

Brian Contreras, DC – 2016

Washington Week or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Wonk

Living in D.C. is strange, but living in D.C. and being a political science geek is even stranger. You read about America's latest foreign policy decision in the news, and then you walk past the State Department on the way to school. You write an essay about press freedoms for class, and then interview the director of the Newseum as background research. You've gone to the National Portrait Gallery purely to use their (always clean) bathroom, and you've taken selfies at most of the places in the *House of Cards* opening credits. A friend of yours once sat next to Bill Clinton in a Starbucks.

What this means, I suppose, is that it takes a lot to really excite me when it comes to politically-oriented experiences. I can be, I must admit, occasionally a bit jaded.

Washington Week broke through that jadedness; and it wasn't even just the whole Obama thing.

The opportunity to meet real people who are doing with their lives what I hope to one day do with my own was one incomparable to any other experience I've had in my life, not least so because I didn't know that some of those jobs existed until I'd already realized that I wanted to do them (here's to you, Senate parliamentarian!) Hearing Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg herself talk about the intersection of feminism and law, or Senator Mazie Hirono discuss her experience as an immigrant in Congress, were some of the most inspirational moments of my young adult life. If every young American had an experience a tenth as rousing as this one, I have no doubt in my mind that youth political participation would hit 100%.

But perhaps more valuable than any single guest speaker were the student participants themselves; teenagers who, though hailing from every spot on the map and every shade on the ideological spectrum, were all brought together by their shared passion for effecting social change via politics. Despite living in the nation's capital, most of my peers here don't harbor the same obsession with politics that I do. Washington Week was perhaps the first time that I found myself surrounded by people who had just as many opinions as me, and were just as willing to get in loud, impassioned, emotive discussions about them. And if the experience didn't wholly rewrite my conception of Republicans, it at least fleshed it out and gave a human face to my second favorite of the two major political parties.

Ultimately, mere words seem incapable of fully capturing my USSYP experience in any meaningful way. But it seems worth trying to do so anyways. After spending a week listening to professional orators, talking with journalists and policy writers and lawyers, and engaging with other students insistent on filling every waking moment with one debate or another, I at the very least have to believe that with the right words, the world can truly be changed.