



Why We Must Vote

essay by University of Baltimore lecturer Ron Kipling Williams, M.F.A. '16

Voting is our civic responsibility. It is one of the fundamental tools by which our nation has guaranteed our inalienable rights throughout our history—237 years now.

Today we live in a rich, multicultural society. We have representatives in our government who cross race, gender, class, sexual orientation and so on. For the first time in American history, we have a black president. Millions of citizens from various backgrounds are prospering and thriving in our democratic system. Frankly, we cannot fathom living in a society based in segregation and injustice. It seems like ancient history.

But it is not. Women did not secure their right to vote until 1920. Black people did not possess the right to vote until the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. People from different backgrounds fought and died for this inherent right to live equally and as fully vested citizens.

While we look to these moments as signs of progress, the Voting Rights Act is not permanent. It is codified to be renewed periodically. What that means is that those rights could be taken away, depending on the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court. In turn, those officials are selected by the president of the United States. He or she appoints these justices. Finally, it's the voters—you and me—who elects the president.

Your vote has determined how Congress acts in our interests, from the Civil Rights act of 1964 to the Affordable Health Care Act of 2010. In fact, according to the Brookings Institution, "Congress passed more than 500 major laws between 1944 and 1999 to improve the quality of life in the nation and world."

In other words, your vote determines who will affect public policy in all three branches of the federal government—executive, legislative, and judicial. For state and local government, the process is the same. In fact, everything you do in society is determined by public policy—where you work, shop, live and go to school.

Three words say it all: Your. Vote. Counts.

Most of us believe that all important decisions take place at the federal executive and legislative levels. It's true that millions of public dollars flow from the federal government to state and local bodies, and that is a public-policy driver. But how we are governed in

our everyday lives often depends on the officials we elect in our own backyard. So, if you are concerned about good schools, crime prevention, clean air and water and decent public transportation, you must vote for those who you believe will represent your interests. That means you need to participate in elections for your city councilperson, mayor, state senator, state delegate and governor.

What happens when people don't vote? Here is one scenario: You do not believe your vote counts; no matter what, there is corruption and nothing will change. So you abstain from voting on Election Day. Voter turnout is low, which invariably favors the incumbents—the very folks with whom you are not happy. Despite your unhappiness, they are re-elected. The result is that the candidates who could have best represented you do not get into office, and once again you are left despondent about your local government. Ask yourself: In this scenario, how can things get better?

I believe that change can never happen unless we vote. Despite all the challenges we face in this society, despite all of the messiness of democracy that we see on television and read about in the media, this system of government belongs to us. We pay for it. We hire people to make decisions for us, and if we are not satisfied with their performance, every election cycle we can fire them and hire others.

Why would you not participate in this? What do you have to lose?