

Our Voting DNA: Part 1

It is obvious that young people are helping to drive the energy in this election. However, in most election cycles, pundits typically predict young voters will be apathetic or have low turn out at the polls. Older generations lament this perceived disconnect between young people and voting and ask "don't they understand how important voting is?"

I am a native Washingtonian and have been in and around politics my entire life. I am clear that there are young people who are engaged, excited, concerned and willing to participate in the process.

My question is what is the importance of voting beyond this historic election, particularly for young voters? While I am anxious about November 4th, I am equally concerned about future elections. This election has received so much attention because of exciting candidates from both parties and because we are struggling as a nation with the war in Iraq and so much economic uncertainty. The ability of one candidate to inspire and connect with young voters has escalated the buzz and excitement, and for the first time in my lifetime there will probably be peer pressure to vote!

Still, it seems that we have placed so much emphasis on the act of voting that we have ignored much of the deeper preparatory work I believe is required to really make voting part of young people's DNA. This is especially the case for generations who are further removed from the time when African Americans or women were denied the right.

So what will help voting become second nature to young people in future presidential, state and local elections?

I believe it starts by knowing your history and understanding what is on the mainstream page and what is missing. The more you know about the decentralization of factory and plant jobs out of the inner city and the devastation and job loss it caused, the easier it is to understand why underemployment and crime thrives in cities across our nation and disproportionately affects people of color. In other words, the more you know about what has been and what is, the more likely you are to form your own sound opinions rather than believing what you are shown and spoon fed on the nightly news.

I also believe it is so important for you to feel connected to people and even more critical that you are able to feel a connection with people who are not just like you. In the future, when voting, my hope is that people will understand how the policies your candidate of choice supports will affect not only your life, but the lives of the least fortunate. We are all connected and I challenge myself and others every day to discover that through service rather than tragedy.

I do not believe voting is the answer to all of our problems. We must continue to take a multi-pronged approach to change that involves political, legal and community activism. There are a myriad of ways that all of us can positively impact our communities but voting is the common denominator of action.

I do believe that if you know your history and self worth, and you stand for justice and fairness for all, you will vote to change the trajectory of your life and the lives of others.

And if we encourage this process, voting (especially in future elections) will become second nature to most if not all young people.

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* Note: this article was adapted from a speech given at Central State University