Elections have symbolic meaning. I remember my elation four years ago when Washington voters approved Referendum 74, which legalized same-sex marriage. Frankly, the force of my reaction surprised me. I had cultivated a defensive nonchalance about the outcome. Washington already had so-called “all but marriage” domestic partnership, and I was hardly about to stake my self-worth or my relationship’s legitimacy on a popular vote. But the outcome was a shot in the arm as an expression of popular acceptance and support.

But sometimes the symbolism is more sinister and murky. Understandably, many MES students felt afraid, alienated, and demoralized in the aftermath of the election. One can easily interpret the outcome as support for systemic racism, sexism, and xenophobia. But I kept puzzling over the fact that many voters supported Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016. Maybe racist and sexist statements that (in my mind) automatically disqualify someone for president might (in another voter’s mind) seem less consequential in the face of other issues. I found myself wishing that casting a vote was more like writing an evaluation. A vote, like a grade, lacks nuance. Opacity opens the door to dark interpretations and false mandates.

Elections also have consequences. We are now seeing—in tangible ways—what a Trump administration means for our world: climate change skeptics and fossil fuel executives appointed to cabinet positions, pipeline projects green-lighted to avoid environmental review, showdowns between the executive and judicial branches on vital issues. We are also seeing the emergence of vocal resistance. The day after Trump’s inauguration our public spaces turned pink as an estimated three million participants poured onto the national mall, city parks, and main streets across the country. When Trump refers to his “mandate” in the coming years, I’ll recall this ocean of people as a visual representation of the *margin* by which Trump lost the popular vote.

**Peter Goldmark**, the outgoing Commissioner of Lands, offered sage advice to MES students the week after the election. First, “complete your education” so that you are fully prepared to make contributions in the future. Second, get involved in local environmental efforts, such as firefighting and land trusts. (I’m happy to report that Peter will be joining the MES faculty, teaching Environmental Leadership and Public Lands Management this year.)

What is the role of graduate programs in environmental studies in this moment of policies that willfully ignore continuing—and accelerating—climate change? We have been contemplating this question, collectively and individually, in the MES program. We have also taken steps to make sure students are prepared for the challenging work ahead.

The election highlights the critical importance of developing broad and genuine coalitions. We’ve heard so much in the past two months about the need to listen harder to “disenfranchised” voters—often defined as some combination of white, male, blue collar, and rural. Good advice that’s worth heeding *and* exceeding: we need to build more diverse coalitions. Effective political change—and effective resistance to backward movement—must reach out to many groups of historically disenfranchised voters. MES is continuing to support such work with courses like Environmental Advocacy, taught by **Ted Whitesell** and **Ben Shaine**, that emphasizes [strategic advocacy](https://teachingstrategicadvocacy.org/).

As one might expect, MES students are taking the lead in such engagement and coalition building, with thesis projects that focus on reaching out to new audiences and participants in creative ways. **Ben Harbaugh** is developing strategies to engage rural landowners in in order to promote knotweed eradication. **Yonit Yogev** is using Participatory Action Research, interviewing/collaborating with people from communities of color, staff from the National Park Service and partner organizations to gather counter-narratives and ideas about how this agency can be more relevant and equitable. We feature each of these projects in this newsletter.

Our current polarization also creates an educational challenge. The MES program can sometimes feel encapsulated by the multiple “bubbles”—Evergreen, Olympia, Washington—discussed by media pundits. Many of our faculty and students share common views that grow out of strong convictions about the importance of protecting our environment and the people that depend upon it. But, scratching the surface reveals many perspectives on root causes of environmental problems, approaches to environmental policy, and strategies for political engagement. Listening to our seminars, I’m often struck by the spectrum of MES students’ arguments and views. As teachers, we must foster—even foment—this intellectual diversity by making sure that students expressing a minority opinion are heard and respected.

Our most recent faculty hire, **Shawn Olson-Hazboun**, will help students understand the complex cultural and political landscape of environmental issues. Shawn studied environmental issues and social movements as an undergraduate at Evergreen; she co-authored chapters for a student-generated advocacy manual, [Defending Wild Washington](http://www.mountaineersbooks.org/Defending-Wild-Washington-P389.aspx). After graduation, Shawn worked for several years as a writer, editor, and field ecology instructor. Her graduate studies began at the University of Colorado—Boulder, where she earned a M.S. in environmental studies and researched social resistance to climate change action and wind energy projects. Shawn is on track to complete a Ph.D. in environmental and natural resources sociology at Utah State University this spring. Her research focuses on public perceptions of industrial-scale renewable energy facilities and policies.

Another critical hire is **Andrea Martin** (MES 2013), who began work this month as our new Assistant Director. Andrea is an amazing role model for students who want to build strong partnerships and effective outreach programs. During her time in MES, Andrea led the Oregon spotted frog program for the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](http://sustainabilityinprisons.org/). She worked with prisoners to raise this state-endangered species in captivity as part of a recovery project that included Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, several zoos, JBLM and others. After graduation, Andrea worked as the Youth Program Manager for [Washington Trails Association](#http://www.wta.org/), where she oversaw all stewardship and leadership programs for children and teens around the state. The Assistant Director is a vital resource for students—prospective, current, and graduated. We are fortunate to have a savvy and supportive person in this role.

As a final note, I want to thank two assistant directors who have managed the many tentacles of the program in recent history. **Gail Wootan** served for five years and guided me through my first two years as director; she began work as Associate Director of Academic Affairs and Policy for the Washington Student Achievement Council this spring. **Heather May** served as Interim Assistant Director for most of the past year until she began work as a policy analyst for the Washington Department of Commerce. As part of their work, both Gail and Heather helped train the incoming assistant director, making both of these transitions smooth. I’m grateful for their diligence, can-do problem-solving, and patience.