

Youth Activism: How & Why?

After being elected president in 2024, Donald Trump appointed Elon Musk the Co-lead of the Department of Government Efficiency. Musk was haphazardly given this position by Trump with little to no consideration for how it would affect the country. As an unelected billionaire, Musk's new role enraged Americans nationwide. The Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, is said to modernize government systems, optimize productivity, and reduce unnecessary costs, despite costing taxpayers an estimated \$21-135 billion in 2025. When over 10% of Americans are said to be in poverty by the 2024 census, it made no sense to cut the funding for government programs that promised healthcare, housing, and food for underprivileged people.

Protests were set up nationwide, including in Palo Alto, California. When Caroline Cheilek-Klaiber stepped foot to the event, she was sixteen years old at her first ever protest. Her long copper hair was tied up into a messy bun as she arrived. Scanning the crowd through her round glasses, Caroline noticed that almost everyone was clearly an adult. She could count the number of young people there on one hand. Intimidated by this demographic, her lean frame still moved on and approached the crowd. They were welcoming, excited to see someone as young as her and so passionate. They welcomed her with open arms and she stood on the side of the road holding her homemade sign and chanting with the crowd.

Many young people, like myself, feel inclined to get involved and fight against injustices we see in the world, but no one ever tells us how or if it actually makes a difference. Caroline Cheilek-Klaiber is a student at Los Altos High School, and activist. She attends political protests on a regular basis and is an advocate for more youth to get involved in politics.

On March 1st 1968, 200-300 students walked out of Wilson High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. This school was populated with majority Mexican or "Chicano/a" students from low-income families. The school was brimming with students, full of outdated

curriculum, and lacked any sort of support or encouragement to pursue higher education. Meanwhile, other schools in the district had adequate funding, up-to-date books, and supportive staff. The district was not allocating the same amount of funds for the students of primarily Chicano schools as it was for the others. The students walked out that day to make a statement: to plead with the district to acknowledge them. Thousands of teens across East Los Angeles saw this and recognized the injustice. In response, throughout early March of 1968, over 15,000 high school students walked out of their classrooms in East Los Angeles. These students were demanding a list of 39 points to be met in their school district. During the walkouts, students were beaten and arrested by police officers. Despite being faced with violence, these high school students were unrelenting and eventually got some of their demands met.

Youth activism has always been a part of American history. During the Vietnam war, when adults were participating in counterculture and preaching peace, students would show up to school with black arm bands representing the same ideal. Many schools banned this type of dress in order to minimize conflict but many students did not listen. This can be seen in the 1969 Tinker vs. Des Moines court ruling. 13 year-old Mary Beth Tinker and friends decided to start wearing these white arm bands to class. Four students in total had gotten suspended wearing the arm bands so Mary's family took the case to court. The court ruled that this suspension was not lawful due to the freedom of speech. When this ruling went through, it proved to students and youth nationwide that they had a voice and could use it.

Becoming a youth activist is never easy and often requires deliberate steps in order to accomplish. It all starts with crafting a meaningful message. Since attending her first protests, 17 year-old Caroline Cheilek-Klaiber has been going to events and getting involved with local political organizations for nearly two years. It all started with an interest in history. Starting in middle school, she couldn't get enough of learning about the past, including injustices and things often swept underneath the rug. She soon realized that history didn't end in the past, it

was the present and the future. According to her twin sibling, "...[their] brother had been interested in history when he got into [...] eighth grade [and] when we were in sixth grade and we just started talking about a lot of history and also politics at the dinner table and I think that's where she started to get interested in [history]". Caroline tried her best to stay up-to-date on the news and was very bothered by a lot of the things that were happening in the world. "Protesting and getting involved was a thing people did in the past. Like, you know, you look at America in the '60s. And so I thought, 'Well, I might as well do the same'." In Palo Alto, a sixteen year old Caroline stepped foot onto her first protest. Looking around, she was surrounded by adults, it was hard to be involved in a space that she was the minority in. Despite this she felt welcomed by everyone around her and as if it was a safe space to voice her opinions and be a part of something larger than herself. She came with handmade signs, and held them above her head on the side of the street. "I wasn't sure what I was doing, but it was great. People were very welcoming," she says.

