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Washington State Midterm Elections: Redistricting, Debates and Student Involvement

Emma Ferguson, Staff Reporter

With general election day in Washington State quickly approaching Nov. 8, the optimal time to register to vote and read up on the candidates is now.

One of the most significant races in state politics is for one of Washington's two seats in the U.S. Senate. Patty Murray, the incumbent and five cycle seat holder, is facing competition from the Republican newcomer Tiffany Smiley.

Murray's campaign is most notably pushing for family paid leave and to protect abortion rights. She has recently raised over \$17 million in campaign funds.

Smiley has a robust agenda, which includes stopping immigration policy Title 42 from being lifted at the southern border and banning the federal government from forgiving student loan debt. She has raised over \$12 million in campaign funds.

Seattle, which sits in the seventh congressional district, has incumbent Pramila Jayapal (D) running against Cliff Moon (R), a water engineer, consulting oceanographer and president of Moon Construction Company.

Jayapal, who won her last two elections with 80% of the vote, has been vocal about raising the federal minimum wage and establishing guaranteed universal healthcare. Serving in the state legislature before her appointment to Congress, she is currently the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Jayapal has raised over \$2.5 million in campaign funds.

Moon is endorsed by the King County Republican Party and Family Policy Institute of Washington Action, and is a self-identified non-career politician. His campaign is pro-firearm, pro-police, in support of building a wall at the border and attributes the homelessness crisis to "the policies [of] a government that ignores individual responsibility and rewards self-destructive behavior." Moon has raised just over \$5,000 in campaign funds.

For more information on who is running, the state's election website and voter's guide provide the deadlines and more information for voters. Crosscut, a non-profit news organization based in the Pacific Northwest, also has a voter's guide.

The upcoming Murray-Smiley debate will allow voters to get a better sense of the candidates. They are scheduled to appear at Gonzaga, Oct. 23.



Natalie Schorr

Seattle U was chosen to be a host location for a second debate, Oct. 25. Negotiations surrounding the event at Seattle U are in progress, with no confirmation from Murray to participate.

“Usually debates are held in places that are seen as both politically important but also politically neutral. And it’s not an accident that the debates are being held at two Jesuit universities,” Patrick Schoettmer, an associate teaching professor at Seattle U, said. “Jesuits kind of straddle that line, it’s a religious institution which makes conservatives feel more comfortable about it, but Jesuits tend to be progressive Catholics which makes democrats feel more comfortable as well.”

Murray and Smiley’s second debate remains up in the air with Murray hesitant to appear for a second debate, a phenomenon that Schoettmer says is unsurprising.

“Traditionally, if you are losing the race you want to have more debates. Because debates are free airtime, free attention and give you arguably the biggest platform to make your case. Way more people know who Patty Murray is than Tiffany Smiley, so it’s in her interest to have more debates,” Schoettmer said.

Having a debate on campus could also affect the turnout for young voters, such as those in attendance at Seattle U. Consistently, Americans aged 18-24 (a demographic that encompasses the majority of college students) vote much less often than other citizens, but there are a lot of reasons why young voters might not show up at the ballot box.

According to Schoettmer, the two main reasons why 18 to 24 year olds don’t go to the polls is because of the lack of a strong political identity and residential stability as compared to older generations.

But that is not to say that people ages 18 to 24 aren’t aware of their lack of presence at the polls. Students involved in political clubs on campus and involved in political organizations outside of their university are trying to counter misconceptions around getting civically involved.

Isabella Maffei, a fourth-year public affairs and political science double major at Seattle U, has been a campaign manager for three local and county level campaigns. She was also a legislative intern for state senator and alumnus Joe Nguyen during this year’s legislative session and now works for the chair of the King County Democrats.

“Local politics needs young people to be involved and is a lot less hard to get involved in than most people think. A misconception college students often have is that you need connections to get involved when really getting involved is how you make those connections,” Maffei wrote to The Spectator.

