



Backgrounder

When the history books are written, 2018 will be remembered as The Year of The Teenage Activist. With the rallying cry, “We are the change!” they’ve marched, registered new voters in record numbers, and taken social media by storm. But most of them are too young to vote. And only 18 percent of eligible 18 to 29-year-olds turned out in the last midterm elections. They tell pollsters they’re going to cast ballots, but then: they don’t. So what’s going to make this election season any different? The answer could just be those under-18s.

High schoolers are enlisting in a bold new Get Out The Vote (GOTV) experiment called The Proxy Project that pairs them -- and Dreamers -- who can’t vote, with young people and “sporadic” voters who *can*. Based on research that shows people are more likely to vote if someone is depending on them, the strategy is to turn high school “activists” into “activators,” who each enlist a single voter who might not cast a ballot without an extra push. That voter pledges to be their “proxy” at the polls in November. The bet is, on Election Day, that one-to-one connection and old-fashioned personal accountability is worth more than an inbox full of GOTV pleas that can too easily be ignored.

“Not being able to vote is so frustrating,” says Ranen Miao, 17, The Proxy Project’s Youth Director, “because our legitimate concerns won’t be taken seriously.” The senior at Milburn High School in New Jersey has been lobbying the state house to lower the voting age to 17. But until that happens, the Proxy Project “changes it up, giving me a way of motivating people who share my views to get out there and do what I can’t do.”

A member of the USA Debate Team, Miao in just a few short weeks has used his power of persuasion to recruit 50 Proxy Project High School Captains in 26 states. Those captains are

tasked with building teams of Activator-Proxy pairs. It's the Activator's responsibility to make sure the Proxy is informed about the candidates and the whens and wheres of voting. The Proxy's only job is to show up at the polls, cast a ballot and then produce a selfie as proof.

The Proxy Project is the brainchild of Susan Ades Stone, an award-winning journalist who learned something about getting people to vote when she ran Women On 20s, an online grassroots campaign that convinced the U.S. Treasury to put a woman's face on paper currency. (Harriet Tubman!) She was inspired by the determination of high school activists after the Parkland shooting, and imagined they could multiply their power if they partnered directly with young people who were otherwise throwing away their votes.

Ades Stone says, "I've always been motivated by the Chinese proverb: "Talk doesn't cook rice." It's not enough, she says, to complain about the things we don't like or even to march and scream and shout. "It's the votes that count in the end," she explains, "and doing one simple thing that, when everyone does it together, makes a difference." With The Proxy Project the "ask" is simple: "I *can't* vote, but will you do it for me? Change can't wait."

Emmy Adams, an 18-year-old from Golden, Colorado, is a born doer. Just weeks after Parkland, she and other students at her school joined with Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting survivors and teen gun violence victims in Pittsburgh to organize a "Vote For Our Lives" rally on the 19th anniversary of the 1999 Columbine school shooting in Littleton, Colorado. She first heard about The Proxy Project last May, at a Teen Vogue summit on student activism, where many young activists were yearning to do *more* than march. She immediately signed on and became one of the nonprofit's founding youth organizers.

"When I would be out registering voters I'd talk to a lot of Dreamers," Emmy says. "They want to vote so badly but they can't. And I thought about how this project would be so great for them, and anyone who cares deeply about issues but is shut out of the democratic process." She'll be voting in her first election this November and her Activator is a young friend with cerebral palsy who worries about health care costs and his future.

Even The Proxy Project itself was the product of an activator -- journalist, novelist and teacher Kate Manning -- who gave her friend Susan the push she needed to start another movement. Together, they built the [The Proxy Project website](#) where "Activators" and their

"Proxies" can sign up to #ProxTheVote. But it's the kids who are running the show, including Manning's son, Oliver Dunne, (a millennial voter) who helped produce their first video.

"As a journalist, it's the stories of these Proxy teams that I find so moving and compelling," said Manning. "The kids are leading us because they fear for their futures and they're tired of waiting for adults to take action. The kids themselves are taking action. And we want to do everything we can to support them in turbo-charging voter turnout in November."

Paige Cromley, a 16-year-old Texan who founded Students Rise, and is another major force behind The Proxy Project, put it best when she said, "Because I *can't* cast a ballot, I'm committed to getting others to realize what a privilege it is and how much it matters."

If the proxy experiment succeeds, this new personalized GOTV model has the power to educate and activate young Americans into 2020 and beyond. They'll become citizens who will understand that full voter-participation is what makes America a true democracy. And they'll take a cue from Alexander Hamilton and say, in unison, "I'm not throwing away my vote."

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