She worked on changing her mindset from thinking that she alone couldn't change anything to realizing how powerful working together as a collective is. She describes it as "a powerful force and that's what you need cause when you get into like the idea of like 'oh I don't need to contribute to this because I'm just one person'...". The importance of collective power cannot be understated. The idea is that many small actions can accumulate to a big wave of change flooding over. When we are at the mercy of billionaires like Trump, and Musk, it is impossible to fight the systems reinforced by hundreds of years of power and corruption as individuals. Big protests such as the "No Kings" protest demonstrate hundreds of thousands of people gathering together, with the same protest often happening in many locations across the country on the same day. When I attended the No Kings protest in San Jose California on [date], there were individuals with signs referencing a wide variety of things. Some were advocating for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to be defunded, to restore rights for transfinder people, to separate government and religion, and much more. Although each one of

these individuals had a different angle, they were all able to gather together as a big unified group. When protestors block the streets, boycott stores or schools, and strike, the individuals in power have no choice but to address them. The accumulation of so many voices is not only what drives change but also what fosters community and comradery amongst individuals.

The heavy weight many teen activists are constantly holding up is overbearing and having a community of people in and out of the political world is important. Caroline expresses how mentally draining constantly keeping up with the news has been for her. It had gotten to a point where she would prioritize these events over doing her schoolwork or hanging out with friends. In order to counteract this, Caroline found it essential to make time for herself and only herself. She spends much of her free time writing and making music. She takes orchestra at Los Altos High School and attends music lessons outside of school, she finds it to be a very calming and effective outlet. It is important to her to recognize her identity as an activist while making room for other activities in her life.

Additionally to the risk to mental health that participation in activism can cause, it also comes with a safety risk. During the East Los Angeles Walk Outs mentioned earlier, participants got arrested and physically hurt by police. This happens often in protests and Caroline herself has felt in danger. While protesting in the Bay Area is usually pretty safe, there have been times when she was in San Francisco where adults she was with had gotten arrested and she "...was worried that [she] was going to be drawn up in that". This is not said to scare anyone away from activism, but to expose the reality so youth can understand exactly what they're getting into. Historically protests have not been the safest and it can be seen in every instance whether the initial event was meant to be peaceful or not. Law enforcement can go too far at times and counter-protestors are often blinded by their rage. While Caroline describes this risk as "worth it", Sandra doesn't necessarily feel the same way in some cases. "I always like to call her at least once per protest to check in," he says. Attending these types of events with people you

trust can be vital to guaranteeing the highest level of safety. Being in a crowd of adults can be not only scary but dangerous especially if counter protestors are present.

The political state of this country is uncertain right now, it could be headed in a direction that we may not be ready to face. More officials that conflict with the core of the beliefs that America was founded on are getting elected. Rights for LGBTQ+ people, women, people of color, and disabled people are waning and seem to be going backwards from what we spent so long working towards. With that being said, it is more important than ever to advocate for what you believe in. This doesn't necessarily even mean attending protests, "You can write letters to senators, representatives, you can call them. That's a huge part of what a lot of organizations here do. So stuff like that is still important".

Youth activism works. It is the driving force of change in the past, the present, and the future.

"If we want something to happen in the future, we are the ones. We are the instruments of change. We have to push for it. Otherwise, no one's going to" - Caroline

Works Cited

Fountain, Aaron G. "The Forgotten History of High School Student Activism | *The Time, Made by History*, 27 Mar. 2025.

time.com/7266632/history-high-school-student-activism/.

Cheilek-Klaiber, Caroline. Personal interview. 1 April 2026.

Cheilek-Klaiber, Sebastian. Personal interview. 1 March 2025.

Gasch, Renee, and Julia Reticker-Flynn. "Youth Activist Toolkit." Advocates for Youth,

www.advocatesforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Youth-Activist-Toolkit.pdf.

Daniels, Ellen. "Activism in Youth: It's a Good Thing | UVA School of Education and Human Development." University of Virginia, 22 Aug. 2017.

education.virginia.edu/news-stories/activism-youth-its-good-thing.

Chakhunashvili, Konstantine. "Mental Health State in Activists during Political Turmoil." BMC Psychology, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 26 Sept. 2025,

pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12465690/.

Aldeeb, Ahmed. "The Power of Youth Activism." Key Club, 10 Feb. 2023.

www.keyclub.org/news/youth-activism/.

