

Our Voting DNA: Part 2

Regardless of whether their candidate of choice won, most young people who worked or volunteered on either campaign, donated money, or voted in this presidential election can be proud of the historical impact of their participation. Turnout of young voters was at its highest level since 1972. It is also the third major election in a row where young people have increased their turnout. The influence of the youth vote in this election changed the trajectory of the image of young people as apathetic about the political process.

Now we have the opportunity to leverage the inspiration and motivation young voters feel and translate that into positive action on issues that affect us all. Part of that process will involve making clear the direct correlation between voting, our elected officials, and their impact on our every day lives. The recent \$700 billion rescue package is a contemporary illustration of the direct connection between voters and the power of their voice to directly impact legislation.

The United States House of Representatives was responsible for the rescue plan's initial failure. Many members of the House were flooded with calls, e-mails and letters from constituents who felt the plan was a bail out for greedy Wall Street banks and executives and would not have a positive impact on the economy. The majority of the members, all of whom were up for re-election, voted against the legislation. As constituents felt the impact of the economic crisis and witnessed the fallout and damage each day the plan did not pass, many changed their tune and pressured their representatives to vote for the legislation. Within two weeks, the rescue plan passed and President Bush signed the bill.

This dynamic plays out on the local and state level as well. The city council members, mayors, County Executives, state representatives and senators we vote for make decisions that directly impact our lives in our cities and states. These elected officials answer to voters and if they don't, it doesn't take long for them to be replaced. In many ways, voting for them is just as important as voting for President.

It is also important for young people to keep voting, even when their candidates of choice lose. The worst thing that can happen is a lack of participation due to frustration. When they drop out of the process, they are essentially muting their voice and the voices of others who can't vote or are so busy trying to survive they don't vote. It is a fact that cities and precincts with the highest voter turn out get the most attention, resources, and money during and after the campaign season. Voting is not the only answer to all of our problems. Obviously a multi-pronged approach to change involves political, legal and community activism like protests, marches and boycotts. There are a myriad of ways we can positively impact our communities but voting is the common denominator of action.

* Note: this article was adapted from a speech given at Central State University by Tamara Wilds Lawson.