

Freedom of the Vote

By Sue Roberts

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My lifelong commitment to voting began at home. Growing up in Sheridan, Wyoming, my parents were loyal Republicans. But in this state before the time when political polarization was so encompassing, the best candidate typically won. Several centrist Democrats were elected Governor of Wyoming. In my family, voting was like church, performed regularly as a duty.

In 1984, at age 16, I embarked on an experience that would forever change my ideas about the political process. I became a U.S. government sponsored exchange student to then West Germany. I spent 11 months in the country, and because of the Congressional-Bundestag co-sponsorship, I had political experiences far beyond the usual American or German citizen. I was able to go on a behind the scenes trip to Bundestag with my local representative. I walked right past Willy Brandt, a major politician and long-time Mayor of Berlin. I witnessed a German general election with my host family, where the ballot had only political parties listed, rather than individuals. Parties governed by majority or coalition.

My fellow Gymnasium (university bound high school) students challenged my Reagan friendly belief system by showing me a world viewpoint of my country. I was exposed to a country that was far more invested in the well-being of it's people. Every family with children received a subsidy per child to eliminate child poverty. Single payer healthcare was available to every citizen free of charge. Completely different from the U.S. I saw humanism and true socialism in practice.

Near the middle of my year in Germany, we students in the program travelled to then divided Berlin. Until the split of Germany after WWII, Berlin was the capitol city. All over Berlin, the wall was imposing and ever present, the Eastern side with a no man's land, barbed wire fences and guard towers. The Western side was covered in graffiti and the city simply went right up to the barrier. There were even floating nets with alarmed sensors in the rivers to prevent swimming across. As a part of this trip, we spent a truly sobering day in East Berlin.

We crossed the border by rail. In East Berlin territory, our train was boarded by soldiers in uniform and long winter coats, always in pairs. They carried Kalashnikov automatic

rifles and several pairs had German Shepherd dogs to search for contraband. We then exited the train in a path lined by soldiers to the Immigrations and Customs area, where our passports were well scrutinized. We exchanged our required daily monetary fees into East German marks. Then we set out on foot for several hours in the city. There was very little to purchase, half of the shelves were empty. There was little to desire or do with our required spending money. It seemed that 50% of the population were uniformed soldiers, always in pairs. Everything and everyone seemed to have a gray cast, augmented by ugly cement utilitarian buildings rebuilt after the bombing destruction of WWII. Order, discipline, and oppression permeated the air. We visited a World War II museum with the Soviet block version of events. Despite the fact that the Soviets and the Allied troops both fought against Hitler, everything West of the Berlin Wall was fascist. It certainly was a different political spin. The victors not only write history, but determine the political narrative. After a horrible meal in a state run cafe, it was time to return to the West. Freedom again. I realized that I was incredibly fortunate to be an American and to have opportunity and choices. I vowed to do my best to participate in every election I was eligible for. I had learned how precious my freedom to vote truly was. I understood my responsibility and privilege.

The original freedom of the vote was provided by the Constitution of the United States of America. However, the freedom to cast a vote was only granted to white male landowners. The penultimate white privilege, guaranteed by the Constitution. Gradually, and largely due to the influence of Andrew Jackson's ideas of expanding democracy from the 1820s, most white males over the age of 21 were granted the privilege to vote in 1828. Andrew Jackson owned over 300 men, women, and children as slaves over his lifetime. It would be decades for men of color and nearly a century for white women to have the right to vote. Much longer for the Civil Rights movement and broader access to voting. Equality in access to voting continues to be a problem today.

Throughout the 19th Century, abolitionists campaigned for African Americans to be free from slavery. The Civil War was fought over slavery. Abraham Lincoln's executive order, the Emancipation Proclamation, was issued on September 22, 1862. It took effect on January 1st, 1863, during the Civil War, which continued another 2 years.

