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A Blue Wave and Red Flags

After a historic Democratic midterm sweep, Harvard students weigh hope and distrust in the federal government.

By CAROLINE STOHRER '28

On Tuesday, Nov. 3, voters nationwide cast their ballots in one of the most contentious midterm elections in recent history after months of furor over federal policies, legal battles over voting rights, and aggressive campaign efforts by the Trump administration. The results were staggering: Democrats regained control of both chambers of Congress, flipping eight Senate seats, nearly 30 House districts, and five governorships. The election also marked a series of historic firsts, including the election of the nation's first Black woman governor, first Muslim U.S. senator, and first openly gay male senator.

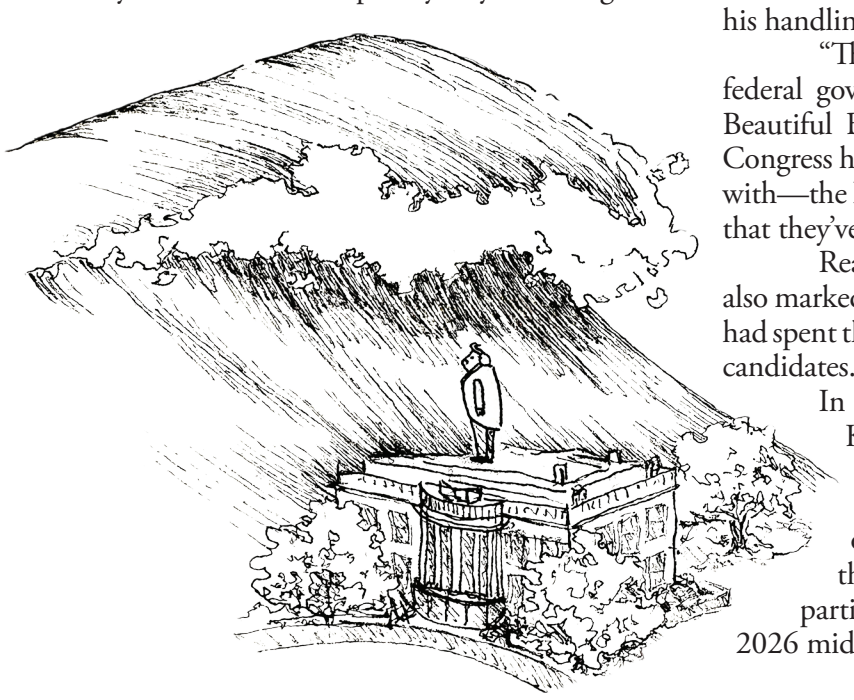
Young voters were pivotal to what some have dubbed a "blue wave." The AP VoteCast found that seven in 10 voters under 30 voted blue, compared with a roughly even split among all voters in 2024. These results mirror the Harvard Institute of Politics Fall 2026 Youth Poll, which showed Democrats leading by 21 points among registered young voters and 37 points among what the IOP classified as "likely voters."

At Harvard, this election comes amid broader questions about young Americans' political engagement and priorities. Study after study has reported Gen Z's disillusionment with government effectiveness and the partisan divide; in the IOP's 2025 poll, only 19% of young voters trusted the federal government to do the right thing most or all of the time. In this context, Harvard students are reflecting on the midterm results and what this election means for the future of American politics.

"I feel like I would trust my local government more than the federal government," Tess Sumner '29 told the "Harvard Independent." "For me specifically—in New Hampshire—living in such a rural place, there's not a lot of money corruption because nobody rich really lives around there, so that's not as much of a factor as it is in federal politics."

New Hampshire's election results reflected this distinction between state and national politics. Democrat Chris Pappas won the state's open U.S. Senate seat, campaigning against the Trump administration's policies on health care, tariffs, and the war in Iran. At the same time, Republican Gov. Kelly Ayotte won reelection by running on her first-term record and emphasizing housing affordability and low taxes. Ayotte maintained relatively high approval ratings despite Trump's unpopularity in the state and her reluctance to engage with Trump.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that I trust it completely," Sumner continued. "I think that no matter what side of the aisle you're on, there's always some corruption because politics has become so money-focused. But hopefully, by winning back some of the control in Congress, we can finally have some accountability in the government."



With Democrats set to take control of Congress in January, party leaders have signaled plans to oversee the Trump administration. They plan to prioritize investigations into the Department of Homeland Security, including the administration's immigration enforcement practices and allegations of abuses of power.

"For me, honestly, the biggest [issue] was ICE and the dealing with immigration. Seeing people murdered in the street … Alex Pretti and stuff like that … was one of the worst things ever," Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences student Grant McIntyre said.

Pretti was fatally shot by a Border Patrol agent in January in Minneapolis during a federal immigration enforcement operation, amid protests following the earlier fatal shooting of another Minnesotan, Renée Good.

"To be honest, the fact that the federal government can go send masked agents into the streets and literally just shoot innocents and kill them. That was definitely the most important thing for me," McIntyre said.

Beyond immigration enforcement and concerns over executive power, voters also expressed frustration with the more immediate effects of federal policy on their daily lives, particularly rising prices and the cost of living. "I am not a single-issue voter, but I think that abortion, immigration, and the economy are my top three issues," Lauren Lee '30, who voted in New Jersey, said.

Economic concerns dominated the election. According to an October Associated Press-NORC poll, roughly eight in 10 registered voters identified the economy or cost of living as among their top issues. The Harvard Youth Poll similarly found that 91% of registered young voters considered the cost of living important to their vote.

The war in Iran, tariffs, and rising health care costs further intensified these concerns. The conflict, which began in February, contributed to higher energy prices and mounting federal expenditures, with the Pentagon estimating its cost to taxpayers at $47.1 billion as of Oct. 16. Meanwhile, Trump's tariff policies drew criticism for driving up consumer prices. Americans faced rising health insurance premiums, particularly as enhanced Affordable Care Act subsidies expired at the end of 2025.

These economic pressures were especially pronounced among young Americans. According to the Harvard Youth Poll, nearly half of respondents said their personal financial situation had worsened since Trump took office, while 77% disapproved of his handling of the economy.

"There's really not much I've liked about the federal government," McIntyre said. "Like the Big, Beautiful Bill. Pretty much all of the decisions the Congress has made in the past two years I've disagreed with—the Iran War? I disagree with the whole premise that they've used to wage the war in Iran."

Reactions to federal policy aside, the election also marked a turning point for Harvard students who had spent the past two years organizing for Democratic candidates.

In an op-ed following former Vice President Kamala Harris's defeat in 2024, former Harvard for Harris co-president Ethan C. Kelly '25 and two fellow student organizers urged their peers to channel their disappointment into political action, particularly through local campaigns and the 2026 midterms.

Two years later, Kelly, who is now a House Aide in Leverett House, said he was "ecstatic" about the results, pointing to Democratic victories in traditionally Republican states, including Texas, where Democrats swept statewide races.

"I was also interested by the reversal of young men away from the Republican Party," Kelly said. "After 2024, the media went on endlessly about young men being permanent members of the GOP. This election proved that wrong."

Kelly explained how political engagement among Harvard students has "skyrocketed" since 2024, particularly following the Trump administration's pressure campaign against the University in 2025. He pointed to students canvassing in Maine and taking time off from school to work on campaigns in Michigan and Texas as examples of campus activism translating into national political participation.

"The targeting of Harvard, and by extension, high educational institutions, has definitely made students more engaged, on a local and national level," Kelly said.

Looking ahead, Kelly said the election underscored the importance of Democrats reaching voters across demographic groups and geographic regions, rather than assuming that recent electoral gains would translate into lasting support.

"Young voters care about the same issues as everyday Americans. Full stop," Kelly said. "Democrats did well with young voters, but just as Trump did in 2024, they cannot take anything for granted."

"If Democrats want to win everywhere, they must compete everywhere," he added. Beyond partisan differences, the election also highlighted broader concerns about democratic institutions and public confidence in the electoral process. Harvard's Fall 2026 Youth Poll found that only 34% of young Americans expressed a great deal or fair amount of trust that the midterm elections would be conducted fairly and accurately.

On election night, President Trump said he was "absolutely willing" to work with Democrats and accept the midterm election results. In the days since, however, he has reverted to his previous claims of election manipulation.

"Does anybody really believe that this 'Election' was honest. How could the Polls be so wrong???" Trump posted Monday, Nov. 9, on Truth Social. "Some early voting 'dumps' were so large that it was impossible to win, no matter how many people went to vote. It's all about the machines, which are far more important than the voter!"

Despite lingering distrust in political institutions, students—and, it seems, young voters as a whole—are hopeful about the incoming Congress and the power of democratic engagement. The Harvard Youth Poll found that 66% of likely young voters believed political participation could make a great deal or a fair amount of difference on the issues that mattered to them.

"I'm very unhappy with the federal government, but I do trust the systems that we have to keep them in check," Lee said. "I'm looking to the positive, and I'm open to the future here."

Caroline Stohrer '28 (carolinestohrer@college.harvard.edu) is the Breaking News Editor for the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Caleb Boyce '29

Disillusionment, Distrust and Demand for Change

The Harvard Public Opinion Project's Fall 2026 poll finds that young Americans have low hopes for the country's future and their own.

By ELLE DU PONT '29

The Harvard Public Opinion Project (HPOP) recently released its 53rd edition of the Harvard Youth Poll, the largest survey of young adults in the United States. Released on Oct. 22, the poll showed growing disillusionment among young Americans, consistent with the frustration young voters expressed in the midterm elections.

Run by the Institute of Politics (IOP) and supervised by John Della Volpe, IOP Director of Polling, the Youth Poll offers a unique way to track young Americans' political, economic, and social values. This edition surveyed 2,024 Americans ages 18 to 29 on their faith in the government, their concerns for the future, and more.

"This edition surveyed 2,024 Americans ages 18 to 29 on their faith in the government, their concerns for the future, and more."

Research Team Leaders, or student leaders within HPOP, lead smaller teams of four to five members, each writing different sections of the poll. The teams then come together to make final decisions on the poll, and they reconvene once the results come back to analyze the data as a whole team. The teams publish their final report each semester, providing a unique commentary on youth politics and serving as a benchmark for future generations.

This Fall 2026 poll cycle was unique due to the midterm elections. "In a midterm year, there's two big changes to our poll," Juan Wulff '29, a Research Team Leader for HPOP, explained. "For this poll, we pretty much only asked questions relating to or adjacent to the midterms. We didn't really do any more social science research questions or explore topics of those kinds."

Because the midterms were in early November, the team also moved up its release: the poll, normally released in early December, was written on a faster timeline so the team could receive the data ahead of the elections.

"We focused on four big areas. The first was what are voters' top issues and which party do they trust more to handle these issues," Sophia Robertson '28, the 2026 Chair of HPOP, explained. The other three areas were how those issues translated into positions, how they affected voters' financial security, and what youth voter turnout would look like. "How are youth feeling about the state of the country? Are they feeling hopeful or fearful? Are they ready to participate or not?"

"We're seeing a record low 9% of young Americans say that the country is on the right track. That's down from 13% in the spring," Robertson continued.

The poll also found that youth voting intention is below 2018 and 2022 levels, with a larger decline among young Republicans. Thirty-three percent of young people polled planned to vote in the elections, compared with 40% in 2018 and 2022.

"Young voters, despite being disillusioned, are still turning out to the polls pretty consistently. Definitely at lower levels, however, than the average elector," Wulff said.

Voter turnout is usually measured through exit polls or precinct-level analysis, so much of the data from these midterm elections has yet to be synthesized and isn't yet available to compare with the poll's predictions, according to Wulff.

"While higher enthusiasm among Democrats might reflect anti-Republican sentiment, new dynamics are also shaping who feels motivated and excited to vote."



Another key finding from the poll that is likely affecting many young Americans' decision to vote is that this year is the first time in the poll's history that more people believe they will be worse off financially than their parents, at 27%, compared to 25% who believe they will be better off. This may be affecting many young Americans' decision to vote.

"I think a recurring message we see among candidates that won [in the midterm elections] is that they really focus their campaigns on economic policy and on the cost of living, and that's what's really driving young Americans," Maurits Acosta '29, the Director of Outreach and Partnership, added.

According to multiple HPOP members, the recent blue wave in the midterm elections reflects young people turning out to express the disillusionment captured in the poll data. Cited factors include the war in Iran and decisions by Republican lawmakers that have affected the current affordability crisis.

"I think a lot of people have qualified it. It's not necessarily an affirmation of the Democratic Party, but it's a rejection of the current ruling party, which is the Republicans," Sydney Burns '29, the Director of Community, explained.

Of those polled who

supported Democratic control of Congress, 51% said they were voting against Republicans, compared with 49% who said they were voting for Democrats. Meanwhile, 62% of those who supported Republican control were for Republicans, compared with 38% against Democrats.

"There is this deep distrust in both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party that I think we see in election results," Grant Shadman '29, a Research Team Leader, added. "I think that that is an important thing to consider in future elections."

"This trend also reflects the affordability-focused campaigns many of these candidates ran, which speak to young voters' main priority heading into the voting booth: the cost of living."

Still, Democrats appear more energized to get more people to vote. "Some of that can be attributed to the party in power. You know, the party not in power is always more excited to vote in the midterms," Robertson said. The partisan gap between Republicans and Democrats who plan to vote is 16 percentage points. "But looking back at 2018, we're seeing less young Republicans likely to vote now than they were then, when their party was also in power."

"I think Democratic candidates are really energizing young people in a way that we haven't seen in a long time," Robertson emphasized. While higher enthusiasm among Democrats might reflect anti-Republican sentiment, new dynamics are also shaping who feels motivated and excited to vote.

Beyond partisan dynamics, young voters had specific priorities. Some of the most important areas were what the team expected. "Cost of living has always been one of the biggest issues that is important to voters, and that's what we saw this poll with an issue battery that we conducted," Martina Jaramillo '29, the Director of Communications, said.

The issue battery, a set of Likert-scale questions, asks respondents to rate how important each issue is to them; the team then ranks the issues by the percentage of respondents who rated them important. "Price of living came at the top of the ladder."

However, some results surprised the HPOP team, including how much young Americans care about corruption in their government. Eighty-eight percent think corruption is important to their midterm vote (the only thing more important being the cost of living), with 56% saying it is extremely important. This outcome was unusual, as the share of Americans who say corruption is a major problem in government is usually lower. It rose 16 percentage points from 2024 to 2026, according to a 2026 Gallup survey of U.S. adults.

"Young people are thinking very critically about how politicians are speaking to them, how campaign finance works, who's funding what candidates, and how all of those things directly affect their day-to-day cost of living, which is really new," Robertson explained. "Historically, young people have thought about corruption in this more general way of 'good governance is important' and not kind of specific to 'corruption is affecting the money in my pocket.'"

Another surprise was broader-than-expected support for democratic socialist policies. The poll included more questions on democratic socialism than in years past, given the rising popularity of self-described democratic socialists like Zohran Mamdani. "When we analyzed certain policies that you may associate with more socialist-like tendencies, like Medicare for All, we saw more uniform support across both political parties. So I think that was something that was also surprising to us," Burns commented.

This trend also reflects the affordability-focused campaigns many of these candidates ran, which speak to young voters' main priority heading into the voting booth: the cost of living. In a related finding, the cost of health care ranked as the third most important issue for voters, with 46% ranking it extremely important and 35% ranking it important. "Young Americans continue to vote based on their pocketbooks," Acosta emphasized.

Normally, the poll covers a wider range of issues than just those directly related to the election. "Usually, our polls are very comprehensive in terms of thinking about all the things that underlie the political dynamics. So the social dynamics, the religion, the community, everything else that underlies political beliefs and voting outcomes," Robertson said. For example, in Spring 2026, Wulff created questions around crime and how young Americans deal with disorder and safety in their communities.

"Looking from the past to the future, the HPOP team still sees a young America that cares about its country."

