

The Urgency of Voting By Ron Kipling Williams

As a grassroots activist, arts education professional and university professor, I have born witness to what can be accomplished both in the community and in the legislative halls. Some outcomes have been ecstatic victories, while others have been crushing defeats. It is critical at every level that there are qualified, empathetic, people-oriented representatives that can enact policy for the benefit of all, and to foster more wins than losses.

Voting is a passive yet critical component of engagement simultaneously. Any free citizen 18 years and older can step into a ballot box and cast a vote, and go about their lives for another four years. However, that vote can be the difference in what monies flows into our communities; what construction projects get green lighted; the proper training and facilitation for productive relationships between police and citizens; and whether or not neighborhoods get access to healthy food.

All politics are local. Therefore voting is local. Often we become so focused on national elections we forget that. Local governments can make laws independent of federal government that assists neighborhoods like the aforementioned. States can enact human rights policies like marriage equality before it becomes federal law. California is leading the movement in ecological sustainability, and Colorado is a pioneer in medical and recreational cannabis legalization.

So we need to be careful of not becoming strategically myopic. Rallies, marches and protests are viable ways to bring awareness to issues we face, and as a veteran of them I have witnessed their effectiveness, but fundamental activism needs a multilayered strategy; organizing communities, building consensus, reaching across various sectors, and working with legislators. One representative can be the difference between a clear pathway and a roadblock to common sense legislation.

We have in our grasp something that our ancestors fought and died to secure—the right to hire people to advocate for our interests. But nothing is guaranteed. In this volatile Republic in which we are living, every election must be met with a sense of urgency. Many of our civil rights gains are under attack. Jobs have grown, but wages have stagnated, so our society is suffering income inequality and disparity. Our environment is becoming more compromised every year, and while we are still dealing with hunger in this nation of plenty, many farmers are still paid not to grow food.

These are not partisan issues. We all want peace, prosperity, and dignity. We all need to invest and save, and we need a reasonably sized government that works. This requires ethical, honest, intelligent, visionary leaders that will guide us in that direction.

I have been proud to work with current and incoming elected officials on serious local issues such as education funding, ending the school to prison population, ending mandatory minimum sentences, living wage rights, and the right to union organizing. They embody the compassion and tenacity needed to tackle these systemic problems, and saw elected office as an extension and amplification of who they are and what they do. It is this kind of commitment that gives us hope when we go to our voter precincts on Election Day.

At the end of the day it is our responsibility to become educated on the voter process, who is running, and what line items are on the ballot. This is the mistake of many citizens who treat it like a random event. An uneducated voter is just as problematic as a non-voter. It symbolizes the phrase, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” We would all like to believe we are active members in the health and well-being of our respective communities, so we must do our due diligence to reinforce that.

There is a common phrase, that activism is a marathon, not a sprint. Change does not come overnight. It is a long, arduous but rewarding journey. We have all the people we need to make it happen, but we need the right people side by side, arm in arm, working to manifest it. That means raising your voice, and doing your civic duty.

So read, think, act, and vote. Our future is up to you.