



Renewing Adult Civic Engagement

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AS A FORMER civics teacher, I welcome the articles in this issue about the importance of teaching students how to be active citizens. In the wake of the Parkland, Florida, shootings, of course, many young Americans have turned the tables and are teaching their elders what democracy looks like. You won't find a bigger cheerleader for civics education than me, but since that's so well covered elsewhere in these pages, I want to use this space to discuss the need for renewing *adult* civic engagement. Democracy is fragile, as we see in the United States and elsewhere, and it requires us to be more engaged than ever before.

Yale historian Timothy Snyder (*On Tyranny*) and Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (*How Democracies Die*) point out that, today, democracies die more often through a gradual whittling away of rights and the atrophy of civic engagement than they do in an outright coup d'état.

Every Vote Counts

Civic engagement in the United States, as measured by voting, is anemic. The U.S. ranks 31st out of 35 OECD countries for voter turnout. We know better than most that every vote counts. The 2000 presidential election ultimately was decided by the Supreme Court, after only 51 percent of the voting-age population voted. In 2016, just 59 percent of eligible voters went to the polls.

Consider the last six months: In Alabama last December, 22,000 votes determined who would be senator. In Virginia, in January, a House of Delegates race ended up tied, decided by random drawing. Imagine living in that district and not having voted. Or, take Pennsylvania, where a grass-roots movement organized to elect a new state Supreme Court. The new court then ruled that the state's congressional maps had been drawn unconstitutionally—gerrymandered—to guarantee that its delegation to the U.S.

House of Representatives would be overwhelmingly Republican, despite roughly equal numbers of Pennsylvania Republicans and Democrats. Now they have brand new maps. Votes count.

Voter Suppression

Precisely because every vote counts, since 2008 the right wing has fought to keep millions of Americans, especially the poor and people of color, from voting.

When the Supreme Court struck down a key enforcement provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in 2013, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas passed voter restrictions aimed squarely, and successfully, at keeping people of color away from the polls. The Trump campaign used social media to run voter suppression campaigns targeted to communities of color.

When people say, "It doesn't matter—everyone is a crook," or "They're all the same," it makes voters stay home from the polls. Why are voter suppression and voter apathy such a big deal? Because voting doesn't just count—it affects *everything*.

Voting populates the three branches of government, providing our government's checks and balances. Supreme Court justices and other federal judges—all confirmed by the U.S. Senate—shape the foundational elements of American democracy: public education, labor rights, and voting rights. And so do all our state legislatures, and our town boards, school boards, city councils, boards of supervisors, and county legislators.

Democracy on the Move

The remarkable democratic upsurge since January 21, 2017, is the largest and most

energetic of my lifetime. Beginning with the Women's March (the single largest demonstration in U.S. history), to the nationwide airport protests against the president's travel ban, to the Parkland survivors pulling off one of the biggest young people's demonstration in American history, to the moving teacher walkouts in deep-red West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and North Carolina—Americans are on the move.

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We've taken on issues many of us thought we couldn't do much about—from sexual harassment to gun violence—and put them on the national table for conversation, debate, and action. This has helped stop the repeal of key aspects of the Affordable Care Act and secured vital resources for public schools. The system isn't so immune to political movements that it can ignore us when we act together, in numbers, in a public commitment to our values.

Now it's time to convert these moments into enduring change. That happens at the ballot box. The teacher walkouts forced public officials to come up with hundreds of millions for public education. Now educators and their allies are going to work electorally to ensure they won't lose ground when new legislatures convene next January.

I believe we are at a crucial moment in American history, and in the future of American democracy. After a decade of unrelenting attacks on the right to vote, on labor rights, and on public education, the era of passive resignation is over, and we're having a totally new conversation about civics.

How all this energy and caring translates to the ballot box is now up to all of us.