The team also conducts focus groups in places with important upcoming elections, whether in key battleground states or in high-profile races like the 2025 New York City mayoral race. "We go and visit these states, talk to local young voters, and try to conduct focus groups that pull from bipartisan youth, so ages 18 to 29, and try to understand their views and what issues matter to them, and then we use that to build our survey questions for the following semester," Jaramillo explained.

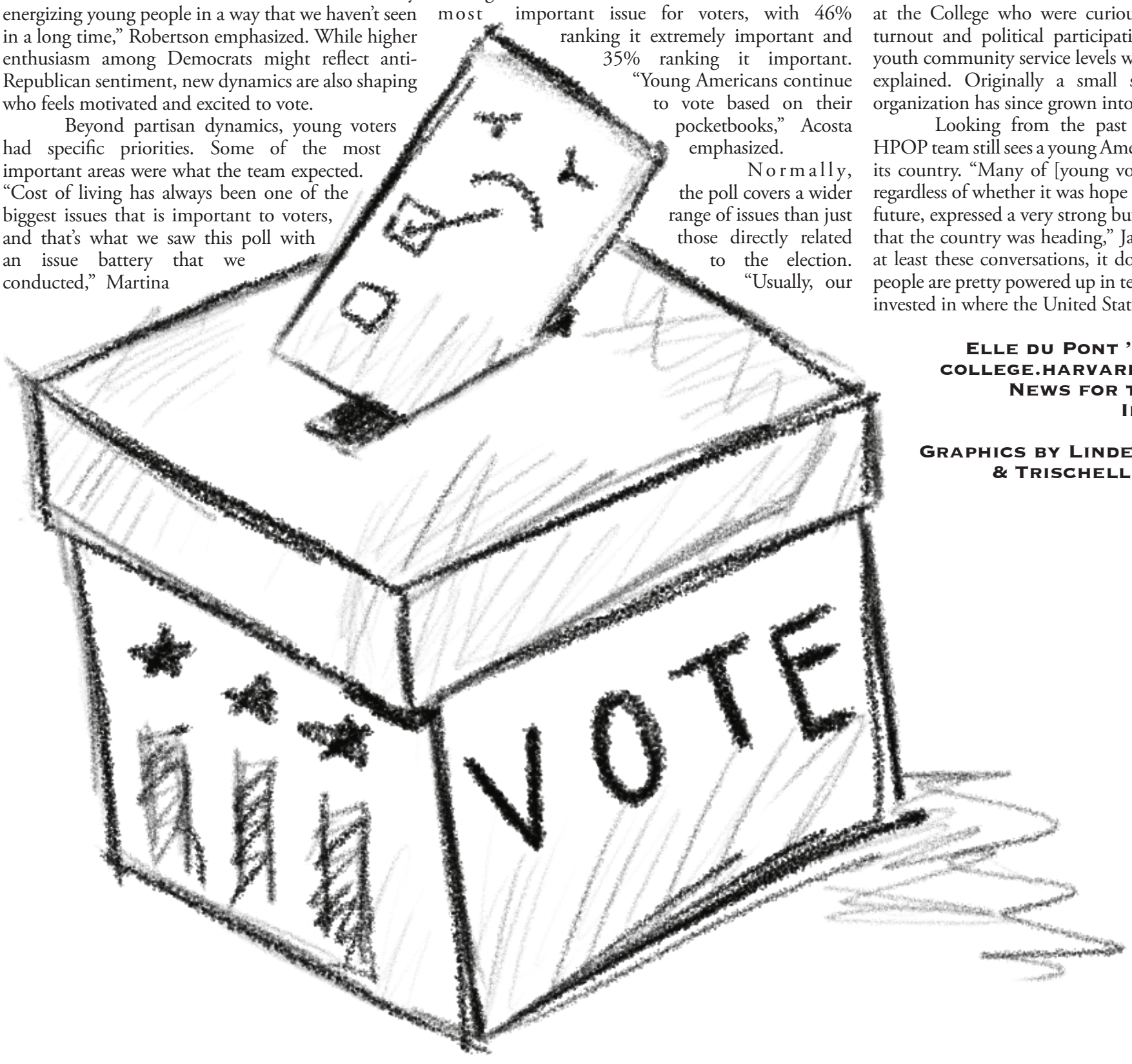
These focus groups give HPOP a sense of what is important to young Americans and what they expect to see in their upcoming poll; it was in these focus groups that the team first noticed the trend of disillusionment. "We get to help conduct those focus groups and talk to young Americans about the contextualized, richer picture behind our data. Because we just get the numbers, but they can tell us what they're feeling," Robertson added.

HPOP was founded in 2000 by two students at the College who were curious why youth voter turnout and political participation were low while youth community service levels were high, Robertson explained. Originally a small survey project, the organization has since grown into a national survey.

Looking from the past to the future, the HPOP team still sees a young America that cares about its country. "Many of [young voters] still expressed, regardless of whether it was hope or it was fear for the future, expressed a very strong buy-in to the direction that the country was heading," Jaramillo said. "From at least these conversations, it does seem that young people are pretty powered up in terms of elections and invested in where the United States is going."

Elle du Pont '29 (edupont@college.harvard.edu) writes News for the "Harvard Independent."

Graphics by Linden McCarl '28 & Trischelle Afihene '27



Harvard's $68 Billion Question

Why, even with a record endowment, Harvard keeps cutting funding.

By ELLIOT HUNTER CHUNG '29

On Oct. 15, the Harvard Management Company released Harvard's annual financial report, detailing the state of the University's endowment. The report shows that Harvard's endowment grew to a record $68 billion, generating a 27.1% return. At the same time, Harvard cut $104 million from salaries and wages, in part through layoffs.

The gap between those figures has angered unions and faculty and prompted calls for Harvard to draw more from its endowment. But Wellesley economist Phillip Levine, who studies university finances, told the "Harvard Independent" that a record endowment value does not create spending money. Harvard's payout rules spread gains over several years, while new costs, from an 8% endowment tax to $210 million in legal fees, hit immediately.

"Harvard cut $104 million from salaries and wages, in part through layoffs."

"It is common to view an endowment as a piggy bank that a university can use however it wants," Levine wrote. "That simply isn't true." Harvard's endowment is a highly complex system of about 15,000 funds spanning seven asset classes. Private equity, including venture and growth equity, makes up 46% of the portfolio; hedge funds make up 29%; public equities 14%; and real estate, bonds and inflation-protected Treasuries, other real assets, and cash make up the last 11%.

Roughly 80% of the endowment's value is restricted by donors to specific purposes, so most of the fund cannot be redirected to cover a budget gap. Less than 5% is fully unrestricted. Gains from restricted funds are also tied up. The endowment paid out $2.6 billion this year, about 39% of Harvard's $6.7 billion revenue, at a 5% payout rate.

The payout rate is the share of the endowment's value that Harvard distributes to its operational budget each year. Harvard's rate generally runs 5% to 5.5%, with the logic that if the fund returns about 8% a year and inflation runs about 3% a year, a roughly 5% payout rate lets the endowment continue distributing the same real value in perpetuity. The Harvard Corporation approves the payout each year, generally as a dollar increase over the prior year, rather than a percentage of the endowment's value.

"Endowment smoothing is a customary and valuable practice," Levine wrote. The practice is meant to keep one strong year from reshaping a university's budget.

"From the institution's perspective, suppose it committed all that extra money this year to a variety of projects, and then investment returns crater next year? The disruption would be significant," Levine continued. "Smoothing helps soften the blow in either direction."

"In this [Harvard's] case, it means that other immediate budgetary pressures may surmount the additional endowment draw that will occur and lead to spending to be cut," Levine added.

Harvard's funding has faced pressure from federal grant cuts, taxes, and legal costs. Federal research revenue fell about 20%, and nearly 33% if back payments on grants restored after Harvard's court fight are excluded.

Legal costs, driven by Harvard's fight with the Trump administration over research funding and international students, hit $210 million, up from $126.6 million the prior year.

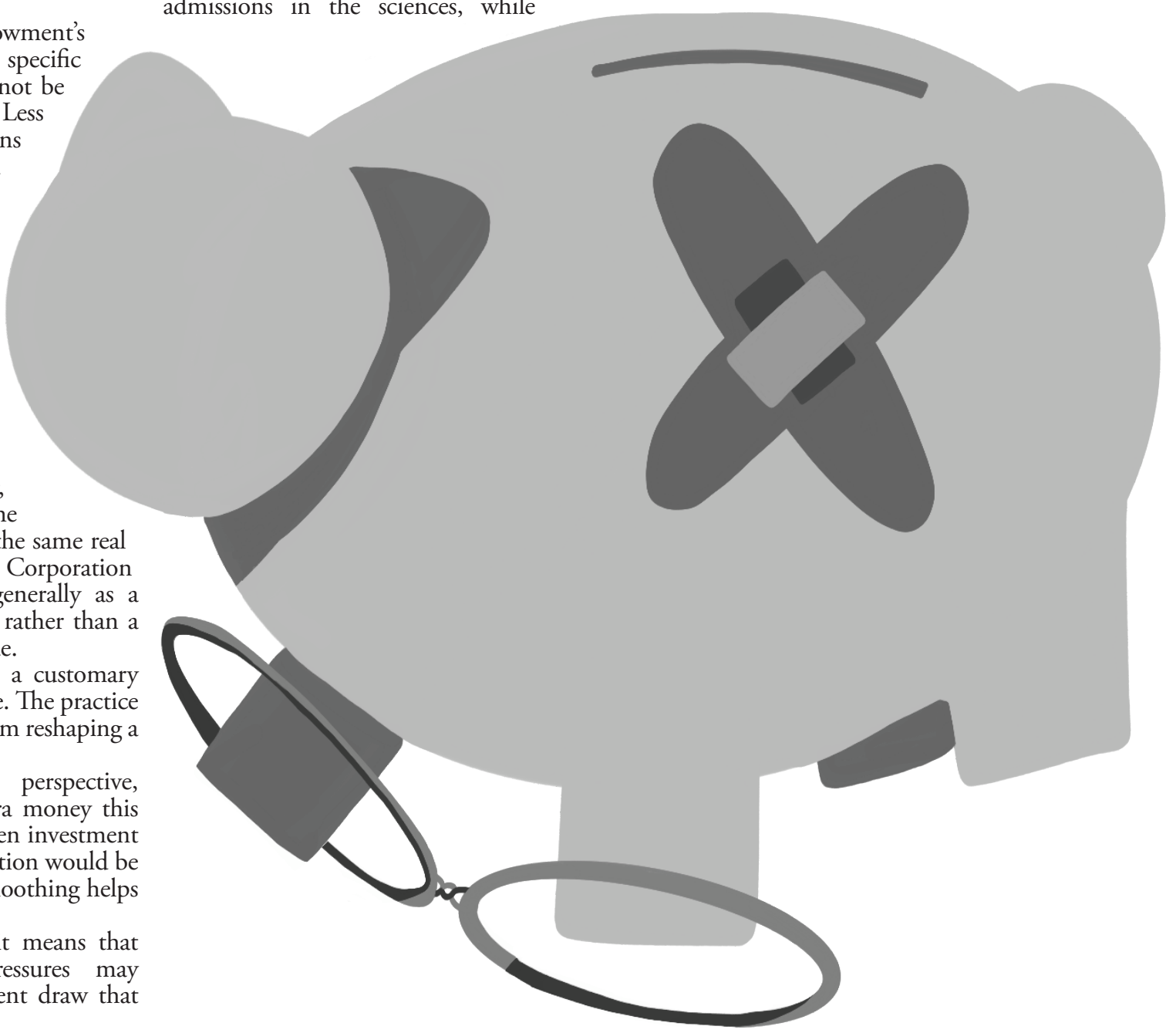
In addition, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, a federal law signed in July 2025, raised the endowment tax for the wealthiest universities—those with more than $2 million in endowment per student—from 1.4% to 8%, starting with the fiscal year that began in July 2026. Harvard estimates the higher rate will cost roughly $300 million a year. The University's fiscal year 2026 financial report showed a $100 million operating surplus, meaning revenue exceeded expenses. But that surplus came from restricted funds, which ran about $180 million ahead, while unrestricted funds, which the University relies on for general operations, ran a $78.7 million deficit.

In response, Harvard has reduced spending across the University, which administrators say is necessary to combat those pressures. Salaries and wages, which are the University's largest expense, fell 3.8% from last year. "A hiring freeze, attrition, and restructurings reduced Harvard's workforce," the financial report stated. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) made the most aggressive cuts, eliminating 165 staff positions over the summer to address what its leaders call a $350 million structural deficit. Those positions made up about 10% of roles in the restructured units. Another 24% of staff in those units moved into new or restructured roles, and the social sciences saw the deepest cuts.

The restructuring halved Ph.D. admissions in the sciences, while other divisions planned enrollment drops of 50% to 70%. Some changes also reached undergraduates directly. The College closed the Dudley Community and laid off Jane Rosenzweig, who had directed the Writing Center for 22 years. The Phillips Brooks House Association, Harvard's largest student-led public service organization, lost about a third of its employees.

"Legal costs, driven by Harvard's fight with the Trump administration over research funding and international students, hit $210 million, up from $126.6 million the prior year."

Critics of the cuts, including labor unions, several faculty members, and some economists, largely do not dispute that the University faces new costs, but instead question whether those costs justify such sweeping cuts to staff and graduate programs. Union organizers argue that with the endowment at a record high, the cuts go further than Harvard's finances require.



The most significant pushback has come from Harvard's unions. More than 4,000 members of the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU-UAW) went on strike on Oct. 27, the union's second walkout this year after a 40-day strike that lasted from April 21 to June 1. "We are prepared to stay on strike until Harvard moves," HGSU-UAW president Denish Jaswal said. Harvard Academic Workers (HAW), which represents about 2,600 non-tenure-track lecturers, preceptors, and researchers, joined them on Nov. 10, walking out after a final bargaining session ended without a contract.

Union staff organizers have focused on the pace of the restructuring when voicing their criticisms. Members of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) told the "Boston Globe" in June that they see Harvard as financially sound and believe the FAS is using the political crisis to justify cuts. Carrie Barbash, a HUCTW organizer, pointed to costs like deferred maintenance that come due over years.

"Many faculty members expressed concern about which cuts may prove permanent."



In an open letter last spring, the union argued that Harvard's efficiency efforts had already led to harmful layoffs, leaving thinner departments to handle the same workload while services for faculty and students eroded.

Many faculty members expressed concern about which cuts may prove permanent. As the FAS shrinks Ph.D. cohorts, one chemistry professor warned at a faculty meeting that Harvard was "destroying something here that we can't actually bring back," "Harvard Magazine" reported.

Some economists and legal scholars argue the endowment exists precisely for moments like this one. "Part of [endowments'] function is to be drawn down in the face of emergencies, and covering federal funding lapses surely counts as one," former University President Lawrence H. Summers wrote in an April 2025 "New York Times" op-ed.

Ellen P. Aprill, a tax law professor emerita at Loyola Law School Los Angeles, noted that the law permits most universities to raise their payouts, a step she wrote could ease, though not fully solve, the mounting crises.

Levine was skeptical of calls for a larger payout. An endowment exists to fund its purpose permanently, he explained: a $10 million gift drawn at 5% a year supports about $500,000 in spending, indefinitely.

"If the institution chose to 'raid' the endowment by increasing the draw whenever it felt like it, that funding would deteriorate over time, and that would violate the purpose of the gift," Levine wrote. "That isn't a great strategy for maintaining the intended support and encouraging giving."

Still, Levine said the limits on restricted gifts are sometimes overstated. A gift that pays a faculty salary, for example, frees up money Harvard would have spent on that salary anyway. "Regardless of the exact figure, truly restricted funds are substantial, so the point still stands," he wrote.

