

Our Responsibility

Civic participation is the way we citizens of the United States build a stronger sense of community. Civic participation by definition is the involvement of individual constituents or communities in local, state, and national government. The United States is defined as a democracy which relies on our responsibility to engage and be the change we want to see in our government. Influencing others to be active in participating can lead to our voices being heard and represented. Enlightenment philosopher John Locke strongly believed that people are *the* source of power.

John Locke once said, "All people have the natural rights, including life, liberty, and property." This moving statement given was the foundation of democracy. When writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson altered this quote slightly and adapted it to, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Jefferson's change was meant to acknowledge that *property* does not mean everything, but the enjoyment of life, liberty, happiness, and safety. James Madison used John Locke's philosophy as an outline for the Constitution of the United States. Our founding fathers signed the Constitution to guarantee that our democracy would provide American citizens fundamental rights. They were striving to ensure that our right to freedom of speech and to vote was guaranteed to us so that our voices could be heard. Freedom of speech and voting are important in civic participation because without either, only the people in charge have power. This is not the original intention of establishing democracy. Democracy was established to allow and encourage the people to voice their opinions.

Oklahoma is ranked #44 in political engagement with Maryland ranked first. Maryland is ranked 23rd in education making it more than two times different from Oklahoma, which is ranked 48th in education. Education plays a key role in civic participation; if citizens are not

well-educated, then they are less likely to not voice their opinions and vote. Although opportunities for civic participation in Oklahoma may seem limited, there are numerous informal ways citizens can better our state and strengthen democracy. As a youth member of Generation Z, voting, jury duty, paying taxes, and registering for the draft are not accessible, but not all civic participation has restrictions, rules, or regulations. Participating in Law Day, Oklahoma Bar Association's Ask a Lawyer Day, and volunteering are a wide range of activities that help benefit our communities and are accessible to citizens.

Our youth benefit from participating as it helps academic performance and creates a profound and lasting impact. Engaging citizens can help influence policies that affect our daily lives. This involvement not only improves our society, but can improve the individuals who advocate for civic participation. The personal growth and development civics has on people cannot be overstated. Civically engaged communities develop new perspectives, develop a sense of purpose, and build leadership skills. Being active in civic activities promotes social justice and holds elected officials accountable. The influence of civic participation is a beautiful and a legacy every U.S. citizen should get to experience.

The importance of civic participation has been the key topic, but what about when there is no civic participation? A decline in civic participation and engagement will lead to the deterioration of democracy, as inequity and inequality would rise as would the gaps of equal opportunity for all people. The voices of those who are non-white, immigrants, and/or low income communities or individuals would go unheard. Their voices being silent leads to vicious cycles of disengagement and perpetuates injustice. Voting for citizens may seem more of a choice than a responsibility, but voting demonstrates our loyalty to the country and shows that we desire our country to thrive. If large numbers of people chose not to vote, then only those

who do are represented or have power. People complain about politics not being absolutely pure and not representing the will of the people, yet these same people do not view voting as a responsibility.

The current voter registration of my county in southern Oklahoma as of December 31, 2023, is 15,915 voters. The U.S. Census Bureau states that as of July 1, 2022 the population of my county is 25,655, the percentage of those over 18, the legal voting age, is roughly around 18,257 . Out of 18,257 people in my county only 15,915 are registered to vote. This is discouraging and troubling as 2,342 people are not registered to vote. During the 2020 presidential election, my county's registered vote count was 15,064, which is a difference of 851 from the current 15,915. My county is not politically diverse and many people have complained of having "unfair" elections, yet those complianants are also the people who did not vote. If those 2,342 people in the county had chosen to vote, they could have impacted the 2020 presidential election, as every vote counts. The outcome would not have been much of a difference since candidates ultimately win through the electoral college, but at least those 2,342 citizens would be able to say they at least tried to get their preferred candidate in office.

There are a variety of ways to help my county's and other state's voter rates increase instead of decreasing over the years. The first general step in voting is for citizens to find a reliable journalist or a reliable news station. Unfortunately the issue is that few news stations are reliable. In fact, most are biased, which is why it is my opinion that a journalist is a better option. The second step is to look over the candidates' records as if it were a job application. Because we have the power to say who gets the job. Watch what the candidate does rather than says, as actions speak louder than words. There is a very slim chance you will find a candidate that supports everything you want them to , but it is always important to remember not to abandon

your principles nor expect others who are also in the voting process to abandon theirs. Individual priorities are always different for a reason. Lastly, you must remember that change takes time. Continue showing up at the polls to increase the chances of seeing change. We are the future of voting. We are the voice.

