



Perspective/Opinion

The Power of Voting

By Benjamin O'Brien, PhD Cell Biology Student

Voting may be viewed as ineffectual, casting one stone in the depths of a vast ocean, but one stone can reverberate across the ocean and combine to generate a wave of change...

As a cynical 18-year-old in 2013, I heard lots of discourse about the “power” of voting and what a great privilege it was to have this right. Initially, I didn’t take it to heart. I questioned, “who even likes politicians? When has one vote ever swung any election?” I figured I would register eventually and maybe vote here and there if I remembered, which wasn’t very often. It seemed like the US was on a generally progressive and inclusive path that would continue without my input. I carried on this way for several years, until 2016, when my outlook shifted completely. My busy school schedule and sense of doubt for the process no longer seemed like adequate excuses to not participate. I realized; we can’t win if we don’t show up.

Voting is the tool we as citizens have to affect change we want to see in this country, by abstaining you’re agreeing to go along for someone else’s ride.

During that year, connecting with my research mentor laid my former lackadaisical ways to rest. My mentor had immigrated to the U.S. and obtained citizenship but recalled the time before citizenship when she could not yet vote. I vividly remember discussing the 2016 election with her. She said something along the lines of:

“voting isn’t the perfect tool to influence government, and sometimes your vote is on the losing side...but it’s all we have and many people living in this country and outside it would give anything to vote freely and fairly.”

Our conversations surrounding civic engagement changed my perspective and led me to place great value on the privilege and power of voting.

In 2019, I began poll working at a local Milwaukee site which provided additional opportunities to observe the impact and power of voting. Specifically, I recall an elderly woman, set to turn 98

years old within the week, that visited our polling site. She needed a bit of assistance, which allowed me to talk with her for a minute. In that time, she told me she had voted in every election since she had turned 18, and how the excitement to cast her ballot still resonated. She commented that her mother was an Equal Rights Amendment advocate and by voting she felt connected with her mother's legacy. This story and participating in the election process solidified my improved civic mindset.

Life experience has changed my cynicism, not on all issues, but surely on voting. This is the civic voice that I have, and I plan to use it. I challenge you to do the same.

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