The pressures on Harvard's budget are not over. The 8% endowment tax took effect with the fiscal year that began in July, and the University has held this year's endowment distribution flat in part to help pay it. A federal appeals court has yet to rule on the research grants a judge ordered restored last year, and HAW walked off the job on Nov. 10.

"In an open letter last spring, the union argued that Harvard's efficiency efforts had already led to harmful layoffs, leaving thinner departments to handle the same workload while services for faculty and students eroded."

"$300 million is $300 million. That is not a trivial amount of money," Levine wrote. "The exact composition of the cuts necessary is up to the university, but it will definitely be felt somewhere."

Elliot Hunter Chung '29 (elliotchung@college.harvard.edu) is comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphics by Linden McCarl '28 & Sarahluna Sassine '29

FORUM

They Shall Grow Not Old

Thoughts on Remembrance and Veterans Day.

By NOAH BASDEN '29

They shall grow not old,
as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

These are lines familiar to anyone who grew up in the United Kingdom or any Commonwealth country, as I did. Though many of us know this stanza by heart, few know where it originates. These lines, more commonly known as "The Ode of Remembrance," come from the fourth stanza of Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen," a poem he wrote in the first few weeks of the Great War. "The war to end all wars," they called it; how wrong they were.

> *"Days like these have never been an abstract ritual; they feel personal to me."*

Five hundred twenty-eight alumni and staff from my high school, City of London School, alone gave their lives in service of their country in the First and Second World Wars. The memorial honoring their sacrifice bears the words of John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." I had walked past the memorial more times than I can count and had never really noticed the quotation; it's easy to walk past a list of names when one's head is buried in an English textbook. But once a year, on Remembrance Day, the entire school community—from the youngest pupils to the oldest, teachers, staff—would gather in the courtyard to pay respects to those who gave everything so that we might live in freedom.

Though traditions differ slightly, Veterans Day, like Remembrance Day, has always held a special place in my heart. Many of my family members have served, and continue to serve, in the U.S. military. I am extremely proud of this. Days like these have never been an abstract ritual; they feel personal to me. Nov. 11 is a day when I can honor and reflect on my own family, as well as the countless other veterans who have given so much to this country.

I say this as a preface to explain my immense disappointment in the Harvard student body for their lack of participation in the College's Veterans Day Observance. I raise it because the contrast is striking. I grew up in a place where over a thousand members of my school's community stood silent, honoring 528 people none of us ever knew. Nobody treated it as an inconvenience; it was simply what we did, and it took nothing away from us. It takes very little to honor those who gave everything.

While a bright future beckoned
they freely gave their lives and fondest hopes
for us and our allies
that we might learn from them courage
in peace to spend
our lives making a better world for others.

These are the words inscribed around the top of the WWI memorial in Memorial Church, built in 1932 as a tribute to the Harvard men who died in battle. Since then, the memorials to Harvard's fallen men and women in service of their nation have only grown as we have engaged in more wars throughout the years. Now, over a thousand names adorn the church's walls as a testament to their sacrifice and a promise that they will never be forgotten. They were students like you and me who once crossed the Yard thinking they were on their way to brighter futures and their 'fondest hopes.' They gave their tomorrow for our today.

That is why the rows of empty pews at the College's observance last year bothered me so much. A building built in honor of its beloved students was left mostly empty on the one day it should've been full.

Now, I don't believe my peers are indifferent; I recognize we are all busy, and no one is required to attend a memorial service. However, I believe it is the right thing to do and that it is a real shame that attendance is so low. The service lasts an hour; all it asks is one hour to reflect on what has been lost. That is not burdensome compared with what was asked of them, or what is still asked of people your age and mine.

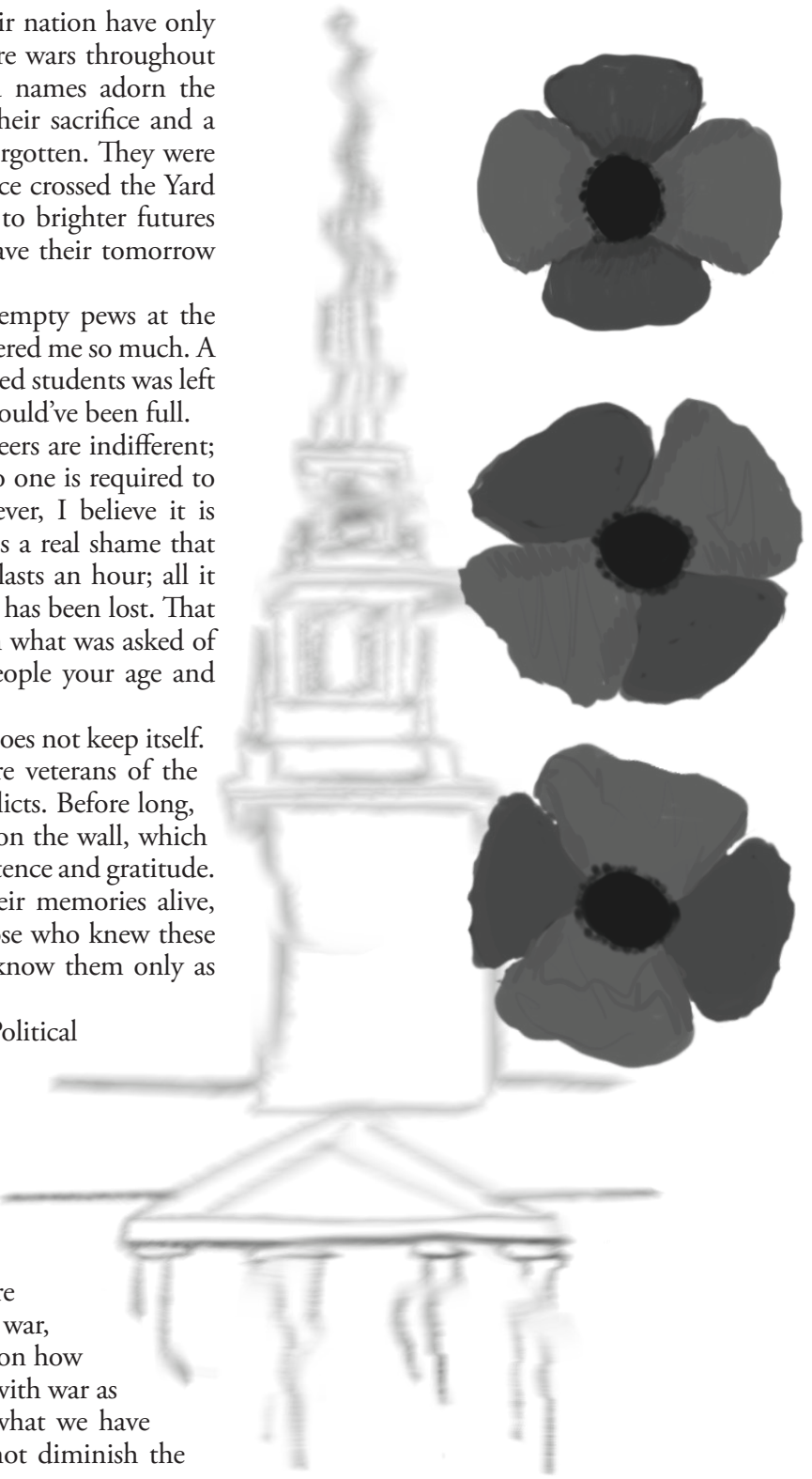
Memory is fragile, and it does not keep itself. Each year we lose more and more veterans of the Second World War and later conflicts. Before long, all that will be left are the names on the wall, which are not memories but proof of existence and gratitude. Attending these services keeps their memories alive, and we become links between those who knew these names as people and those who know them only as names on a wall.

Though this may be the Political Issue, there is nothing political about attending a service like this. It is one of the most unifying moments we have as Americans. No matter your creed, color, or party, you can stand as one in a room and pay your respects. There were no Republicans or Democrats at war, only Americans. You can disagree on how wars are fought; you can disagree with war as a general principle and criticize what we have done in the past, but that does not diminish the immense debt we owe those who came before us.

> *"Memory is fragile, and it does not keep itself."*

This issue, unfortunately for my impassioned plea for attendance, will be published the day after the Veterans Day Observance. However, the message is incredibly important, and if you didn't go this year, go next year and the year after; the names aren't going anywhere. Binyon's poem does not say "they will be remembered" but rather "we will remember them," a promise made in 1914 that we must continue to keep for the sake of those who come after us.

They shall grow not old, as we that are
left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.



Noah Basden '29 (nhbasden@college.harvard.edu) hopes to see you at the next Veterans Day Observance, if not on Wednesday.

Graphic by Sophia Jo '29

An Ode to Mortality

The case against living forever.

By ZOË MACKLOWE '30

Remember, we will die. I know this is true, but I had never truly considered it until my grandmother fell in February 2025. Perched beside her hospital bed, I could hardly believe what I saw: the woman who had once dragged me through every gallery in Manhattan suddenly seemed so fragile. That was the day death began to feel real.

The Romans had a phrase for this realization: memento mori. A philosophy tied to Stoic thought, and later a genre of art, memento mori flourished from the late Middle Ages through the Baroque and reminds viewers that human existence is finite. Memento mori addresses our fear of death, while also showing us that such anxiety is futile—we all ultimately perish.

In Ancient Rome, this philosophy was ingrained in war victory rituals. An enslaved attendant would stand behind the war generals who were being celebrated, remarking, "Memento mori! Respice post te, hominem te esse memento," or "Remember that you will die! Look behind you, do not forget that you are only a man." Even the most victorious general lacks the gods' immortality.

Mortality connects us across class, power, and status, compelling us to live fully. Contemporary approaches to avoid death might seem tantalizing, but they risk disconnecting individuals from society and erasing the simple joys of life. Instead of focusing on optimizing our lifespans, we should redirect that attention to what adds value to our lives.

In 2026, the allure of longevity is packaged and marketed everywhere. For example, Equinox, a popular fitness chain, offers "Optimize by Equinox." For $40,000, participants receive personalized wellness and longevity plans based on blood biomarkers. Celebrities like Kevin Hart and Matt Damon '92 have invested in Function Health, a subscription service providing subscribers with over 100 lab tests to identify potential health issues.

"The Romans had a phrase for this realization: memento mori."

Then there is Bryan Johnson, the founder of Project Blueprint and the "Don't Die Protocol." He spends over $2 million annually trying to extend his life. Through Project Blueprint, Johnson outlines how one can live longer by following a variety of regimens.

Some of these changes are accessible, like lowering your resting heart rate before bed to improve sleep or exercising more often. Other changes are more extreme. Johnson's "Advanced Therapies" include injecting Mesenchymal Stem Cells into your bones, undergoing gene therapy, and using hyperbaric oxygen chambers.

Yet on June 30, Johnson was diagnosed with autoimmune gastritis, a condition in which the immune system attacks the stomach lining, slowing down acid production. Johnson, now 49, could have had AIG for years; he had an autoimmune thyroid disease at 21, and the two organs are closely linked. Still, his diagnosis calls into question the validity and effectiveness of the strict routines he adheres to.

Even the man who claimed he was "going to try and achieve immortality by 2039" is facing an illness. If death is guaranteed, why spend so much effort—financial and psychological—trying to outrun it?

When you prioritize longevity above all else, you are bound to enter an obsessive state that strips life of its fun spontaneity. Always focused on sleep, you forgo the wild nights out with friends—the ones you will talk about years, maybe even decades, later. Always counting macros, you will turn down the thrill of a midnight pizza run and the conversations that continue over dessert.

Above all else, if we believe that we are immortal, we might lose gratitude for life itself. When time is unlimited, and life becomes repetitive, we are likely to find less joy and novelty in simple pleasures—coffee shared with an old friend, spotting the Big Dipper on a summer evening, the bold hues of red and orange that canvas the trees in fall—because these moments are no longer fleeting.

Memento mori reminds us that our mortality should not scare us; rather, it should push us to appreciate life while we still have it. As Seneca emphasizes in "Letters from a Stoic," "you may not wake up again! … you may not go to sleep again!" This unpredictability pushes us to seek light in dark moments, make time for loved ones, and strive to be our best selves.

"If we believe that we are immortal, we might lose gratitude for life itself."

My grandmother is 88 now. She has recovered from her fall and remains as sharp as ever, but that morning in the hospital never left me. Even in the busiest weeks of high school, when the SAT and college essays were eating away at me, I made time for our dinners and museum visits. Her fall showed me that it is impossible to know how many more of these remain—an uncertainty that makes me prioritize and cherish any time spent with her.

Now imagine Johnson's goal: a life that never ends. When you consider longevity ethically, more issues emerge. Living forever means outlasting most, if not all, of the people you love. What's the point of being alive once they are all gone? Life loses purpose without the people we love, and Johnson, ironically, seems to agree. But he gets the point wrong. He emphasizes the importance of family and relationships for a long, meaningful life. "Love and be loved. It will extend your life," he wrote.

There is also the question of who lives longer. The Danse Macabre, or "Dance of Death," is a memento mori motif that illustrates how death joins us all. These images depict citizens of different classes—emperors, farmers, children—walking together, paired with identical dancing skeletons. In death, everyone is the same.

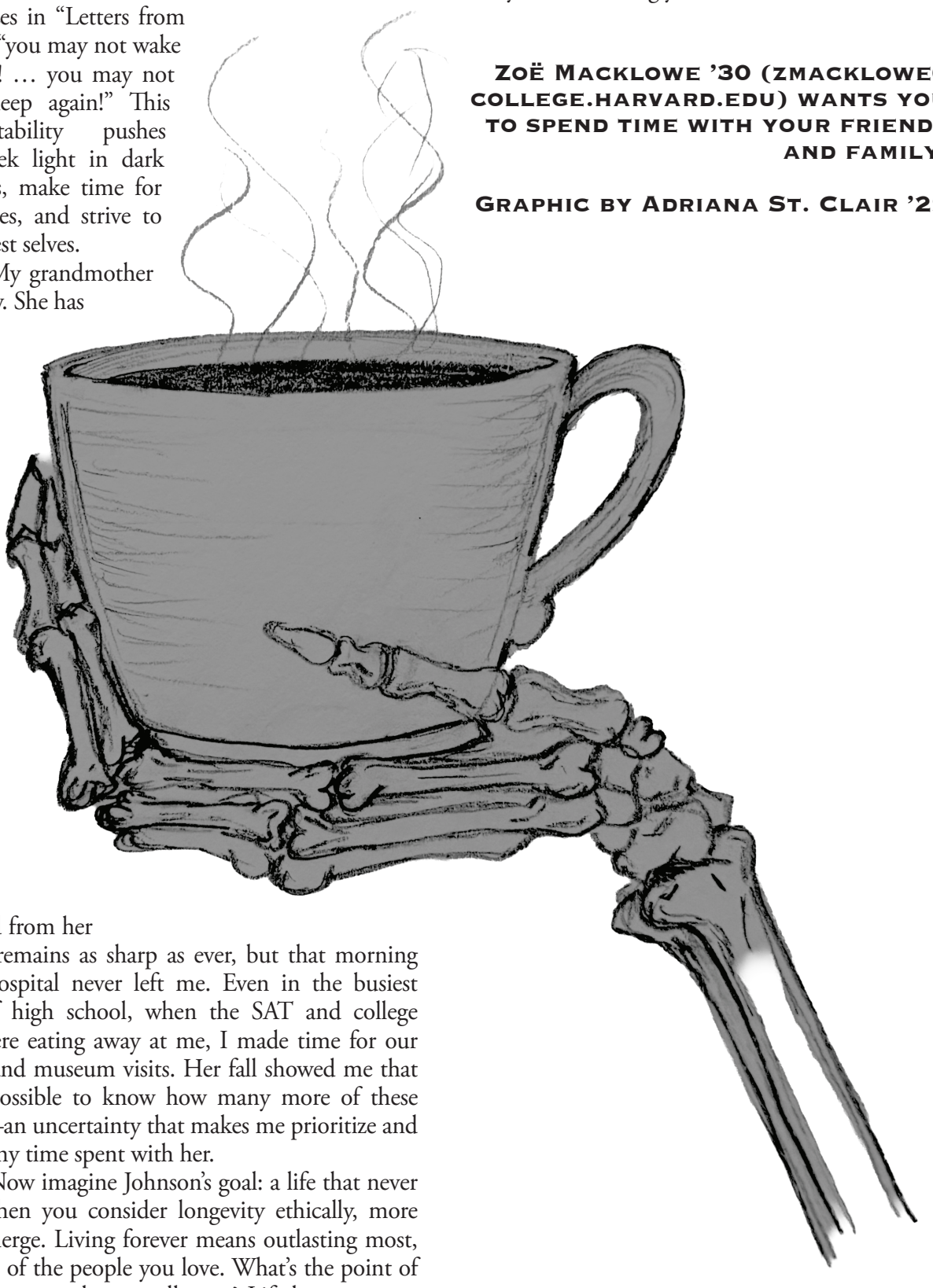
The longevity movement, though, relies on financial access. The proposed "solutions" to mortality cost, at minimum, tens of thousands of dollars, even millions in Johnson's case. When only the wealthy can afford to fight death, even mortality becomes a class divide. We relinquish what the Danse Macabre captured: the comfort that we all are one in death.

