

"Reporting will begin at 11:00," read the slow, outdated homepage of the county website.

"Reporting will begin shortly," it insisted at 11:15 p.m.

I refreshed the page. Still nothing. Then, a tiny sliver flickered onto the pie chart.

"6% of results reported."

Finally.

A month of research, interviews, and writing culminated in this classic journalistic rite of passage: reporting on election night. For weeks leading up to that fateful Tuesday this past November, a fellow editor and I reported extensively on the most polarized school board election our school district had seen in decades — one fraught with accusations of fraud, interference from Moms for Liberty and other outside groups, and lawsuits, among countless other tensions.

My eyes scanned the website every few seconds, waiting for polling stations to close and begin counting the ballots that would determine our district's future. Finally, close to 11:30 p.m., results began trickling in. As I began to write the article reporting the election's outcome, I paused briefly to reflect on what had led me to this moment: wide awake with a mug of tea in the late hours of the night, waiting to publish the results that residents would check for in the morning.

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Since the spring of eighth grade, I've served on the staff of my high school newspaper, *The Stinger*. In the process, I've tackled all kinds of stories, from venturing into the tranquil world of bonsai to exploring the impact firearms have on our local community. Over the course of the last year and a half, I began to feel one journalistic beat tug at me over and over again, to the point I couldn't ignore it anymore.

From a young age, I've always been fascinated by politics. CNN, Pakistani news channels, and *The Morning Call* (our regional paper) have been a constant presence in my home as long as I can remember. Yet for all those formative years, I never considered I'd come close to producing content similar to what inspired me to learn more as a child.

Soon enough, I started doing just that. My first few stories from freshman to junior year focused on the most hyperlocal form of government — our school board. In January last year, a single text catapulted me from covering school board meetings to reporting on the presidency.

"biden coming 2 emmaus tmrw," read a frantic text I received from one of my editors two days into the new semester. Through her job at a local business, she passed information to us that we used to plan a reporting trip in less than 24 hours. We contacted local shopkeepers who kindly let us station our photography equipment as close to the police barricades as possible.

Once there, I led a small group of student journalists to document the heavily politicized scene before former President Joe Biden's arrival at our small downtown, just a ten-minute walk from our high school. I interviewed a variety of individuals there, including: Biden's supporters cheering him on, Trump's defenders affirming their belief the 2020 election was stolen, and Palestinian-Americans and Jewish Americans alike protesting Biden's Israel policy. Out of the dozen interviews I conducted that day, my favorite was undoubtedly when I asked a pro-Trump protester if she was at the Capitol Building on Jan. 6, 2021 (while we were on the topic), as my fellow editors looked on in shock that I had asked such a direct question.

"No comment," she brusquely responded after staring me down for almost half a minute. "Take that as you will."

While the scene was not my first uncontrolled environment as a reporter, it definitely was the most interesting. I occasionally faced personal attacks from protestors I interviewed, ranging from being decried as "fake news" to enduring pointed comments about immigrants "taking over." Being a dedicated journalist and a son of immigrants, both accusations stung deeply. Nevertheless, I continued in my reporting, interviewing people from across the spectrum, allowing me to write a more nuanced, balanced story — one read thousands of times in print and online. Conducting more than three hours worth of interviews while there (and several more afterward), I crafted an article accurately representing all involved parties.

Over the past year, I've seen firsthand how national political tensions manifest locally. The fights over curriculum, book bans, and public education funding aren't just abstract policy debates but have real consequences for students like me. Yet too often, we are left out of these conversations. We don't just observe politics — we're directly affected by it, and in my reporting I've aimed to reflect that lived reality in a way professional outlets often overlook.

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As election results trickled in the day after the school board election, I updated our website continuously, tensing up with anticipation for the results. In total, our website and four-part election package amassed over ten times the views our site normally did as residents relied on us for reporting the election outcome. When I saw that hundreds of people had viewed my stories within a couple of hours, I realized my writing matters. Seeing that impact reinforced why I do this work — and why I'll continue seeking out stories for The Daily Pennsylvanian and The Philadelphia Inquirer next year and beyond that inform, challenge, and engage my community.