

Engagement first step to bridging the voting gap

In a nation of states where lawmakers are working every angle to suppress voting by the masses, Oregon stands above the fray with a solid record.

We have the universally popular vote-by-mail system, which unfetters voters from the ballot booths. (That's particularly refreshing this year, knowing some states face the hubris of self-appointed monitors

against fantasy fraud at the polls.) And unlike many states, people with felony convictions on their record are able

to vote after their time is served.

Still, Oregon suffers the same problem as most states in the nation: Low-income people are underrepresented at the polls. Sen. Bernie Sanders put it front and center: "Poor people don't vote."

Obviously, the flip side is that the higher income levels are the ones electing our representation and deciding policy – with little inclination to encourage anything but. According to studies compiled by Politico, the past "40 years of state-level data finds no instance in which there was not a class bias in the electorate favoring the rich – in other words, no instance in which poorer people in general turned out in higher rates than the rich." The report goes on to note that this bias has increased since 1988, "just as wide gaps have opened up between the opinions of non-voters and those of voters."

If the widening economic gap is any indicator, fewer people with lower incomes will be voting with each passing year.

Tuesday, Sept. 27 is National Voter Registration day, and Street Roots will be taking part in helping people get registered for the upcoming election. The Oregon Bus Project will be in the house, registering vendors and whoever needs to sign up. Street Roots also serves as a mailing address for receiving and distributing ballots. We're one of several services in town doing so – helping get people who have so much at stake in future

policies, particularly around affordable housing, engaged in the issues.

But it doesn't end with a completed form and a stamp. Voting needs to be talked about, exercised with careful thought and practiced only after many viewpoints have hit their mark or hit the fan, so to speak.

Unfortunately, with poverty also comes social detachment and political isolation. Yet for many of our vendors, the shop floor for political debate and pointed arguments are a street corner, with customers, familiar or new.

Every Friday morning, with the rundown of the new paper, a roomful of Street Roots vendors give their opinions on controversial topics and important issues, from incarceration policies to housing regulations. It's a time where people find solidarity where it's not expected, around shared experiences and concerns. Opinions span conservative, liberal, old-school and progressive, but there is plenty of common ground for everyone to stand.

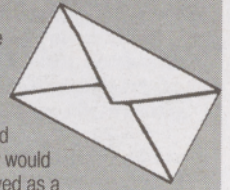
There's much at stake in any election, but this year housing has become paramount. In November, voters will also consider the groundbreaking Measure 26-179 that would raise \$258.4 million over 20 years to acquire and build permanently affordable housing in Portland.

And while it is important all economic classes can engage in democracy, it's also important for all to be heard and understood. It's a two-way street.

So the next time you're picking up your Street Roots, talk with your vendor about the serious issues this upcoming election. It could be a very thought-provoking conversation.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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