I am not against living a long and healthy life. I try to sleep eight hours a night; I try to exercise six days a week. The key word is that I try. I prioritize these behaviors, but not above all else. I allow myself to deviate. Put down the stem cells and call your parents. Go to dinner with your grandmother. Dance with your friends through the early hours of the morning.

Life is short. Savor it. As Marcus Aurelius reminds us in "The Meditations," "It is possible you may depart from life at once, act and speak and think in every case accordingly."

Zoë Macklowe '30 (zmacklowe@college.harvard.edu) wants you to spend time with your friends and family.

Graphic by Adriana St. Clair '29



When Goodness Becomes Obedience

Did growing up with faith make me patriarchy-conforming?

By PAIGE CORNELIUS '28

It is a Sunday morning. I am in middle school, having just woken up at my best friend's house from the sleepover we begged for. My friends are still asleep, so I tiptoe upstairs and rush out the door, my mom waiting outside to drive me to religion class. As I halfheartedly listen to my teacher share another biblical story, I watch with envy as the group chat fills with photos of the homemade breakfast for my friends to enjoy without me. When the hour ends, I walk across the parking lot from the school to church, preparing for another mundane hour of wishing I were someplace else.

I rarely paid close attention to the service. As a child prone to mind-wandering and knee-bouncing, I spent more time estimating how much time was left than listening to the Gospel. Yet, looking back, I wonder how much I was implicitly learning during those two hours I spent immersed in faith every weekend. I may not have been consciously listening, but I was learning what it meant to be good, to be obedient, and, perhaps, to be a woman.

I have to wonder whether my religious upbringing reinforced the patriarchal expectations women encounter outside the church. When values like obedience and selflessness are presented as moral virtues, the expectation that women prioritize others' comfort over their own can become a measure of goodness. As I've grown older and begun to question these teachings, I wonder how much independence I sacrificed to be good, and whether the very definition of a "good woman" was shaped by men who stood to benefit from my obedience.

"Who am I to challenge God's word?"

Growing up Catholic, I was surrounded by male authority figures. God was called the Father, Jesus was His Son, and the priest who stood before me every Sunday was a man. I was taught that women could not become priests but was given little explanation beyond "that's what God wanted." And who am I to challenge God's word?

I don't remember ever consciously believing that men were better suited for leadership than women. In fact, I grew up playing sports, surrounded by women's strength and talent. My mother was an elite athlete and an inspiring social worker who taught me the importance of a strong work ethic. Yet every Sunday, I entered an institution where an implicit hierarchy placed men in power.

What irks me the most about this routine is not that I was explicitly taught that men were superior—I wasn't—but that I learned to accept their authority with no room for conversation. As I internalized this notion, I became more inclined to accept it in other aspects of life.

Beyond the Catholic Church's hierarchical nature, the teachings themselves emphasize humility, forgiveness, selflessness, and obedience. While these are not inherently problematic virtues, and are not always presented as solely feminine, they reinforce the societal expectation that girls should be accommodating and agreeable.

I have always hated confrontation, extending kindness in situations where I should have stood up for myself. I have forgiven those I should have challenged, overlooking behavior that hurt me. At some point in my development, selflessness became a vulnerability; I learned to put other people's needs before my own.

This is not solely a product of Catholicism, as girls are exposed to expectations of obedience in countless settings outside of religion. And I certainly wasn't the only child taught to respect authority figures or put others first. Still, I wonder if my religious upbringing morphed societal expectations into moral frameworks, solidifying them into something stagnant and sure.

At the same time, I have to credit Catholic teachings with instilling in me values I hold dear. Honesty, loyalty, and compassion are ideals central to my character, and I not only practice them but am also drawn to others who do as well.

However, I can't help but notice that men seem so much more comfortable expressing their wants and needs, even at the expense of others. I find myself apologizing when no apology is warranted and feeling guilty every time I say "no." Even more troubling, disappointing a man feels heavier than disappointing a woman. I became so worried about what men would think of my actions that I started becoming less myself.

"At some point in my development, selflessness became a vulnerability; I learned to put other people's needs before my own."

After attending a Bible study emphasizing the beauty of a Christian marriage, I was exposed to a series of Bible verses. Perhaps this is where religion has placed me within the patriarchy:

"Wives, in the same way, submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives…" (1 Peter 3:1).

"To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:5).

"But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3).

I was never explicitly taught that my purpose in life is to please men, but I was taught to be good, to be obedient, and, perhaps, to be a woman. I am grateful that Catholicism taught me to care deeply about others and to be kind and charitable. But the undertones that women should value men's comfort over their own autonomy have reinforced the patriarchal belief that men can get away with anything, and women will remain silent. I strive to be a good woman. I aim to be kind. I am learning, though, that being good requires challenging the authority I once accepted.

Paige Cornelius '28 (paigecornelius@college.harvard.edu) wonders if religion and feminism can coexist.

Graphic by Cara Cronin '28



ARTS
Protesting Shouldn't Destroy the Arts

The arts have become a victim of demonstrations.

By KALVIN FRANK '28

"BEEEP BEEEP BEEEP." The blaring of a fire alarm filled Sanders Theater around 7:40 p.m. on Nov. 6. Having lived in Adams House, I found it nothing new. However, the shrill alarms and flashing strobes interrupted a conversation between Yo-Yo Ma '76 and Stephen Colbert, cutting short a performance featuring Ma and the Crimson Cellos. The alarm brought "Arts for Life's Sake," to an end, the alarm disrupted a highly anticipated, sold-out event.

In an emergency, I would have been upset but accepting of the evacuation. However, post-alarm

"All so HGSU could get a social media post about Ma and Colbert crossing a picket line."

analysis makes the situation seem suspicious. After investigation, the Cambridge Fire Department "found no reason for the alarm activation."

Coincidentally, before and during the event, the Harvard Graduate Students Union was picketing in front of Sanders Theater. Even during the emergency evacuation, the Union continued to chant, hindering safety professionals' ability to give instructions. The Union had specifically positioned themselves to force Ma and Colbert to cross the picket line—later posting about the event on Instagram. Suddenly, as the picket line seemed to fail its intended purpose of ending the event, one could deduce that a frustrated member might have taken matters into their own hands. This is all speculation, of course, and the union said it had no involvement in the fire alarm. The cause of the alarm remains unknown.

Regardless of whether an HGSU member pulled the fire alarm, the union's goal was to cancel the event. And it leaves me wondering why "Arts for Life's Sake" was targeted. Evan Lemire, the Vice President of the Union, offered an explanation for "Harvard Magazine." "Harvard is an institution that holds prestigious events with prestigious speakers. That prestige is built on the labor of graduate student workers," he said. "We were here to be loud, and to ask Yo-Yo Ma and Stephen Colbert not to cross our picket line."

So, to restate this: because these speakers are prestigious and Harvard is taking advantage of the HGSU, the union is picketing the event. This logic is nonsensical and essentially gives the union free rein to protest anything and everything on campus regardless of its impact on the greater good.

A strike ends work to pressure a corporation to improve working conditions and benefits. I have no problem with this and applaud the union for advocating for improvement. But how does a fine arts speaking event designed for undergraduates fulfill this goal?

Unions have an inspirational history; this article is not a criticism of unions. From the General Motors sit-down strike to the Delano grape strike, collective labor has left lasting positive legacies through the benefits they have negotiated. In fact, I am in the very union I am criticizing; the HGSU has positively impacted my life as a Course Assistant, and I am grateful despite my decision not to strike.

However, my membership does not mean I agree with the actions HGSU has taken. In fact, I adamantly oppose the union's apparent goal was to disrupt the event. The Office for the Arts organized the talk and concert, with a stated goal of "integrating the arts into the lives of Harvard College students." Its events attract half of the undergraduate student body to participate each year. While striking is meant to pressure the corporation, this picket was held during a ticketed evening event—specifically attacking an undergraduate event and an appreciation of great performances. All so HGSU could get a social media post about Ma and Colbert crossing a picket line.

I wish destruction of art as a form of protest were rare, but unfortunately it is not. Climate activism groups, such as Just Stop Oil, Riposte Alimentaire, and Ultima Generazione, have used art galleries to stage their own protests. They throw paint, glue themselves to objects, and use other forms of vandalism to draw attention to their movements. Paintings such as Van Gogh's Sunflowers, the Mona Lisa, and Primavera have been impacted.

Sure, the paintings sit behind protective glass, but that does not remove the impact on people who travel thousands of miles to see them. The goal here is not destruction, but shock value. The artwork and its admirers are just convenient victims.

But are these methods really effective? Does the destruction really create outrage about the environment and other movements, or does it needlessly damage a public good? Everyone has movements and views they are passionate about. But destruction at the cost of innocent bystanders benefits no one and creates animosity.

The Crimson Cellos spent hours preparing to perform with Ma, with over a thousand people packed in to hear the greatest cellist of our lives play in person—not to mention the knowledge and advice Ma and Colbert were offering. All this, and the HGSU made it about themselves. They tried (and succeeded) in destroying an event that had nothing to do with their movement, and little to do with the university office that they are negotiating with. And they got the outrage they wanted.

The problem is that when you incite such anger, it often gets misplaced. Many of the students attending the event were upset, not at the College, but at the Union. HGSU, which once was supported by the majority of undergraduates, has lost significant support from a key portion of Harvard's campus.

Sidechat blew up in response to the picket and event. One post received 947 upvotes and stated, "Forget yo yo and Colbert for a second—grad students chanting during those student cellos performing is so selfish and shameful."

Striking is a right; striking is necessary; striking is honorable. Disrupting students' lives and intellectual growth for zero net benefit is shameful. Sure, one can argue that the union is advocating for living wages, but that should not burden bystanders (outside the classes directly impacted). It also calls into question: where do we draw the line? Should the union picket outside Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club performances? Block student artwork from being showcased in public spaces? Disrupt sleep by protesting outside dorms at night?

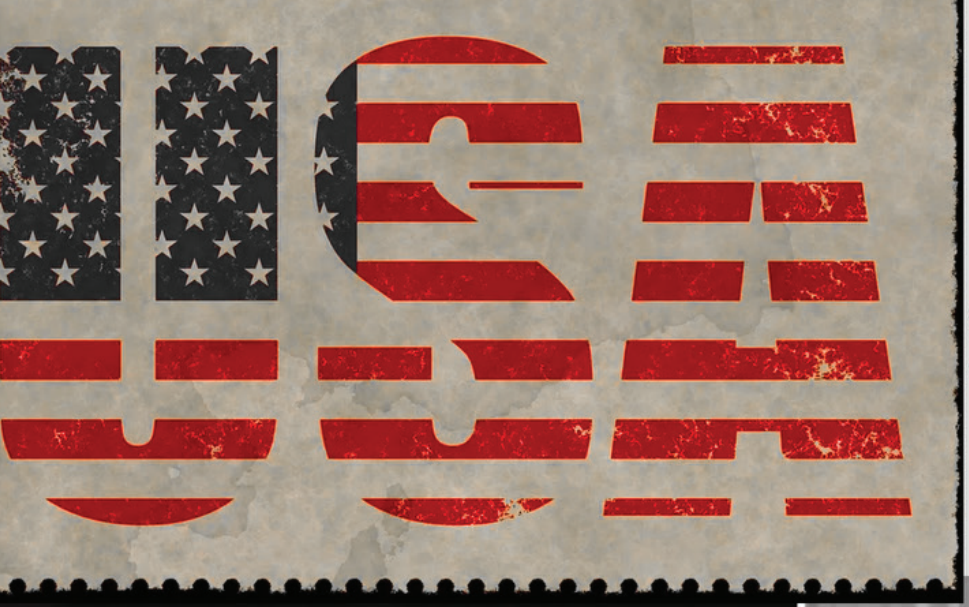
I do not ask these questions to claim the union would do these things. Rather, just to point out that all of these would put pressure on the Corporation at the cost of student life and expression.

The arts are a public good that deserves public protection from all parties involved. The arts provide us with a safe space for creative expression and enjoyment. They are not and should not be expendable for movements, strikes, and protests. I call on the HGSU to consider the cost of what you deem dispensable or cancelable. I also call on leadership to apologize to the Crimson Cellos, the student body, and the arts community for their protest, which hurt on-campus creative outlets.



Kalvin Frank '28 (kfrank@college.harvard.edu) is the Arts Editor for the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Amelie Lima '27


