

How to Increase Voter Turnout – May 29, 2019

“If you want to complain, you have to vote”

This and other takeaways from last evening’s forum

By Sheila Smith

When it comes to mobilizing today’s voter, understanding the barriers that come between them and the ballot is vital in making an impact in election turnout. That was the core message in last night’s public forum, How to Increase Voter Turnout, co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Greater Cleveland and the Rocky River Public Library. Moderated by Jen Miller, Director of the League of Women Voters of Ohio, and featuring panelists Crystal Bryant of Cleveland VOTES, Mike Brickner of All Voting is Local, and Tony W. Perlatti, Director, Cuyahoga County Board of Elections, the full-house event featured a lively and informative conversation on the obstacles within our current voting system and the activists working to remove them.

From mistrust in the government and disbelief in personal impact to transportation difficulties and misinformation about registration regulations, the reasons for low voter turnout lie on a wide spectrum. For some, the process of maintaining voter status, can become time intensive and laborious, especially to those who move frequently, request absentee ballots, or are unable to make it to the polls due to time constraints and other responsibilities. Even those who choose to vote early, especially in rural areas, can face struggles due to only having one early polling location per county. “We don’t want to have just an accessible system, we want to have an equitable system,” said Brickner.

But the question is how can we create the equitable system? Automatic voter registration, a system which routinely registers residents to vote or updates their voter registration when they visit government agencies, such as the Bureau of Motor Vehicles or the Department of Taxation, was viewed by the panel as a vital first step. Right now, under the National Voter Registration Act, Ohioans are supposed to be given the option to opt in to voter registration at any government agency they visit, but that rule does not always come to fruition. Recently, Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose announced that a bipartisan group of lawmakers would begin to create a bill aimed towards forming a more efficient voting system in Ohio. In the meantime, Ohioans do not have to stand by and idly wait for the General Assembly to make a move. “Be consistent,” said Bryant, “Trust your skills, put effort in the areas that have low turnout and have open and honest conversations with people.”

This means calling state legislators, advocating for a better voter registration system, volunteering with advocacy organizations, writing letters to the editors about issues you are passionate about and consistently engaging with individuals about voting on a routine basis. Staying involved, informed and excited is a year-round endeavor. Same with forming relationships not just with residents who are registered and choose not to vote, but rather those residents who are unsure about the system, the candidates and their ability to make a difference. All in all, Perlatti stated it best: “If you want to complain, you have to vote...Every election that you are involved in can impact you somehow.”