Preserving and influencing our constitutional government helps keep citizens in power. It is important that citizens acknowledge that our government is based on our voices, so we must use our voices to preserve and influence our government. Many people wonder why the government and elected officials expect us to voice our opinions after they put us through hardships when they did not listen to our voices in the first place. Forrest Bennett, a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, made an incredible point that, often many representatives cannot get elected if they represent something opposed to their party's beliefs, therefore if they cannot get elected then they can not help citizens. This is why if an elected official is not speaking on a topic that is important and needs to be publicly addressed, you must step up and write to the elected official. As civically minded people, we know there needs to be more compassionate elected officials, but that will never happen if we never express our concerns and provide constructive criticism. Decisions are often made by people who do not fully understand the issue, an example of this is military spending. All people should voice their opinions because voting determines the direction of the country, and although it may not always be the result we want, by participating we show that no matter the political party, we are working together to make this country a better place.

In the future, I look forward to striving to make my country a place where everyone is educated on civic participation and no one hesitates to respectfully voice their opinion. Civics and politics have always interested me, but it was not until last year when my teacher announced

the Law Day Essay Competition for 2023 that I knew it would be my main interest. The 2023 Law Day contest reminded me that I can do anything I set my mind to. As a citizen of a minority group, I have always been aware that there would be slight challenges, but participating in Law Day helped me overcome the mindset that my ethnicity could hold me back. As of right now, I am focusing on educating myself more and more with being a founding member of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Teen Board. The Oklahoma City National Memorial Teen Board has introduced me to many educated politicians such as David Holt, Ronald J. Norick, Kay Floyd, and Forrest Bennett who have given me a deeper understanding on what it means to be a leader. With this new knowledge of being a leader, I hope to fill the voids between citizens and politicians, and show people that no matter your background, you have the power to be the change, and also educate my community and generation on civic responsibility and advocate for it. Together we will be the tangible change we want to see. As Thomas Jefferson once said, "Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government."

Work Cited

- “Civics Advocacy Resources: Inspirational Quotes - CIVICS RENEWAL NETWORK.” *Civics Renewal Network*,
<https://www.civicsrenewalnetwork.org/featured/civics-advocacy-resources-inspirational-quotes/>. Accessed 12 January 2024.
- “Civic Participation - Healthy People 2030 | health.gov.” *Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion*,
<https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/civic-participation>. Accessed 12 January 2024.
- “Democracy.” state.gov, U.S. Department of State, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/democ>.
Accessed 12 January 2024.
- “Maryland Ranks No. 6 Among 'Best States' In Nation.” CBS News, 14 May 2019,
<https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/maryland-ranks-no-6-among-best-states-in-nation/>. Accessed 12 January 2024.
- McCann, Adam. “Most & Least Politically Engaged States.” *WalletHub*, 12 October 2022,
<https://wallethub.com/edu/most-least-politically-engaged-states/7782>. Accessed 12 January 2024.
- “Oklahoma Rankings | US News Best States.” USNews.com,
<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/oklahoma>. Accessed 12 January 2024.
- “Pursuit of Happiness.” Thomas Jefferson's Monticello,
<https://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/pursuit-happiness/>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

“Teach Democracy.” Constitutional Rights Foundation,

<https://www.crf-usa.org/foundations-of-our-constitution/natural-rights.html>. Accessed
12 January 2024.

“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Garvin County, Oklahoma.” U.S. Census Bureau,

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/garvincountyoklahoma>. Accessed 12 January
2024.

WebInteractive Stats: Index,

<https://stats.okelections.us/>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

“What are civic participation and civic activities?” *Zencity*,

<https://zencity.io/glossary/what-is-civic-participation/>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

“Which Issues Can Benefit from Civic Engagement | UMN.” College of Continuing and
Professional Studies, 20 June 2023,

<https://ccaps.umn.edu/story/5-societal-issues-can-benefit-civic-engagement>. Accessed
12 January 2024.

“Why Is Youth Civic Engagement Important? | CIRCLE.” Circle at Tufts,

<https://circle.tufts.edu/understanding-youth-civic-engagement/why-it-important>.
Accessed 12 January 2024.