HIGH


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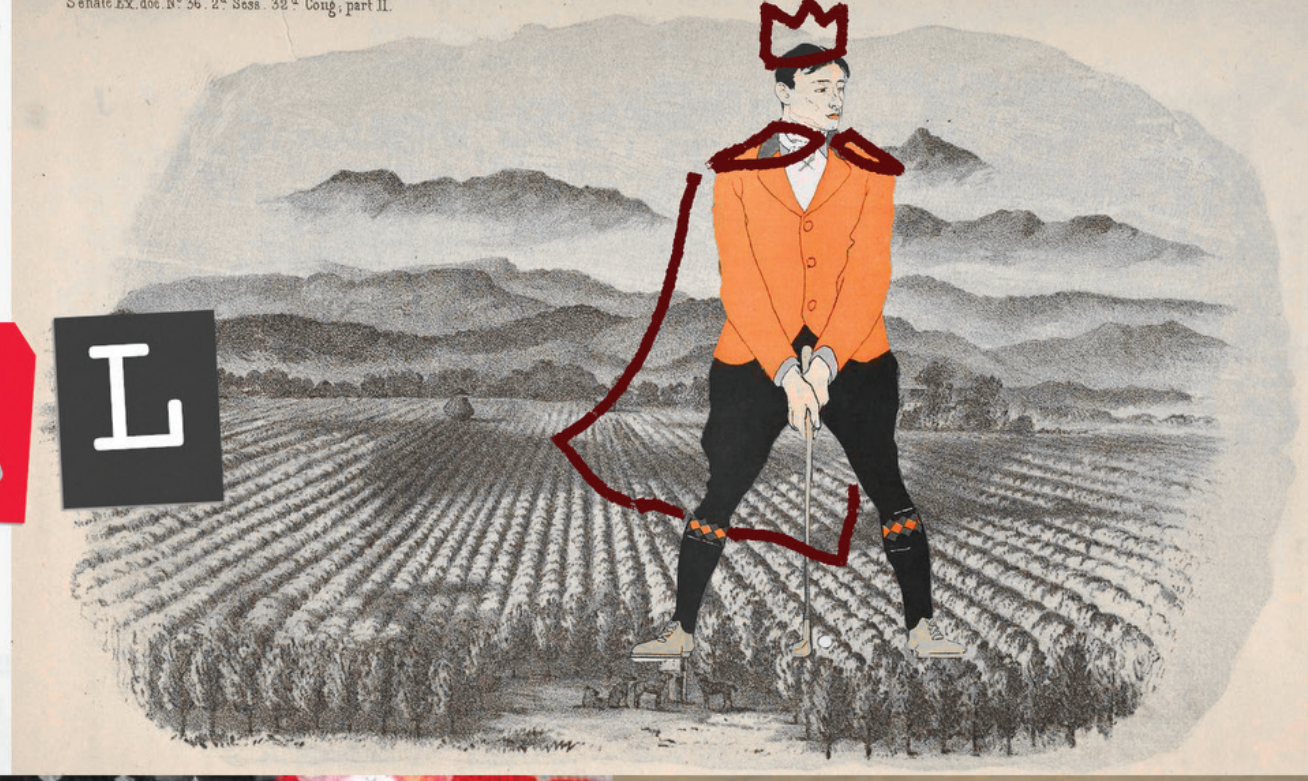
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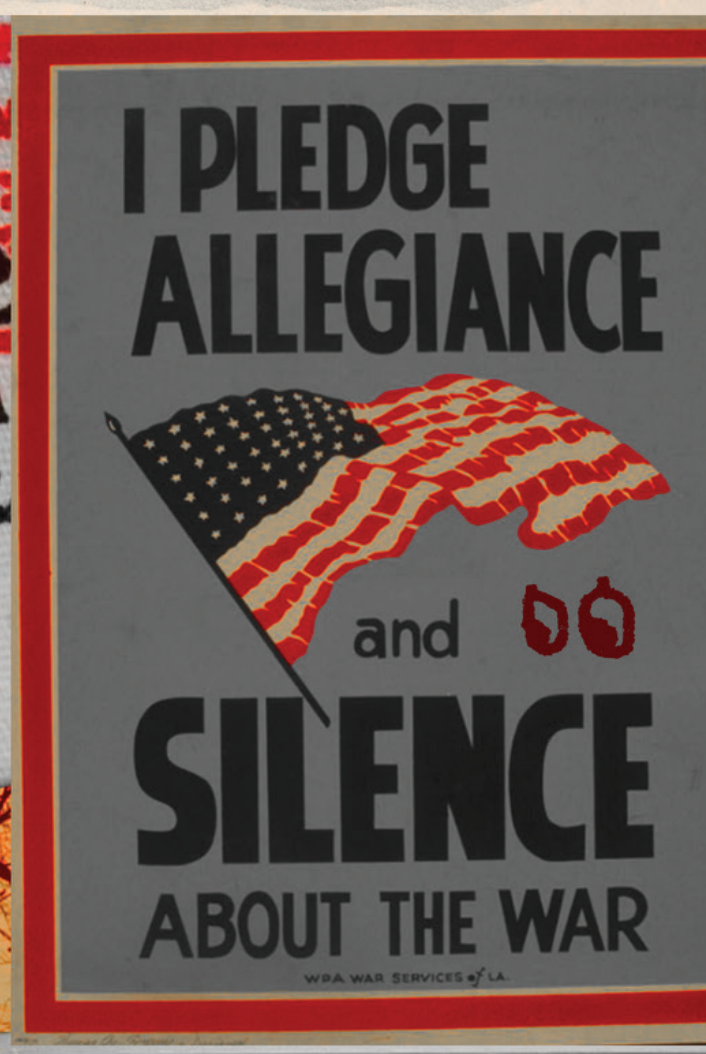
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"Ride the Cyclone": A Rollercoaster of a Show

The Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club's wonderfully creative take on the off-Broadway musical.

By EDEN BRIDGE-HAYES '29

A girl stands at the foot of the stage, facing away from the audience, her head down. She holds a headless doll in her arms. Slowly, she ascends the stairs and walks onto the stage, singing a hauntingly beautiful description of life: "I know this dream of life is never-ending. It goes around and round and round again. You know the sun is rising while descending. It goes on and on and never ends." Then, she vanishes behind the stage's closed curtains, and everything fades to black.

This is the captivating opening to the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club's rendition of the musical "Ride the Cyclone," directed by Leonard Walletzký '29 and Jolana Kampfová '28. The story follows six teenagers in the St. Cassian High School chamber choir. While they are traveling for a choir competition, the group stops at an amusement park and decides to ride a roller coaster called "The Cyclone," which derails at the apex of the loop-de-loop, causing the students to plummet to their deaths.

In limbo, the students meet a precognition machine called "Karnak," which is designed to predict the exact time, place, and cause of someone's death. Karnak tells the group he will give one of them a chance to return to life, and they take turns describing their lives and why they deserve a chance to live.

The Amazing Karnak, voiced and puppeteered by Will Radford '30, appears as a life-sized puppet sitting within a box designed by Georgia Dicandia '29, Savannah Jagodzinski '29, and Emilia Smetana '30. His crystal ball lights up in various colors to match the scene, adding another dimension to the theater's lighting designed by Bhargavi Limbachiya '29 and Arya Bosworth '30. Radford does a fantastic job playing to his audience and timing each of Karnak's witty remarks, causing the audience to erupt into laughter and providing some much-needed comedic relief between some of the musical's more emotional moments.

The first "contestant," Ocean O'Connell Rosenberg, is played by Lily Murdoch '30. Ocean is ambitious, driven by a need always to be the smartest person in the room, and she asserts her superiority over her classmates in her song "What the World Needs." Throughout the show, Murdoch brings Ocean's lovable obnoxiousness to life, interrupting her classmates' emotional moments with awkward attempts at compassion and frequently bursting out into ill-timed song. Murdoch's convincing performance was exactly what the musical needed to maintain its semi-comedic premise and keep the audience engaged.

After Ocean's song about how the world needs people like her (and not her loser classmates), Karnak reveals that her classmates must decide who comes back to life. Noel Gruber, played by Justice Sirotek '27, a flamboyantly gay teen with a taste for French cinema and nihilism, interrupts her pleas. As he breaks out into his song, "Noel's Lament," he tears away his ordinary school uniform to reveal a black corset, sparkly black shorts, and fishnets, costumed by Hana Prokop '28. Donning a wig and high heels, Sirotek performs a passionate ballad about his fantasy of being a French prostitute in the 1930s.

During this performance, the choreography (Jae Rodericks '29) stood out to me. The latter half of the song is reminiscent of Bob Fosse's choreography, as it includes Noel dancing around a chair—a feature seen in Fosse works like the film version of "Cabaret." This beautifully illustrates the era Noel longs to be part of, and his piercing high notes only heighten the song's intensity.

After this, Ukrainian immigrant Mischa Bachinski (Ethan Mendicino '30) performs two songs, each representing one of the only two emotions he believes Ukrainian men can feel: rage and passion. Mischa sings about his amazing life, filled with partying and drinking, in "This Song Is Awesome," before performing a heart-wrenching ballad named for his online fiancée, "Talia."

"Murdoch's convincing performance was exactly what the musical needed to maintain its semi-comedic premise and keep the audience engaged."

In the latter, the female cast members change into white dresses, don flower crowns, and hold small lights. As they take turns turning on the lights, Mischa tries to catch the light but never does, representing his inability to be with Talia. When Mendicino performs Mischa's powerful vocalizations at the end of "Talia," you can truly feel Mischa's pain.

Ricky Potts's (Arthur Camara '29) following song is certainly a change in subject, and Camara's portrayal of Ricky's far-fetched, sexual alien fantasy is nothing short of hysterical. While watching, I felt the urge to both burst out laughing and cringe, which I think is exactly the reaction a dorky song like "Space Age Bachelor Man" is supposed to evoke. Of course, the glittery cat masks and silver jumpsuit likely helped.

"The Ballad of Jane Doe" is likely the most famous song from "Ride the Cyclone," and it is extremely hard to execute. Jenny Wu '29 performs both the song and her eerie character artfully and with expert technique. Her twitching movements convincingly convey Jane Doe as a headless corpse, and her dreamy voice (both singing and speaking) suits the character perfectly.

Constance Blackwood's song "Sugarcloud" is a sugary-sweet speech and musical number about enjoying every aspect of life, and I believe it would be extremely hard to deliver convincingly. However, Nina Galindez '30 performed so movingly that tears welled up in my eyes, and it became my favorite part of the production. Galindez delivers the speech with such authenticity that I found myself reflecting upon my own life, feeling grateful for every moment—good or bad.

All of this culminates in the students choosing to let Jane Doe be resurrected, and she goes to the "other side" by exiting the stage again. This time, though, she takes a seat among the audience, demonstrating her reintegration into society.

Although the cast is small, each detail in the production is impressive. During each character's turn, they pull a lever, and images of them as children appear on stage as film strips (Allie Zong '28, Salar Sekhavat '30). Moreover, the set walls (Ziva Benedejcic '28, Daphne Unsal Nuchi '28, Willow Kwak '29) feature posters that captured each character's personality (for example, Noel's included French movie posters, and Ocean's included an advertisement for her class president campaign).

"Although the cast is small, each detail in the production is impressive."

HRDC's adaptation of "Ride the Cyclone" showed clear attention to detail, whether in its casting, musical production, or stage design. The musical direction, by Olukayode Ekundare '29 and Nate Brown '28, evokes a broad range of emotions, from humor to contemplation. Yet, it ends by instilling a feeling of appreciation for life itself—encouraging you to enjoy the ride simply.

Eden Bridge-Hayes '29 (edenbridgehayes@college.harvard.edu) is kind of tempted to ride The Cyclone.



Graphic by Ella Cohen '29

Hung Up on Power

What does a presidential portrait say?

By MALA BRUMM '30

Step into the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery's "America's Presidents" hall and you will notice that all the faces look strangely alike. They sit or stand with a flag, desk, or column nearby, and they all wear the expression of someone who knows history is watching. They are meant to feel timeless. But are they really art, or are they just branding in a frame?

For most of American history, the answer was supposed to be "neither"—the portraits were a ritual, only unveiled after a president's final term. The National Portrait Gallery likewise traditionally hangs a presidential portrait only after that leader has permanently left office. The logic is that a portrait is a final verdict, not something to deliver during an ongoing trial. The president is supposed to be safely in the past tense.

Even in an otherwise changing world, that convention endured. In 2018, Barack and Michelle Obama unveiled portraits by Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald that diverged from the genre's precedent. In his portrait, Obama is seated, leaning forward against a wall of living foliage instead of the traditional mahogany desk. Michelle Obama is rendered in grayscale, in Sherald's signature style. Visitors lined up for hours: the portraits broke from the ones that came before, and people could tell. It turns out that a portrait can be a statement about who gets to be a subject of American history at all.

Which brings us to the present, where the portrait no longer waits for history but tries to write it.

In 2025, the White House released a new official portrait of President Donald Trump by chief White House photographer Daniel Torok.

"Portraits tell you who the institution thinks is worth remembering."

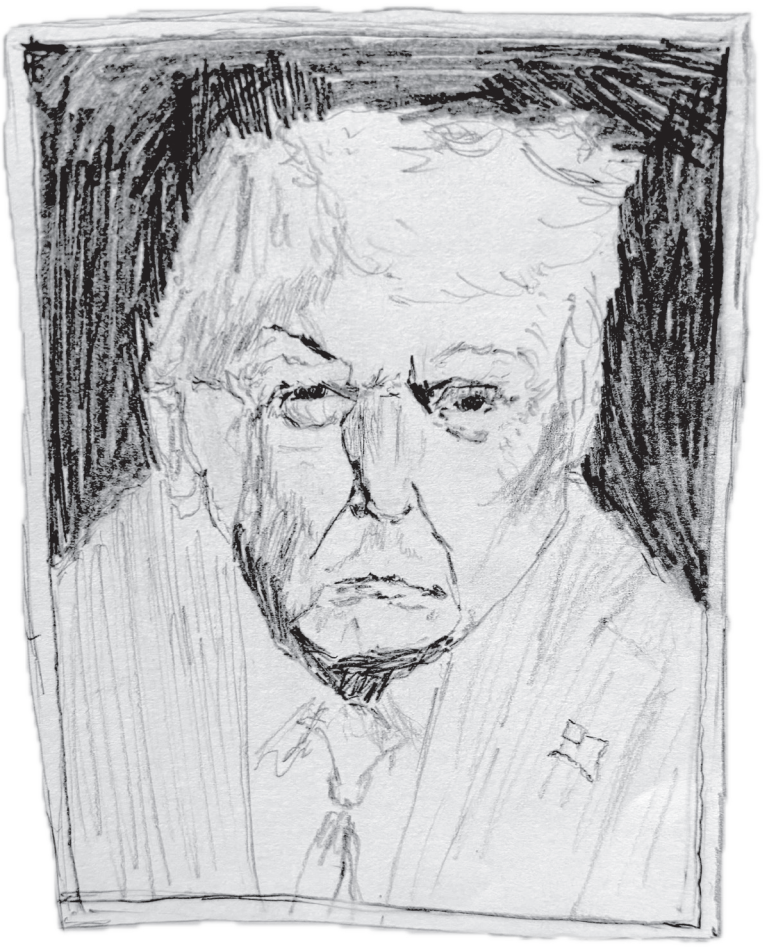
With a dark background, no American flag, and a stern, unsmiling expression, Trump's piece reads less like a civic portrait and more like a movie poster. Supporters loved the intensity, while critics found it too theatrical. Either way, the photo was a choice: an image meant to project strength, not reassure.

This tension did not stay inside the White House. In January 2026, the National Portrait Gallery removed wall text mentioning Trump's impeachments from the display of his portrait. Meanwhile, Trump has also altered how other presidents appear in his redesigned presidential portrait gallery in the West Wing Colonnade, hanging a photo of an autopen to represent Joe Biden.

We could argue forever about whether any of this is fair. A caption, a frame, and a hanging location used to be only background details. Recently, though, they have started to create arguments themselves. When a museum edits a wall label, it revises a portrait's meaning without ever touching the picture itself.

Even beyond Washington, we can see this fight in the states. After Trump complained about how he looked in his portrait at the Colorado State Capitol, the building's advisory committee voted to take down all the presidential portraits in the rotunda, at least temporarily. They replaced them with an exhibit celebrating the state's 150th anniversary. As of this spring, officials remained undecided about whether to put the portraits back up. An entire history of presidents, Democrats and Republicans alike, ended up in storage over one man's reaction to a painting.

You do not need to be in Washington to feel this. Look up the next time you eat in Annenberg. The walls of Harvard's rooms are lined with oil



portraits of the people who ran the place, funded it, or taught in it. For most of the University's history, those people looked a lot alike. Portraits tell you who the institution thinks is worth remembering. Anyone who has ever wondered why the people on the walls do not look like the people at the tables has already asked the question that the National Portrait Gallery faces: who gets remembered, who does not, and who decides? At Harvard, the answer to the last part has always been the university itself.

Harvard also has a stake in the presidential canon. John Adams, Class of 1755, and John Quincy Adams, Class of 1787, both studied at the College, as did Theodore Roosevelt, Class of 1880; Franklin D. Roosevelt, Class of 1903; and John F. Kennedy '40. Barack Obama became the first Black president of the "Harvard Law Review" before anyone had hung his portrait anywhere. George W. Bush is a Harvard Business School alumnus. When you walk around the Yard, you brush past the same buildings as those whose careers shaped the nation—and the gallery wall.

Fittingly, one of these alumni has become a portrait artist himself. George W. Bush's new book, "The Call of Freedom: Portraits of Political Prisoners and Dissidents," will be released March 9 and coincides with an exhibition of his art at the George W. Bush Presidential Center in Dallas. Here is a former president who spent decades as a subject and now chooses to be the painter, putting the focus on people who were imprisoned for speaking up. It reverses the genre: power looking at the powerless, rather than the other way around.

