

Activism grows in Hudson Valley amid divisive times

Geoffrey Wilson, Poughkeepsie Journal Published 7:00 a.m. ET Jan. 14, 2018 | Updated 7:42 a.m. ET Jan. 14, 2018



(Photo: Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal)

Amid turbulent times marked by instances of violence and racist rhetoric, Ignacio Acevedo sees positive change occurring.

Acevedo, the lead organizer with Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson, a Poughkeepsie organization that advocates for working-class people of color, said the Hudson Valley is experiencing a surge in activism among its minority groups.

"After living here for 27 years, I don't think I've ever seen people of my community speaking up like this before," he said.

As Martin Luther King Jr. Day arrives and nearly one year into President Donald Trump's administration, political science professors and local community leaders agree that there is an impetus of activism in the region, but also fear felt by some people of color.

MLK BREAKFAST: [Journalist Maurice DuBois to deliver keynote at Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast \(/story/news/local/2018/01/09/maurice-dubois-keynote-mlk-jr-breakfast/1014240001/\)](#)

OTHER EVENTS: [Poughkeepsie district to honor MLK with 'anti-bully' week \(/story/news/education/2018/01/12/poughkeepsie-district-honor-mlk-anti-bully-week/1029051001/\)](#)

Some say the growing prevalence of the alt-right, a political grouping embraced by some white supremacists and white nationalists, [as well as comments from Trump himself \(/story/news/politics/2018/01/12/5-other-times-president-trumps-remarks-sparked-controversy-over-race/1027925001/\)](#), have emboldened individuals to make openly racist and hateful remarks.

"We've heard about someone getting kicked out of a store for wearing a hijab," said Vanessa Green, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Hudson Valley. "A parent called in saying their son was called the 'N'-word. It's gotten worse, and it feels like they're organizing on their side."

But amid that divisive climate, Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson and Black Lives Matter Hudson Valley both say they have seen a growing fervor in their ranks, which leaders hope can lead to systemic change long overdue.

"We have noticed more participation and willingness to take part, and more people are rising to the challenge," Acevedo said.

While most evidence supporting increased activism is anecdotal, KT Tobin, associate director at the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, said there has been a rise on the national scale.

"There's been an uptick of people of color and LGBTQ people running for office nationally," said Tobin, who also serves as deputy mayor in the Village of New Paltz. "There have been more resistance groups popping up focusing on moving politically back toward the Democrats while countering Trump."

Lynn Eckert, associate professor of political science at Marist College, said the political climate has generally motivated POC communities to become more active politically. In particular, organization in the Black and African-American communities has increased.

"The African-American community has faced many existential threats, so as harmful as this administration has been, it's not powerful enough to demoralize leadership within the community," said Eckert, legislator for the City of Kingston's 5th district.

However, actions by the alt-right could also have a negative impact on people of color, discouraging action and activism, Tobin said. She pointed to rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which white nationalists marched in the streets chanting slogans; one rally in August resulted in the death of a counter-protester.

"We weren't seeing Nazis and white supremacists marching in the streets publicly before," Tobin said.

In the Hudson Valley, these viewpoints are most visible on social media, Tobin said.

"You see people have become emboldened to be racist," she said. "In a way, the administration has motivated both sides to act."

The Hudson Valley, particularly the 19th congressional district, serves as a major battleground for political action, Tobin said.

"We're in a pretty unique position as one of the few purple districts," Tobin said. "We have more opportunities as citizens and as political actors."

The Trump administration has served as fuel to the fire for local activists, Green said.

"Since the election, so many folks not involved before have become activists," she said.

Systemic issues such as housing, transit, food, employment and criminal justice predate the Trump administration. But the rise in activism in response to the administration opens up the possibility to address issues at multiple levels.

"Right now, there's so much potential to make transformation happen in our community," she said.

But the divisive rhetoric "definitely creates some fear," Acevedo said, regarding immigrants and undocumented people in the Hudson Valley. "It makes you question the community you live in. You wonder who's making you a target."

And existing struggles for equality in the Hudson Valley make taking active roles in the community difficult, Green said.

"The Hudson Valley is a good ol' boys network," she said. "It's hard even for just a woman to be in a position of power here."

More than ever, Green said it is necessary for people in the community to stand up against racist rhetoric and show that it's unwelcome.

"It's important that we let others know we're here for you and that as a country, we say, 'No, we won't stand for this,'" she said.

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