Get Registered, Get Educated, and GEAUX VOTE

By Laura Brasseaux

Show of hands: how many of you in here are registered to vote?

How many of you voted in the last presidential election?

Final question: How many of you voted in your last local election?

My grandmother has been a poll worker in St. Landry Parish for well over a decade, and she brought me to vote in my first election after I turned 18. It was a local election to determine whether teachers would be getting a raise.

I’ve asked her sometimes on election days how the turnout was, and I remember one time the number of voters to show up for voting on local measures was about 27 at her polling station all day. She recalled one time the turnout was less than 10 percent of registered voters in her precinct. As someone who recognizes that less than a century ago, I wouldn’t be able to vote because I am a woman, I take my right to vote seriously, and I found it to be disappointing that others in my community don’t feel the same way. Not only did women face challenges to get the right to vote, but African-American voters faced intimidation and violence to discourage them from going to the polls well after they were legally allowed to vote. Even poor white men were disenfranchised of their right to vote simply because they could not afford to own land. I don’t think it’d be a stretch to assume that at some point in our country’s history, almost all of us in here would have been affected by these issues, and that’s why I think it’s in our best interest to get registered, get educated, and GEAUX VOTE!

Voter apathy leads to less participation during elections, which can lead to the situation that we have in American politics today where “our” representatives are more concerned with special interests than with the health and well-being of us, their constituents. Did you know that young people will soon be the largest voting bloc for the first time in history, but are the least active voters? If we don’t vote, we are choosing to relinquish a lot of our political power as a whole, leaving a minority of voters to choose policies for the majority. Today, I hope to inspire everyone to get registered, get educated, and GEAUX VOTE.

Some excuses I see from a lot of people who are apathetic about politics is that, “My vote doesn’t count, anyway,” or “I don’t have time,” or, “there’s no one worth voting for.” In the 2016 presidential election, only 58% of registered voters cast a ballot, which is about the same as the 2012 elections, but our voter turnout is embarrassing when compared to other developed countries. According to the Pew Research Center, in Belgium, where voting is compulsory, or required by law, 87% of registered voters voted in 2014, and in Sweden, where voting is not compulsory, 82% of registered voters cast a ballot in 2014.

Young people don’t show up to the polls. According to civicyouth.org’s estimates, of the millennials aged 18-29 who were eligible to vote in 2016’s presidential election, only about half voted.

Voters aged 18-35 are on track to outpace baby boomers as the largest voting bloc, but we are the least active. I think that part of this is due to apathy, but that it’s more that young people are especially busy with school, work, and families, or that younger voters just don’t know where to start in order to get registered and become an active voter.

In the 2016 presidential elections, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote with nearly 3 million more votes, while Donald Trump took the presidency with an electoral college vote victory of 306 to 232. In this case it’s easy to say that your vote doesn’t count if the person with more votes doesn’t win, but in our system the decision ultimately falls to the electoral college, who has the final say. I personally feel it is an outdated system, but it is what we as country currently operate under.

An article from PBS.org states, “turnout rates dropped by 1.3 percent in Iowa, 3 percent in Wisconsin and nearly 4 percent in Ohio in 2016, a combination that became a death knell for Clinton’s presidential hopes in areas where Obama performed well during his two terms.” I don’t use this example to push any certain political view, but to illustrate that, had those small percentages of voters shown up to the polls in those swing states, it could have changed the ultimate outcome of the electoral college vote distribution. A couple thousand people who feel their vote doesn’t count could ultimately be the difference between which candidate wins a district, which can result in a state being won, which can result in a presidency being won. So in this case yes, even with the electoral college, your vote matters.

There are also voters that show up to vote, but are mainly driven by single issues, such as abortion. These voters ignore the rest of the candidate’s platform and previous political history, leading to an uneducated voting population which may end up actually voting against their own best interests. To clarify, I don’t mean uneducated as in “stupid,” but uneducated in the fact that by not doing the proper research into their candidate, they lack the full knowledge of their candidate’s platform and political history. This creates a very charged, polarized political environment, making it hard to draw attention to other important issues that affect a majority of us; politicians pander to those issues since it’s easier for them to draw lines and create turmoil with wedge issues than it is to work together for meaningful solutions.

REMEMBER: Being an under- or uninformed voter can lead to one voting against their own best interests when casting a vote based on a single issue

According to NPR, in the 2012 election, the Silent Generation, or voters who are 70 years and older, outvoted millennials 74% to 49%. This causes a larger representation for the interests of older citizens, but those interests may not align with those of younger voters; for instance, older citizens may not have interest in a candidate that promises part of a budget for an affordable childcare program, while younger voters with growing families may be heavily swayed by this. But younger voters are giving up their representation when they don’t vote.

We end up with is a representative body that is much less diverse than the people that they have been elected to represent. This results in a body of leaders that are out of touch with the needs of their constituents. Also, due to legislation like Citizens’ United, which allows for unlimited amounts of monetary donations to politicians, representatives become more concerned with pushing special interests.

So what can we do?

First and foremost, STOP buying into the myth that your vote does not count. If you can’t make it to vote on election day, Louisiana has early voting procedures in place so that you can get to the polls at a time that is more convenient for you. If you feel that there isn’t anyone good enough to vote for, YOU can run for local office!

How do I get involved? The first step is to get registered! You can register at the local DMV, or you can register today in a few minutes on the Secretary of State’s website by going to sos.la.gov, you just need your drivers’ license or government issued ID, and your social security number.

Once you are registered to vote, it is important to become a well-informed voter. Generally, candidates have campaign websites, and in the case of smaller local elections, you can usually find a Facebook page for the candidates. Ballotpedia.org is also a great resource that has ballot information, candidate information, and they even provide fact checking.

Now the important part: SHOWING UP! You can use the resources that are available on the voter portal on the secretary of state’s website, including signing up for text or email alerts about upcoming elections. They have sample ballots, give information on where you can vote early (which may not always be where you vote on election day.) It’s also extremely important to vote in local and state level elections and on local measures, as those are issues that affect citizens directly. Voting in congressional races, or midterm elections are of the utmost importance since these are the people who will ultimately represent us in Washington and are the ones voting legislation into law.

REMEMBER: We are responsible for becoming well-informed citizens who vote, so get registered, get educated, and GEAUX VOTE! Thank you.