Maybe we are more qualified to judge this than we might think. Our generation spends its life managing portraits—from the Harvard ID photo, snapped in 30 seconds and carried for four years, to the LinkedIn headshot, the club website bio, the Instagram slides filled with candids. We edit, crop, choose the dark background or the warm one. We know what a portrait is meant to do, because we do exactly what the White House does, just at a smaller scale.

So when the White House picks a stern portrait and no flag, I understand the choice, even if it is not one I would have expected. Here, the focus is on the man holding the office, not the office itself. There is no flag, and thus no borrowed symbolism of the nation, but instead a face meant only to reflect toughness and individual authority.

I find myself wondering what comes next. If portraits become tools of the current moment, then a museum's wall label, a state's gallery, and the order of the frames all become open to negotiation. The tradition of waiting until a presidency ends was meant to give the portrait some distance from the politics it depicts. Without that wait, it is harder to say what a portrait is for.

There is a hopeful note in all of this. Bank of America is sponsoring the assessment and conservation of 110 historic presidential portraits and frames at the National Portrait Gallery, many of which have never been formally conserved. Conservation is the opposite of the fight over what is displayed: asking what a painting is made of, not what it should be saying. I hope this closer look leaves us with a better-documented record of how the portraits were actually made and altered, giving future viewers firmer ground to stand on for whatever arguments come. Somebody is still carefully cleaning old paint off these faces so people who are not born yet can see them, which seems like the right impulse to me: preserving the record before arguing about it.

"Here, the focus is on the man holding the office, not the office itself. There is no flag, and thus no borrowed symbolism of the nation, but instead a face meant only to reflect toughness and individual authority."

Mala Brumm '30 (mbrumm@college.harvard.edu) is comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Tess Harris '30

We Want YOU: The Sexiest Politicians

A list of the most attractive people who may (or may not) appear on a ballot.

By CAPITOL CRAVER AND GOVERNMENT GLAZER

The most important part of a politician is not, of course, their beliefs, but how hot they are—and some clear, sexy front-runners stand out on the ballots around the world.

Vladimir Putin

CC: Putin may be one of the more controversial picks, but trust me on this one: the entire country of Russia agrees. Aside from election win after election win (how could that have happened?), Vladdy has consistently shown Russian women what their man could be like—just listen to the 2002 Russian propaganda pop song "A Man Like Putin"! As the song describes, Putin is "full of strength," "doesn't drink," and "won't make you sad." What's not to love?

GG: This is genuinely absurd. I have never heard a worse take in my life. It's not just that he isn't exactly a shining example of a morally sound politician (if those even exist), but he's also just unattractive. He kind of reminds me of an angry old owl. Young Putin also looks like a young Hailey Bieber, which I am not a fan of—duck lips and dead eyes just don't do it for me.

Gavin Newsom

CC: While I am not a fan of his politics by any means, he does look amazing in a suit. Although he has some interesting takes about the state of the unhoused, his anti-Trump rhetoric just makes him all the more sexy. He has the classic charismatic smile of all our favorite political icons: John F. Kennedy '40, George W. Bush MBA '75, and Bill Clinton.

GG: This might be a niche pull, but Newsom looks like Hrithik Roshan, a Bollywood star who was a fan favorite of mine as a child. There's a certain villainous twinkle in his eye that just draws me to him. And as a Californian, I've never felt more patriotic than when he was trolling the President.

Dr. Abdul El-Sayed

CC: One word: Irresistible. I think people need to stop calling Dr. El-Sayed "evil Mamdani" (he just happens to be a Muslim guy, come on, everyone…) and truly give him his flowers. Not only does he have an amazing smile, charisma, and wit for days, but he is also every brown grandmother's dream (including mine). A doctor, a politician, and educated on social issues: what more could you ask?

GG: To agree with CC, I dislike that he's always seen as a knockoff of Mamdani. They aren't even the same type of brown! But he's still truly one of my favorites on this list. As a former debater, I'm attracted to his argumentative prowess—along with his sparkling smile and massive biceps. His uniform of black V-necks doesn't hurt either (yes, I'm attracted to Elizabeth Holmes—sue me).

Zohran Mamdani (shoutout to his more attractive wife)

CC: I wish I could write about Rama Duwaji here, but alas, we can mention her less attractive but still lovely husband: Zohran Mamdani. Who knew America was attracted to democratic socialism and politicians that don't use your tax dollars for private jets (hint: we did)? His recently departed mustache will be forever missed, but who could say no to those cheekbones?

GG: Like CC, I love Rama Duwaji, but I have room in my heart for Zohran too. His friendly demeanor and cheeky quips just make him so lovable, and although socialism is a bit spineless, he wears it well. Plus, I'm a sucker for a smile!

Kamala Harris

GG: I have BEEN a Kamala supporter, not of her politics, but of that beautiful face. She was also right about the coconut tree—we exist in the context of everything we live in. I personally miss her short curls; they were really doing it for me. Fun fact: my old boss used to work with her, and I've been lucky enough to view previously unseen photos of her when she was young and lit. You should all be jealous!

CC: I have grown to love this take. Kamala Harris has aged with immense grace, but before her stint as Vice President and her run for president, young Kamala Harris was truly a sight to behold. Her makeup and hair were always on point, and her best feature, her smile, still beams today.

Emmanuel Macron

GG: This is my Vladimir Putin—my international, insane, but oddly attractive old white man. He seems to be perpetually furrowing his brows, but I'm kind of into it. And I know his hairline isn't doing him any favors, but I'm willing to let it slide because of his strong jawline and big nose. (You know what they say about big noses!)

CC: Horrible take! This man is as chopped as his politics. His carefully styled hair may conceal his receding hairline, but this is a message to all the French: time is running out for your temporarily hair-clad president. As his country's politics swing right, he slips into more and more ill-fitting suits (and sometimes his wife's palm). I hate to disagree with GG, but I will never get behind this.

"Make America Hot Again (sorry, RFK, MAHA means something else now)."

Angela Alsobrooks

CC: This woman may have some of the prettiest eyes I have EVER seen. Her hair is always styled perfectly, and her personal style shines through regardless of the event. I truly enjoyed researching her because, in every photo, her energy is bright, intense, and fabulous.

GG: I admire female senators, and I love a woman with class. Angela has all of those, and her consistently flawless base and styled hair certainly do not hurt. Her kindness and passion, along with her chic hanging earrings, give her an elegance you can't miss.

Manny Rutinel

GG: I ADORE him. He's honestly perfect, from his face to his body to his curly hair. With his tan skin and his kind eyes, his political advertising should just be photos of his face. I know I'd vote for him! His only flaw is being a former Bulldog.

CC: I will have no criticism of this take. Make America Hot Again (sorry, RFK, MAHA means something else now). He's young, fit, handsome, and he looks phenomenal in a cowboy hat—what's not to love?

We hope you enjoyed reading about our desire (and disgust) for these local, national, and international leaders—maybe you've found a new ballot box crush! But please don't let a politician's sexiness determine your vote, although being attractive certainly makes some of their policies suddenly sound so convincing

Capitol Craver and Government Glazer might be found clerking for one of the politicians on this list.



Graphic by Amelie Lima '27

A Playlist for the Revolutionary

Nine political songs to add to your library.

By NUALA MERNIN '29

Across cultures and time, throughout wars and revolutions, one thing has remained consistent: when oppressed peoples cannot speak, they sing. Protest music has unified movements of all kinds, whether it comes in the form of soft folk or hard rock. If you are feeling especially revolutionary after the Nov. 3 election, want to learn more about political music, or just want to add some songs to your playlist, give these tracks a listen.

"Drink Before The War" (1987) by Sinéad O'Connor

O'Connor was only 19 when she first recorded this song as an exploration of memory, violence, substance abuse, and coming-of-age during The Troubles in Northern Ireland. The chorus repeatedly references a man outside of a liquor store who yells, "Anybody want a drink before the war?" The image reflects the rampant alcoholism plaguing Ireland at the time and its role as an anesthetic in the face of large systems of violence. In her verses, she condemns the wealthy's complacency in the face of the poor's suffering, writing, "You got a nice big car, nothing bothers you / Somebody cut out your eyes, you refuse to see."

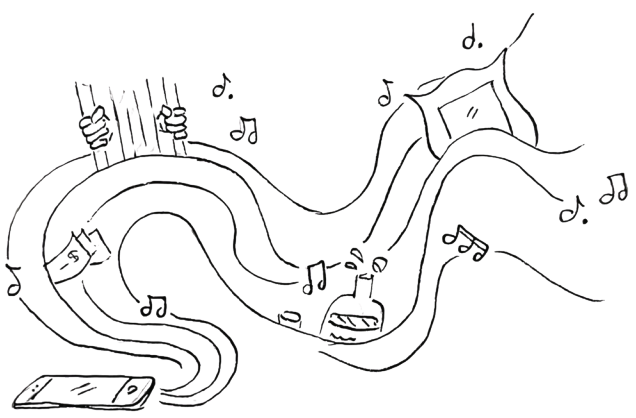
Though "Drink Before the War" is one of her most famous works, O'Connor said she hated it 10 years after the song's release. "When you're fifteen you think you're being really deep and meaningful, and actually you're talking a lot of bullocks," she said.

"The Message" (1982) by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five

One of the most influential hip hop tracks ever, "The Message" put politically conscious rap on the map. Since its release in the early 80s, the song has become one of the most sampled rap songs in history, incorporated into tracks by Ice Cube, Coi Leray, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, to name only a few. The song breaks down the living conditions of the New York ghetto and the school-to-prison pipeline. "It was the first dominant rap group with the most dominant MC saying something that meant something," Public Enemy's Chuck D said, a group best known for their work on the soundtrack of Spike Lee's classic Brooklyn film "Do the Right Thing."

"Folsom Prison Blues" (1955) by Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash first wrote this famous country song while stationed in Germany, where he first watched Crane Wilbur's crime drama "Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison." The song tells of the laments of a fictional prisoner who is serving life in the California prison after gunning a man down in Reno. The song humanizes prisoners and connects crimes to economic hardship at a time when advocating for prisoner rights was rare. Cash recorded the song live inside Folsom Prison in 1968, a performance so revolutionary that he was asked to perform at state penitentiaries across the country. There, he heard firsthand accounts of the abuse suffered by the incarcerated, inspiring his advocacy for prison reform later in his life.



"Whitey On The Moon" (1970) by Gil Scott-Heron

Known for his lyrical poetry and Afro-inflected beats, Gil Scott-Heron released this short song just months after the U.S. won the Space Race and put man on the moon. The poem paints a picture of the poor living conditions of many Black Americans, who faced high rent prices and severe medical debt while working lower-paying jobs. With every description of his economic hardship, he reminds listeners that "whitey's on the moon," highlighting the government's ability to fund space exploration while refusing to provide necessities to its civilians.

Though Scott-Heron released the song half a century ago, it remains as relevant as ever: Artemis II completed its orbit around the moon this summer. At the same time, rent and medical prices continue to skyrocket in urban areas.

"Money, Money" (1966) by John Kander and Fred Ebb

No playlist is complete without a musical number, and no account of political music is complete without "Cabaret." The musical follows regulars at Berlin's Kit Kat Club during the collapse of Germany's Weimar Republic and the consequent Nazi takeover. The musical warns against distractions from political dangers, portraying such fun-loving characters who believe themselves separate from their rapidly changing, radicalizing political world. This satirical number, a vaudeville performance about financial survival, points to the connection between economic instability and susceptibility to fascism.

> "When you go to get a word of advice
> From the fat little pastor
> He will tell you to love evermore
> But when hunger comes to rap
> Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat at the window (at the window!)
> Who's there? (hunger) Oh, hunger!
> See how love flies out the door."

While several amazing renditions exist, I personally recommend Alan Cumming's 1998 recording.

"No playlist is complete without a musical number, and no account of political music is complete without 'Cabaret.'"

"Burka Blue" (2005) by Burka Band

Afghanistan's first all-female band was a completely anonymous rock group formed by three women in Kabul. The blue burqa, also known as the "shuttlecock," differs from the black burqa because it fully anonymizes the wearer. While the black burqa is made of three pieces, leaving some room for the wearer's eyes, the blue burqa is a single cloth that completely covers the body and identity. Forced upon women by the Afghan Taliban regime, the burqa continues to be one of the most controversial garments in the world. The band members, who wear the oppressive material as a symbol of resistance, point out the dangers of the garment:

> "You give me all your love
> You give me all your kisses
> And then you touch my burqa
> And do not know who is it."

"Killing in the Name" (1992) by Rage Against the Machine

Definitely the most hardcore song on this list, "Killing in the Name" emerged in response to the infamously brutal beating of Black civilian Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers in 1991. Though the song is over five minutes long, it repeats the same six lines, including the two below.

> "Some of those who work forces
> are the same that burn crosses"

These lyrics point to the violent racism latent in city police forces at the time. But, in keeping with the band's name, the song refuses to quietly accept systemic injustices, crescendoing with the line, "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me," repeated 16 times.

The outrage of the song even seeps into its album cover, a famous photograph of Buddhist Monk Thích Quảng Đức self-immolating at a Saigon intersection in protest of Vietnam's persecution of Buddhists.

"Sound of da Police" (1993) by KRS-One

With its catchy chorus and drum beat, this song has developed into a popular club track and sports arena anthem. But its origins aren't that of your average dance-rap song: released at the height of the War on Drugs, "Sound of da Police" delivers a scathing protest against the New York Police Department. By imitating the sound of police sirens and describing the fear and anger felt at their arrival, KRS-One points out the extreme aggression Black New Yorkers faced, and the necessary violence criminalized groups respond with. Most famously, the song draws parallels between police officers and plantation overseers, both of whom act as the executors of higher authority.

> "The overseer had the right to get ill
> And if you fought back the overseer had the right to kill
> The officer, he has the right to arrest
> And if you fight back, they put a hole in your chest."

"Man in the Mirror" (1988) by Michael Jackson

"Man in the Mirror" encourages listeners who want to see positive change in their societies first to look inward and improve themselves. In today's socially and politically divided world, it's easy to look at other groups and demand they change. This song is a persistent and necessary reminder that the first and most important place to begin a revolution is within oneself.

While many of these tracks are lyrically beautiful and catchy, none of them can be limited to their musical value alone. These songs have motivated freedom fighters, comforted the disenfranchised, and educated the public. Listening to any of them can help one notice the flaws in their own society and appreciate the changes these artists fought for.

Nuala Mernin '29 (nmernin@college.harvard.edu) made a Spotify playlist featuring all of these songs.

Graphic by Annabella Burton-Boone '29

MAGA Makeup

A not-so-satirical deep dive into Trump's most bronzed cheerleaders.

By ANIKA GUPTA '30 AND SALMA GHEITH '30

If you have ever wondered who is teaching America's MAGA women how to look like a less fabulous version of RuPaul, look no further. The main culprit behind the infamous MAGA makeup, also called the "Mar-a-Lago" face, is Adrienne Gray, a former "Fox News" commentator turned makeup artist who has recently gained traction among conservative female politicians.

Gray's look features heavy matte foundation, creased concealer (often a shade too light), blush that makes the cheeks extremely rosy, heavy contour, false eyelashes, and a thick ring of black eyeliner around the eyes. Some aspects of the look aren't shaped by makeup alone: long blonde (but sometimes brunette—shoutout Kristi Noem) hair, big lips, and Botox are all classic additions.

Gray's new way of decorating America's most visible women gained so much attention that she hosted a makeup masterclass at Trump National Golf Club in Washington, D.C., in Virginia. The "Wall Street Journal" reported "varying degrees of unease" in the room as she painted the face of conservative lifestyle brand founder Jayme Franklin. This unease is not limited to the golf course. Users on TikTok have taken to creating parodies of the look, mocking the exaggerated features and poor technique.

But the problem with the MAGA look is not just bad hair extensions, filler, and unblended contour. The MAGA look is a signifier of one's loyalty to the agenda; it enforces a narrow kind of femininity, and borrows features that are associated with women of color while still centering whiteness.