Liam Jenness, a fourth-year political science major, was a volunteer in a 2019 campaign and learned that getting involved in politics can make a lasting impact.

“There are a whole bunch of political organizations that are outside of individual campaigns that I think are probably better if you want to affect long lasting political change and that’s your goal, not just electing one particular candidate,” Jenness said.

In fact, there are several candidates who are affiliated with or graduated from Seattle U running for office in Washington this cycle. Dan Phan Doen, who received a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science in 2017 from Seattle U, is currently running for Senate with no party preference. Also running for Senate is Ravin Pierre, who prefers the Democratic party and was a member of the university’s Master’s Data Science Advisory Board Member in 2019. Marquez Tiggs, a current student working on his Master of Business Administration, is running for Secretary of State as a Democrat.

There are several clubs on campus focused on civic engagement, providing opportunities to get involved and get educated about politics. Clubs like the Young Democrats and the Federalist Society, for example, are spaces for students to talk with each other about politics and policy.

Natalie Kenoyer, a fourth-year history and political science double major, is the founder and chair of Young Democrats.

“I founded it because I was not seeing a central area to plug into Seattle or Washington politics and that was something that I was really interested in. It’s really hard to get into that as a young person when a lot of people don’t realize how friendly people in politics can be,” Kenoyer said.

The Young Democrats Club helps register voters and get the voters out to the polls, as well as share job opportunities. They have been talking about the upcoming election, according to Kenoyer, especially about Seattle U is situated within Washington’s legislative landscape.

The Federalist Society declined to comment about the upcoming elections.

Another way to get involved without the commitment of a club is by sending letters to potential candidates, something that James Gamboa, a fourth-year English major, did for the first time this year.

Prompted by his professor for a class about the U.S. border, Gamboa wrote to Smiley about some of her agenda plans pertaining to the border, specifically stopping the lift of Title 42.

"It was easy to fall into the trap of writing things out of emotions and the rhetorical strategies that evoke emotions. But at the same time, the easy thing was that there was a lot of information out there," Gamboa said.

Gamboa sent a letter by mail, through Smiley's website, and is hoping to give her a physical copy when she comes to campus for the debate. Overall, it was a positive experience for Gamboa, and made him more invested in understanding candidate platforms.

"I also want to encourage people to look at the agendas for these candidates because sometimes the state and federal elections can kind of go over our heads, but they entail a lot more than you might think," Gamboa said.

There are several important pieces of legislation for residents on campus and within the state that could influence voters, most notably abortion rights and the economy, according to Fourth-year Political Science and Economics double major Nathan Meyer.

"All eyes are on suburban women to see if Roe v. Wade will be a strong enough motivator to elect Democrats when the historical indicators are pointing to a Republican blowout in the house," Meyer said. "Republicans are trumping up talks of crime following the usual conservative scare tactic campaigns targeting similar suburban demographics, but also have rising prices of gas and groceries to use as a cudgel against a unified democratic government."

This year, more than ever, it is even more pertinent to come to the polls prepared as Washington just redistricted, the final map being adopted Feb. 22. According to the Washington State Redistricting Commission, every 10 years the state redraws its boundaries for the congressional and legislative districts with census information provided by the federal government to ensure that all the districts have the same number of residents.

Redistricting could have an impact on the outcome of the elections, especially in the eighth district, which is the most undetermined race.

"Whenever the lines are changed a little bit, there are always some people who have never voted for the incumbent before and so they have no attachment to them," Schoettmer said. "It might also bring in new voters who might be more or less inclined to support the previous incumbent, depending on the goals of the redistricting."

The impact of voting has become more apparent to Seattle voters as elections determine, now more than ever, local policy influence over national issues such as education and abortion rights. The work that goes into being an informed voter can be daunting, but there are many resources to make it easier.

The deadline for online and by mail-in is Oct. 31 and for in-person voting is as late as the day of, Nov. 8.