

Q+A with

Kathryn Sikkink

The Ash Center sat down for a conversation with Kathryn Sikkink about her work on voter participation. Sikkink is the Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at HKS and one of Ash's newest faculty affiliates.

You are known for your work on international human rights issues, but you also helped co-chair the School's participation in the Harvard Votes Challenge with Archon Fung [a University effort to encourage eligible students to vote; story on page 8]. How did you go from the world of human rights, and the responsibility to protect, to voting?

Well, first, I've always been interested in human rights. I got interested in human rights as an undergraduate student living in Uruguay during the darkest days of the dictatorship. So I thought a lot about democracy, because Uruguay had been one of the most vibrant and long-lived democracies in Latin America until the coup in 1973.

One of my earliest questions was, what happened in Uruguay? How was it that this vibrant democracy had this repressive military government and became known as the torture chamber of Latin America? Part of the answer to that question is that people stopped believing in democracy. And both the left and the right in Uruguay dismissed the importance of democracy.

How can a country simply dismiss something as fundamental to its way of life as democracy?

The left in Uruguay in the late sixties, early seventies, said it was bourgeois democracy. It was formalistic but it wasn't delivering radical change. And so they turned to armed revolution. And the right denounced democracy because it was allowing these communists—some were communists—to organize.

When I see some people in America today, people like the Antifa, who are advocating violence because they are so disillusioned with our democracy, I get worried, because I've seen it before. And I think it's dangerous.

You have started making the argument that, in a democracy, all eligible citizens not only have a right to vote but also a responsibility to do so.

I got interested in people being indifferent and not taking seriously their responsibility to vote, especially young people. Young people, as you know, vote at much lower levels than any other age group

in this country. So I started saying, “We have a right to vote, but also a responsibility to vote.” And I got a lot of pushback because people feel they have a right to vote and they have a right not to vote.

What did some of this pushback look like?

People fear that when you start talking about individual responsibility, you take the burden off the state for not protecting the right to vote. So, if you talk about responsibility to vote, people suggest you may be ignoring voter suppression. But of course we’re concerned about things that the state must do to improve voter turnout. Of course we’re concerned about suppression.

[The reality is that] voter suppression is a conscious and a successful policy in many states in this country. Working on voter turnout has to be as conscious a policy as fighting voter suppression. We just can’t sit back and wait until the state delivers the goods. We also can’t sit back and only lobby the state as if individuals had nothing to do with the problem. We have simultaneous problems that require us to focus on demanding that the state do a better job to respect rights to vote, as well as mobilizing individuals about their responsibility to vote.

During the Harvard Votes Challenge, did you see a change in attitude among faculty here—were they more encouraging of their students to vote?

In fact, I saw a change in faculty around the country. All of a sudden I’m being asked to sign a petition for Citizens’ Day—to make Election Day a federal holiday. Or to make, at least, Election Day a University holiday.

What more could universities do, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, to really build and to foster this culture of voting, and this responsibility to vote?

We should have a University holiday. We need to get rid of Columbus Day, and we need to add Citizens’ Day. Columbus Day is a completely outdated holiday. You can call it Indigenous Peoples’ Day, but we all know it’s celebrating something we really don’t want to celebrate anymore. So let’s turn Columbus Day into Citizens’ Day at the University level. We don’t need to wait for anyone to do that. I think that should be our next campaign. Why? Because Harvard sets an example for universities around this country. So people can say, “Harvard made it Citizens’ Day. All the universities in this country should make Election Day, Citizens’ Day.”

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

EVENTS



“Government is not about politics. It’s about lives”

—San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz speaking with students last fall at an event co-organized by the Program on Crisis Leadership



“Only 3.5% of philanthropy is going to environmental protection”

—Tony Saich, director of the Ash Center, discussing the state of philanthropy in China at an Ash conference at Harvard Center Shanghai



“How do we expect folks to become contributing members of society if we cut off their way to contribute even when they’re behind bars?”

—Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney speaking at HKS last fall about the fight to restore voting rights for felons in Virginia