The MAGA look could not be a clearer representation of the way that white women borrow from women of color while discrediting them. A deep bronze tan, overfilled lips, sculpted cheeks: Eurocentric beauty culture mocked Black and Brown women for all these features. Features once considered "masculine" and "unattractive" have been repackaged as something you can buy at a doctor's office or a medi-spa, and voila! It's fabulous again; all the white women are doing it!

"The MAGA look relies on a certain form of cognitive dissonance: conservative women can look however they want in search of some form of idealized 'femininity,' but queer people who are breaking gender norms are prevented from doing so."

The rest of the template follows the same conservative script. Beauty writer Jessica DeFino told "Marie Claire" that for the aesthetic to exist, whiteness must be the foundation: light but tanned skin, blonde or highlighted waves, and narrow noses.

Another journalist, Inae Oh, has written extensively on the MAGA aesthetic and told NPR's "Code Switch" that the ideal's whiteness is "very much intentional." Women of color in conservative spaces are consistently held to a contradictory standard. The look is borrowed from them, but it was never designed to include them.



Adrienne Gray, credited as the mother of the look, has painted the faces of all the "greats," from Karoline Leavitt to Bettina and Lara Trump (reportedly her most frequent flier). Gray has described the look as the opposite of "clean girl" makeup, while critics call it cakey, unblended, and creasy. The look has also been faulted for making wearers indistinguishable and stripping them of individuality, which stands in stark contrast to Gray's description of it as "niche."

The irony of her process doesn't just lie in its ridiculous visual; it lies in the products. She uses blush from Patrick Ta, an openly gay man, despite the MAGA movement's rampant homophobia. And the hypocrisy does not stop with the makeup. Daniel Belkin, a New York dermatologist, compared Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem's look to drag. He noted that although MAGA supporters tout lip filler and plastic surgery for themselves, they remain vehemently against gender-affirming care for transgender people. The MAGA look relies on a certain form of cognitive dissonance: conservative women can look however they want in search of some form of idealized "femininity," but queer people who are breaking gender norms are prevented from doing so.

Melissa Rein Lively, a conservative influencer, described how much MAGA makeup meant to her. "It's so much bigger than politics. It's friendships. It's relationships," she told "Agence France-Presse," a news organization headquartered in France. "That MAGA look really signals to other people that you're on the same team."

MAGA makeup, like many other fashion trends, also serves as in-group signaling. Coiffed hair and poorly contoured cheeks symbolize allegiance to the president. The look is certainly a departure from older conservatives, distinguishing what the classic conservative woman symbolized from the new MAGA era.

Juliet Williams, a professor of gender studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, noted that the MAGA look remains incredibly political. "It's actually absolutely central because this Trump MAGA movement was able to return to the White House in 2024, I believe, essentially because of leveraging the gender war," she said.

She was also resistant to the idea that MAGA women were merely victims of objectification or a fashion crime. "I see it as war paint," she continued. "And, you know, embracing a system that is ultimately designed to work against them." While MAGA women may be taking advantage of the system, they are also participating in it: their faces become ways to signal their attractiveness to men, a goal still heavily rooted in sexism and misogyny.

Concerns about submission and objectification related to the gaudy looks popular in the MAGA movement are not unfounded. Trump himself owned a beauty pageant, so these choices may not be independent political decisions but might instead reflect what Trump finds attractive. The goal for conservative women to look traditionally feminine also has ties to the patriarchy: conservative looks often attempt to uphold strict gender roles, focusing on appearing attractive to men. Popular MAGA women deny this, however.

"By absolutely nobody's volition other than my own do I spend two hours in the gym every day, get my hair done every three and a half weeks on the button, get my nails done, get my eyebrows done, get my skincare done, get Botox," Lively said in an interview with "Agence France-Presse."

Unfortunately, this is not entirely true. While Lively, like many other conservative women, may enjoy her style and make those choices for her own happiness, aesthetic decisions rarely exist in a vacuum. MAGA makeup trends not only serve as a signifier for who they can trust, but are extensively shaped by pervasive societal pressure to conform to patriarchal beauty standards. While a woman might choose to wear dramatic lips and heavy bronzer, critics argue it is often subconsciously motivated by a goal of appearing desirable to the male gaze.

This is not just indicative of a group of women who "enjoy" the same styles of makeup, but rather it shows a culture that consistently uses patriarchal signaling tactics. The hypocrisy of the MAGA movement and its exclusion of women of color reflects that it is not just about looking pretty, but about a specific type of social currency that allows conservative, and often bigoted, white women to position themselves in relation to men.

Anika Gupta '30 (anikagupta@college.harvard.edu) and Salma Gheith '30 (salmagheith@college.harvard.edu) are comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Sarahluna Sassine '29

Dear Evan Hansen: How Do We Experience Collective Grief?

A funny, sincere, and unforgettable musical about finding yourself.

By CLORIS SHI '29

"Dear Evan Hansen" is a humorous, sensitive exploration of family, friendship, and authenticity. Director Ava Della Pietra '27 and the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club brought the show to campus, and it concluded its five-day run from Oct. 28 to Nov. 1 at the Loeb Ex Theater.

The show opens with Evan Hansen (Jack McCarthy '30) cross-legged on his bed. At his therapist's direction, Evan writes letters to himself that begin with the iconic line: "Dear Evan Hansen, today will be a good day and here's why." As one of these letters falls into the hands of Connor Murphy (Aidan Vissers '29), a boy who takes his own life early in the show, Evan Hansen is unwillingly cast as Connor's secret best friend and the only person who can help Connor's family navigate their grief.

With a story that arises from a teenage boy's suicide, how does one balance humor, respect, and sincerity in the treatment of this subject? Indeed, "Dear Evan Hansen" was brought to life by the powerhouse cast and staff here at Harvard. It's a perfect dance, lathered with care and love, as it explores the complexities of collective grief.

"Dear Evan Hansen" opens with Evan at the start of his senior year. His mother, Heidi (Dessa Kavrakis '27), encourages Evan to make friends by asking them to sign his arm cast. Heidi plays a doting, although scatterbrained, mom, endearingly fist-bumping Evan's arm. In the opening act, we also meet the Murphy household. During the opening ballad "Anybody Have a Map?," where the show's two central mother characters sing about the struggles, confusion, and fear of raising teenage sons, the background is split half-red, half-blue through a projection, so that we are introduced to the Murphy household, where Connor's mother, Cynthia (Cassidy Crabb '28), joins Heidi. This blocking, choreographed by Tala Sanford '29, moves Heidi and Cynthia left, right, back, and forward around all four corners of the stage as the actors mourn "another stumble as [they] reach for the right thing to say." This choreography brought to life the difficulty these mothers face when raising a kid struggling with his own mind.

"It's a perfect dance, lathered with care and love, as it explores the complexities of collective grief."

As the show seamlessly transitions to the second track, "Waving Through a Window," Evan first confesses his insecurity with being in the spotlight—literally. The lights, designed by Jessie Zheng '29 and Kiri-Anna Kingsbury Lee '28, illuminate Evan's face, timed to his attempts to dodge them and "step out, step out of the sun," illustrating a recurring fear of attention. These set designers make the most of the confined Loeb Ex space, which feels expanded through projections. In this song, Evan appears alone on stage, shrouded in darkness. In a subsequent song, "Sincerely, Me," Evan recruits his family friend Jared (Fred Klein '28) to draft backdated letters, singing with a mix of crude teenage-boy humor and genuine confessions of loneliness. The mastery of contrast—whether to capture the character's loneliness or to shift scenes comically—keeps the audience on the edge of their seats, always surprised by what new scene unfolds next.

This feeling of discovery with each show also comes from the staff. Della Pietra describes each show as a chance for a new interpretation of "Dear Evan Hansen," a new dance between cast and audience.

"I'm always surprised how different demographics react to different things," Pietra said in an interview with the "Harvard Independent." "I think tonight with more family and parents in the audience, there were a lot of heavier moments where we were hearing more gasps than laughs."

Further, a unique attribute of Harvard's rendition of "Dear Evan Hansen" is the versatile paneled projections in the background. These translucent, fleeting images fracture, expand, and shape-shift with the scenes, as Evan assumes a mirage of an identity projected onto him by others' expectations.

"It also created a nice visual to create the feeling of being overwhelmed by the internet. The simplicity of the set also allowed the actors to really carry the show as well," Della Pietra explained.

To raise suicide awareness, the Connor Project—a social media campaign—is spearheaded by Alana (Finley Mcelhinny '27), another student at Evan's high school. Alana is a stereotypical class know-it-all, a tongue-in-cheek nod to what elite college students like Harvard students might have been like in high school. Although Alana thrives on media attention, Evan does not. Amid the cacophony of strings in "You Will Be Found," Evan begins to experience the internet's onslaught in support of the Connor Project, and the screen flickers in and out with comments, likes, and reposts. The song is the emotional center of Act I.

Before the show's run, the team asked Harvard students to submit friend-group photos that someone might post in an Instagram carousel. If students our age are implicated in the very questions of online authenticity that "Dear Evan Hansen" asks, incorporating our own faces into the backdrop of the play makes that messaging undeniable.

Further, "Dear Evan Hansen"—with a Tony Award-winning score—was a sonic feast. Co-music director Ellie Guo '29 conducted this tantalizing score, composed by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul.

The chemistry between pit and cast is evident. In one moment of particular perfection, the frustration and confusion of Zoe Murphy (Lana Schwartz '27) about her expectations to mourn her brother is conveyed in "Requiem"—a number where the pit crescendos as Zoe grows agitated, then falls out perfectly so that we are left with Zoe's tender, raw soprano voice confessing "I cannot play the grieving girl and lie." The pit guides us, tells us when the waterworks should flow, and establishes the rhythm of our heart as we follow along.

"Dear Evan Hansen" excels because it treats all the characters with forgiveness—not just Evan. After all, playing Evan Hansen comes with its own difficulty—he fools Connor's parents and pursues Zoe Murphy, the dead boy's sister.

In Jack's words, "there's a sort of, Gen Z, resentment towards the show, because people don't really [understand]. As long as I can get some people on his side at certain points, though, that was definitely my goal."

For example, one key relationship that the musical explores is that of Connor's mother and father— Cynthia and Larry (Ben Arthurs '27). In one particular exchange, Cynthia regrets not doing



enough to help Connor. She shouts in anger at Larry for having mistaken Connor's first suicide attempt as a bid for attention. In just a snippet of their fight, we see their different parenting approaches and the difficulty of truly understanding and caring for a child.

There is much to take away from "Dear Evan Hansen"—for both the staff and the audience.

Co-music director Nathan Tesler '27 believes the recurring theme of "Dear Evan Hansen" is its emphasis on the mother-son relationship.

"I really just want to emphasize the point of the difficulty of raising a child who's going through challenges, and the relationship between the mother and the son is one of the most important themes of the show," he said.

As for the lead, Jack emphasizes learning from Evan. "Main thing to take out of this show—you are not alone. Lead with empathy. And be honest."

Dessa Kavrakis '27 concurs. "Stories are complicated," she said. "There's a lot of layered messaging here, a lot of complicated and controversial pieces of the show. Under Ava's directorship, she really pushed us to probe 'what would this character feel in this moment?' given all these confounding feelings."

"Dear Evan Hansen" is perhaps best described as an attempt to take us into a growing boy's life. Brought to campus, this musical is a timely reminder to approach those around us with understanding and an open ear. Nothing about this musical is didactic or judgmental; we are just witnesses—weeping and laughing, booing and cheering on Evan as he finds his footing. One cannot help but think of the age-old adage from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus: "The only constant is change"—and through this roller coaster of a life, nothing will ever be better than simply being yourself.

Cloris Shi '29 (clorisshi@college.harvard.edu) couldn't admire the "Dear Evan Hansen" team more.

Graphic by Lola Selberg '30

Sketch Politics

Out of Office

By SOPHIA GONZALEZ '28
Designed By CAMERON BERNIER '29



Sisyphus and the Bu-rock-cracy

By ELLIE GUO '29 and SAM PARK '29



One must imagine Sisyphus productive.

Disaster at the Washington Monument

By SADIE TRIBE '30



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SPORTS

Get Off the Field

An analysis of condoning domestic violence in professional sports and why we should wholeheartedly reject it.

By ANIKA GUPTA '30 AND SALMA GHEITH '30

During a game on Oct. 29, Green Bay Packers running back Josh Jacobs reached the end zone and placed his hands behind his back in a mock handcuff gesture. Jacobs later claimed the celebration was an ode to the gospel song "Break Every Chain," but the imagery was an uncomfortable call to reality. Just months earlier, Jacobs was arrested following a domestic dispute and later pleaded no contest to two misdemeanor battery charges. The celebration came just 10 days after the NFL cleared him to play, in only his second game back on the field.

Jacobs was arrested on May 26 following a complaint about an incident that had occurred on May 23. He was initially held without bond on felony charges including strangulation, suffocation, disorderly conduct, battery, damage to property, and intimidation of a victim. He was released from jail on May 27. Prosecutors later filed only two misdemeanor battery counts, and in September Jacobs pleaded no contest to both.

Jacobs's celebration on the field represents more than a moment of poor taste. It's indicative of a culture that allows professional athletes to commit acts of domestic violence so long as they can still score a touchdown. Jacobs has played every week since he was removed from the Commissioner's exempt list, all while the details of the alleged attacks sat in a public police report. The exempt list is not a punishment; it's paid leave. Jacobs will still receive his salary (his contract is worth $48 million over four years), and the NFL never announced a formal suspension. He was allowed back while the league's own investigation into the domestic violence charges was still open.

"Jacobs's celebration on the field represents more than a moment of poor taste. It's indicative of a culture that allows professional athletes to commit acts of domestic violence so long as they can still score a touchdown."

His case is not an isolated incident; it fits a familiar pattern for the league. Players face serious and verifiable allegations of domestic violence, the news cycle forgets about it, and they stay on the field. When the NFL and its teams keep playing a player in his situation without comment, they tell fans, survivors, and the world that winning outweighs accountability. Jacobs's gesture makes that hard to miss.

The decision to keep Jacobs is a calculated one; without Jacobs, Green Bay had the worst rushing offense in the NFL. Even after three more women came forward, head coach Matt LaFleur said he could "anticipate him being a member of us moving forward."

According to the 129-page police report, the victim described Jacobs as "look[ing] like a different person" during the alleged attack. She further stated that it was the first time he had ever tried to strangle or suffocate her. "She said that she thought she was going to die," police wrote in the report. Her fear is far from an overreaction. Research indicates that women who survive strangulation by a partner are about 7.5 times as likely to be killed later by that same partner. Conveniently for Jacobs, the strangulation and suffocation allegations were not among the charges ultimately filed, and he was only charged with two misdemeanors.

The incident allegedly began when the woman brought up Jacobs speaking to other women. When she tried to leave, Jacobs prevented her from doing so, breaking her phone and slamming her to the ground in the garage by her neck. After waking up, she reported that she was "seeing dots/stars." The garage surveillance footage was not released, as both Jacobs and the alleged victim sued to block it.

Jacobs was then pulled over on May 26 while a passenger in a car. Upon his arrest, he told officers he planned to report himself. In released footage from a conversation with a police officer, Jacobs commented on the situation. "If I know I 100% didn't do anything wrong, what can I do in a situation to, you know, avoid it? To me, it's like, unfair, you know what I'm saying. So I don't really understand," Jacobs said, according to the audio log of the conversation.

According to records released by the Hobart-Lawrence Police Department on Oct. 30, following the initial allegations in May, three women reported other incidents of abuse by Jacobs dating as far back as April 2021. Jacobs's attorneys released a statement: "The Brown County District Attorney's office had these uncorroborated, old, and previously unreported allegations for months … the D.A. determined that only two misdemeanor charges were warranted … Josh has repeatedly expressed his remorse and is honoring the agreement."

