGBTQ youth after bullying or harassment has already occurred is important, it's not enough. Schools being able to stop it from happening in the first place is what can save someone from trauma. Making this bill a law may also be a quicker process than writing a whole new one. According to the Trevor Project, of the LGBTQ youth that seriously consider suicide each year, at least one attempts it every 45 seconds. The faster we pass this bill the more lives it may be able to save.

All students deserve equal access to education and the chance to learn without the distraction of threat to their safety and mental wellbeing. For too long, LGBTQ youth have had to endure a hostile school environment. Supporting the Safe Schools Improvement act is an important step towards ending bullying, protecting students' rights, and saving lives.

## **Samantha Urbina (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Junior)**

As of the 2020 census almost 19% of the United States population are Latino or Hispanic. Latinos are the second largest ethnic group, the largest minority group and our history is being glossed over in our high school education, being forgotten in a country founded by immigrants. Correcting this injustice starts in the classroom. For example, there is not any mention of our contributions during the world wars. I know there was though, my great uncle, a Mexican-American, was part of the 101st Airborne division during World War II. From what I can remember of all the history that I have learned from elementary school to now, there has been little to no mention of the colonization of Latin and Central Americans or any Latino history or contributions to the United States. The Chicano movement was active during the 1960s and Hispanic-Americans were also fighting for equality during this time, but almost all of the attention in class and textbooks was focused on Civil Rights for Black Americans, Women, and Native Americans. Talking to my friends from other high schools such as Essex, Champlain Valley Union, Colchester and Burlington said they had little to no education on Latino history. Either it was barely mentioned in a world history class, only talked about cultures in Spanish class or a short unit about North American Indigenous peoples.

The lack of education is part of the reason for the stereotypes and misinformation about Latinos and who we are. Latino history in America is American history and it should be added to the curriculum, and the excuse that areas that don't have a large population of Latinos-like Vermont-don't need to learn that part of history is wrong and demeaning. It causes us to feel invisible in our own home and school. Learning and being educated is connected to how everyone thinks as an adult. The lack of Latino history taught can lead to prejudice and biases against this group of people. Drowning out those loud voices that talk with hatred gets us one step closer to complete equality and equity between everyone, it won't be perfect but the hope is that it will be better.

Progress starts here. Celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month is not enough, we can do better than that. School Boards should change the curriculum to include everyone's history, even if there aren't students that are Latino, by not teaching inclusive history it is like we don't exist. In a world history class; tell the story of the colonization of Latin and Central American countries. In American History; let the students know that Latinos had a part in our wars, in the Civil Rights movement, that our voices were loud enough to be heard. Change starts with a clear view of United States education standards shifting to be as inclusive as they claim, changing for all the Latino kids who feel invisible to be proud of who they are and where they come from.



## **Gretchen Wertlieb (South Burlington High School, Freshman)**

When you think of global warming, you probably think of factories, vehicles, and anything else that emits gas, or, more scientifically, greenhouse gasses. But there is one huge factor that not many people think of. Something we contribute to every day. Food waste.

Feeding America is the largest food rescue organization in the country. They send all that food to people in need of meals or food banks. According to Feeding America, about 108 billion pounds of food is wasted every year. That's equivalent to 130 billion meals that could go to people in need. All in all, around 40% of all food is wasted in the US, which comes out to about \$408 billion a year (Feeding America).

Even if you can get fresh food easily from your local grocery store, your family farm, or somewhere else, food waste impacts you more than you think. Food waste sitting in landfills produces tons of methane, a greenhouse gas even more dangerous than carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). "In the United States, food waste is responsible for more than twice as many greenhouse gasses than commercial aviation, leading some experts to believe that reducing food waste is one of our best shots at combating climate change" (New York Times). Greenhouse gasses trap heat in by drifting up into the air and mixing with other gas molecules. In an article from MIT through the Climate Portal, Jesse Kroll, Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Chemical Engineering, is quoted as saying "Greenhouse gas molecules will absorb light...This traps the energy, which would otherwise go back into space, so it has the effect of heating up the atmosphere" (MIT Climate Portal). This, combined with so many other factors of global warming, is enough to heat our planet to the point of destruction.

Although it's a big problem, food waste still has some people skeptical about solutions. Some people don't have a place to compost food, or don't know what to do with it. It's also hard to know what to do with the already giant piles of food in landfills. One thing we can do to decrease food waste is talk to people about it. Getting your neighborhood or town involved with simple practices like composting or a community garden can make a difference. You can also be more mindful when buying produce at the store. The majority of foods in landfills are foods that don't look as pretty as what you would see in a store. Just because that tomato is misshapen or the lettuce has a brown spot doesn't mean they aren't edible.

Another good way to decrease food waste is donating to organizations that rescue food, like Feeding America. You can also donate directly to your local food bank, which provides meals for families in need. This is a great option, because food waste also contributes to food insecurity. Whatever you may choose to do, we can all be more mindful when thinking about our food consumption and the consequences.