The 15th Constitutional Amendment in 1870 prohibits the use of race, color, or previous servitude in determining voter eligibility. This theoretically enabled black men to vote. In practice, in many parts of the country, especially the Jim Crow South, this was far from true. The freedom to vote was limited by poll taxes, literacy tests, residency requirements, and other measures aimed at limiting Black and low-income voters.

Women's suffrage included mostly white women. Well-known suffragettes were sometimes blatantly anti-African American. In a blunt statement, Susan B. Anthony said, "I will cut off this right arm before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the negro and not the woman." Sojourner Truth started traveling the country in the mid 1800s promoting both abolition of slavery and the right of Black women to vote. Harriet Tubman encouraged the Black vote for all men and women. Activists such as Harriet Forten Purvis, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Frances Harper, and Ida B. Wells organized groups and campaigned for the Black women's vote in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The white women's vote was established by the 19th Amendment in 1920, which prohibits governments from denying (white) women the right to vote. Native Americans of either sex were denied voting rights until 1962. Additional strides were made in the freedom to vote by the 24th Amendment in 1964, prohibiting poll tax. But until Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1965 Civil Rights Act, people of color faced a gauntlet to vote. The most modern Constitutional Amendment related to voting was enacted after the draft and youth activism during the Vietnam War. The 26th Amendment in 1971, lowered the eligible voting age to 18.

Our current freedom of the vote is challenged by several issues, one being low voter turnout. 60.1% of eligible voters in the 2016 Presidential election cast their votes. (Voter statistics from The Election Project) The presence of gerrymandering in legislative districts is also a problem. The largest threat to our freedom of the vote today is dark money in our political process. Election finance reforms have been gutted by the creation of Super-PACs (political action committees). Since the 2010 Supreme Court decision of the Federal Election Commission vs. Citizens United, the candidate with the biggest wallets supporting them typically wins an election. Super-sized PACs obscure political donors, allow huge (and even foreign citizen) donations, and unfairly influence elections. People working to rid the political system of dark money, organizations such as Wyoming Promise, are trying to help change this. Many UUs have lent this movement support.

After so much effort spanning two centuries to have the freedom to vote for all Americans, and efforts to keep elections free and fair, why do so many Americans not vote? The U.S. ranks 31st out of 35 developed countries in voting participation. In the top turnout countries, voting is legally required and people are automatically registered from their social security systems.

The number one reason people give for not voting? Registration takes work. Transportation, verified state photo IDs, proof of residence, and other documentation are required in different states to register. The time interval to the election matters in some

states. It's not simple. Education is a factor in voting. People with college degrees vote at higher rates than those with less formal education. College grads may have more money, access, and comfort with the registration process. Your friends and relatives also factor in. If the people around you vote, you're more likely to vote.

Another reason people don't vote is that two parties may not be enough for people to feel their ideas and values are represented by either one. However, no coalition governance is set up in our system and outside party candidates really have little chance of success in the national political process. People also state they don't care about politics and don't feel elections affect their lives. That is apathy. People also have election burnout. Sometimes there are lots of elections, too often. Some people feel their votes don't count or don't matter. In the past two decades, two candidates who won the popular vote for President did not win the office. The Electoral College is an entirely different rabbit hole I will not go down. It can be plain frustrating to vote.

Many interventions exist to improve voter turnout. Peer pressure helps. Ask those around you if they've voted. Those silly stickers help! Educate the young about voting early and well. Personal interactions, face-to face, are still the best way to encourage voting. Participate in the political process how you can.

The freedom of the vote for UUs is partially grounded on our watchful application of Principle #4, a responsible search for truth and meaning. We must verify and seek truth in political information. Search to separate super PAC and dark money advertising claims from reality. Find which candidates align with our values.

Our 5th Principle, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large is rooted in the freedom to vote. Our hard won freedom should be exercised regularly and with care. In the upcoming 2020 election, your voice is vital to address the huge problems of climate change, pandemic management, economic insecurity, xenophobia, immigration, racial injustice, and hate. With consideration of our principles, let's use our Freedom of the Vote.