One survivor said that Jacobs threw her belongings outside, pushed her against a wall, and grabbed her by her arms, resulting in pain and swelling in her ribs and bruising to her arms. She stated that she called the police after the incident, and reports from responding officers indicated no observed injuries or damage. Another survivor reported that in May 2022, Jacobs had placed his hands on her neck and head, dragged her around, taken her cell phone, and scratched her chest, leaving her with bruising and scratches. The woman did not report the incident or seek treatment because she was not a U.S. citizen and feared deportation. By her account, Jacobs himself told her she could be deported if she reported him.

Jacobs has claimed that these reports are an "attack" on his character. In a statement, his lawyers said he denied all accusations. In September, he pleaded no contest to two misdemeanor charges of battery and was convicted. Jacobs has consistently denied the allegations. "At the end of the day, there's a lot of stuff being said about me that's completely false, like, completely made up, and it's like, people just run with it, and I can't change that," he said in an interview with reporters. "All I can do is try to be who I am and try not to let the negative moments change who I am. And that was the biggest thing for me throughout this whole process."



Despite Jacobs's denials, the volume and severity of the accusations remain alarming. The connection between football and domestic violence is not new: In June alone, Alaric Jackson of the Los Angeles Rams and Jonathon Cooper of the Denver Broncos were arrested. In February, James Pearce Jr. of the Atlanta Falcons was arrested, and Rashee Rice of the Kansas City Chiefs was sued.

They join several other players arrested in recent years. This pattern of normalized violence extends beyond the field. The Super Bowl has been associated with an increase in domestic violence, with studies showing that reports of male-on-female intimate partner violence rise about 10% after upset losses by the home team.

The association between football and violence is often handled poorly. The NFL struggles to take accusations of domestic violence seriously: Jacobs did not play for the first six weeks of the season, but his return to the field was immediate and seamless. Sports are often used to explain away abuse. Male athletes who harm women are written off as merely emotional or high-strung—intense, as competitors are expected to be. Fans defend players, arguing that sports are a tense environment and that a player's competitive value matters more than the harm they have caused.

The league has been here before. In 2014, Ray Rice got only a two-game suspension even after a video of him dragging his unconscious fiancée out of an elevator surfaced. The public outcry is what pushed the NFL to adopt a baseline six-game suspension for domestic violence. Within that same policy, choking is listed as a reason for a longer suspension, and the policy does not require a criminal conviction before the league can discipline a player. The NFL has every tool to prevent Jacobs from playing; so far it has chosen not to use them.

When high-powered, physically larger men are allowed to hurt women and partners, it serves as an extreme and excused example of the domestic violence that occurs all around the world. And when it happens on a public scale but remains unaddressed, it reflects the ignorant assumptions that prevent victims of domestic violence from seeking help. Athletes like Jacobs, with multiple allegations over an extended period, should face scrutiny and punishment and no longer be allowed on the field. When they are allowed to continue, it sets a dangerous precedent, telling victims that their pain does not matter for the sake of scoring a few more points.

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Graphic by Maya Kodali '30

Weekly Sports Preview: November 12–19

Your weekly what-to-watch for Harvard Athletics.

By LUCY DUNCAN '28

The weather is getting colder, which means a new season for Harvard Athletics! While most fall sports have finished their regular seasons and are heading into post-season playoffs, winter conference play is already underway. It's an exciting time for fans to watch their favorite teams develop early in the season.

Field Hockey (15–2)

On Friday at 12 p.m., No. 3 Harvard hosts No. 19 Old Dominion at Berylson Field. A perfect conference season earned the Crimson an automatic bid in the NCAA playoffs. Friday will be not only the first round of playoffs, but the first time Harvard has ever played Old Dominion. Harvard's semifinal run last year was the first in program history, and the Crimson is now eyeing their first national title. Returning All-Americans forward Sage Piekarski '27, midfielder Martha le Huray '28, and goalkeeper Linde Burger '29 will lead the Crimson's effort in this make-or-break match.

Football (7–1)

On Saturday at 1 p.m., the Crimson plays the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. An automatic Football Championship Subdivision playoff bid is on the line for the Ivy League champion. With two games left, Harvard and Princeton are tied for the lead. Harvard has won the last five games against Penn, but the last three were by margins of three points or less—the Crimson must stay vigilant. Quarterback DJ Gordon '28 will be a key asset, since he rushed for two touchdowns against Columbia in only his third game back from injury. It's the last match before Harvard-Yale, so the team is naturally looking for a win to build the momentum.

"It's the last match before Harvard-Yale, so the team is naturally looking for a win to build the momentum."

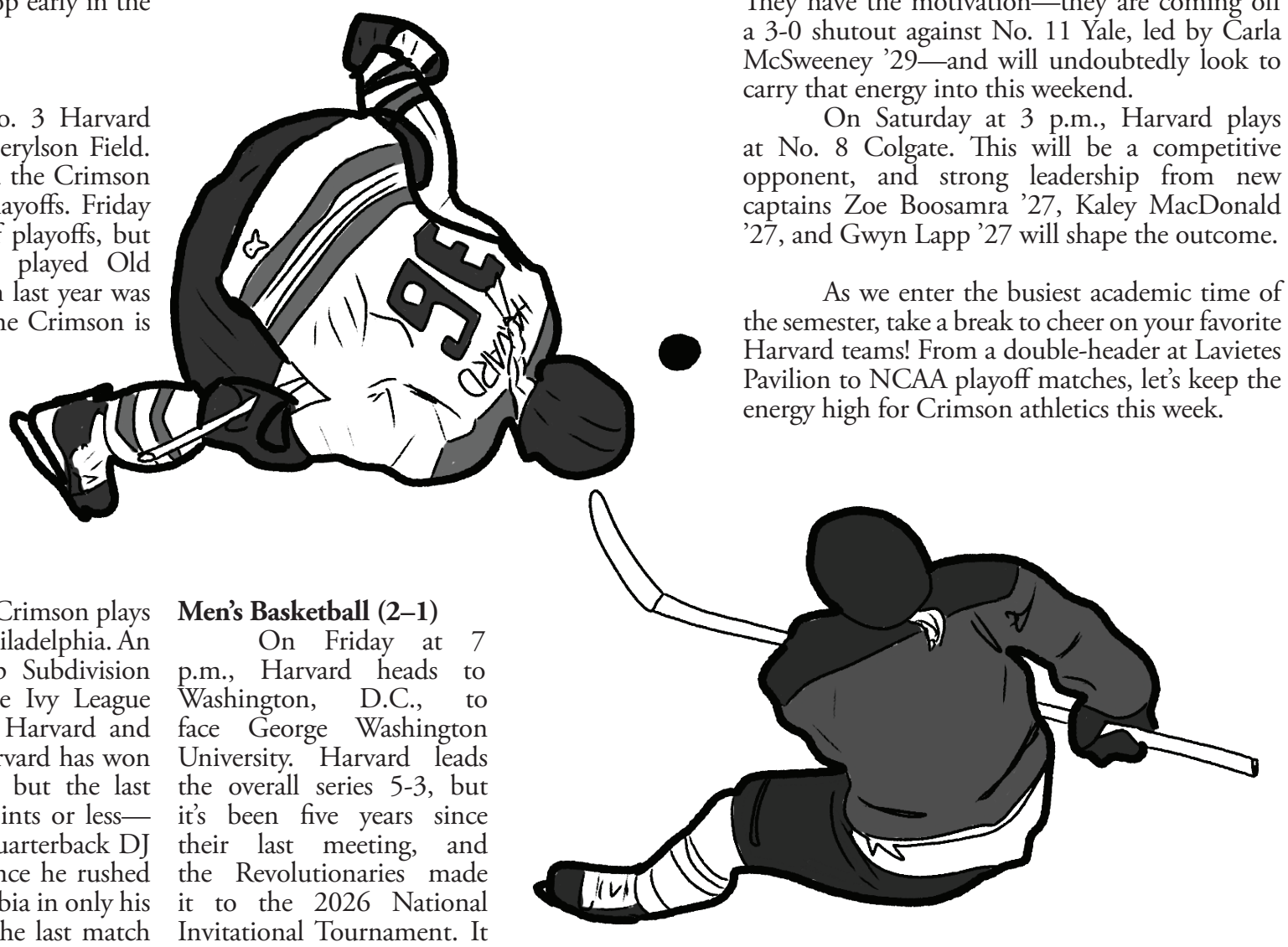
Women's Rugby (6–0)

Women's rugby plays American International College in the NCAA tournament this Saturday at 1 p.m. The Crimson recently concluded an undefeated regular season and are now eyeing their fourth consecutive national title. It's a rematch from earlier this season: on Oct. 30, Harvard met AIC in Springfield, MA. AIC started strong, leading 17–14 by halftime, but back-to-back tries from Josephine Mignone '28 and conversions by Evie Eyers '29 led the Crimson to a 38–24 comeback win. This time, Harvard will look to start explosively and get to the try line early.

Women's Basketball (2–1)

Women's basketball hosts Michigan State University for a 2 p.m. match dubbed "Aloha Sunday." This is the second time Harvard has faced the Spartans, following a Crimson loss, and MSU is undefeated so far this season.

On Wednesday at 5 p.m., Harvard hosts Syracuse for their second power-conference match of the week. It's part of the Atlantic Coast Conference double-header evening at Lavietes Pavilion, immediately followed by a men's team match-up against Boston College. Guard Karlee White '27 scored 25 points to lead the Crimson to their first victory of the season against Boston College on November 5, so she's definitely one to watch heading into this high-stakes week.



Men's Basketball (2–1)

On Friday at 7 p.m., Harvard heads to Washington, D.C., to face George Washington University. Harvard leads the overall series 5-3, but it's been five years since their last meeting, and the Revolutionaries made it to the 2026 National Invitational Tournament. It will be a competitive non-conference match and will test the Crimson's on-court strategy early on.

On Sunday at 1 p.m., Harvard plays American University. The Crimson have won just one of five games in this series, so this will likely be the week's toughest game. First-team All-Ivy Guard Robert Hinton '28 and captain Thomas Batties II '27 have been critical to the Crimson's success so far this season, and they will remain valuable matchups for this game.

On Wednesday at 8 p.m., Harvard hosts Boston College at Lavietes Pavilion. The Crimson has led this matchup in recent years, so this will hopefully be a lighter non-conference home match to reset after a challenging road weekend. It's the second half of the Atlantic Coast Conference double-header at Lavietes, coming immediately after the women's game against Syracuse.

Men's Ice Hockey (3–2)

The Crimson are headed to Princeton on Friday at 7 p.m. It's Harvard's first conference road test under new head coach Rob Rassey and captains Michael Callow '27 and Matthew Morden '27. Harvard leads the series, and last year's matchup had five Crimson goals by five different skaters. After an overtime loss to Yale on Nov. 7, this game gives the Crimson a chance to improve their standing in Eastern College Athletic Conference Hockey rankings.

On Saturday at 7 p.m., Harvard plays No. 5 Quinnipiac. The Bobcats were ranked No. 1 in ECAC preseason polls, so this could be one of the Crimson's toughest conference matches of the season. Back-to-back road games will further test Harvard's endurance against one of the nation's most dominant teams.

Women's Ice Hockey (4–4)

Women's ice hockey is headed to New York this weekend for back-to-back travel games. On Friday at 6 p.m., they play at Cornell. Last year marked the Crimson's first victory in this series after a five-year slump, so they'll look to carry that momentum back to the rink this year. They have the motivation—they are coming off a 3-0 shutout against No. 11 Yale, led by Carla McSweeney '29—and will undoubtedly look to carry that energy into this weekend.

On Saturday at 3 p.m., Harvard plays at No. 8 Colgate. This will be a competitive opponent, and strong leadership from new captains Zoe Boosamra '27, Kaley MacDonald '27, and Gwyn Lapp '27 will shape the outcome.

As we enter the busiest academic time of the semester, take a break to cheer on your favorite Harvard teams! From a double-header at Lavietes Pavilion to NCAA playoff matches, let's keep the energy high for Crimson athletics this week.

Lucy Duncan '28 (lduncan@college.harvard.edu) writes Sports for the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Linden McCarl '28

HARVARD
YALE

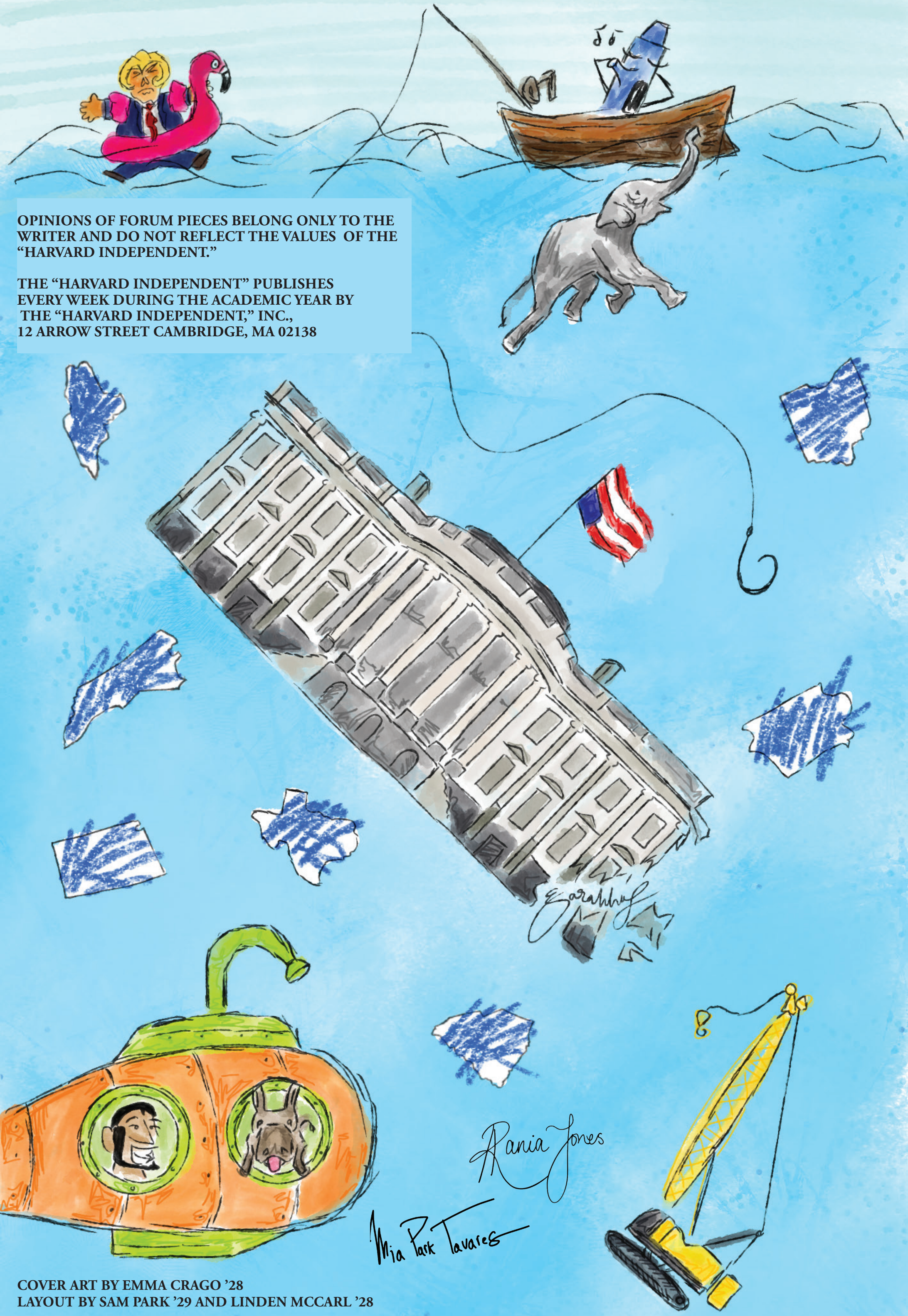




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