

The shot clock has begun

Elections have consequences. Decisions at the polls help shape the mighty river of federal and state policy and can reach into our personal and business lives. We live in a great country, where each individual gets the opportunity to make their voice heard.

Our jaded political system and its loudest voices may seem to always have the floor, but there always comes a time when even the most powerful must surrender to the voting booth — or in the case of “vote by mail” Oregon, a kitchen table.

Your voice matters. The general election is only a year away. The ballot will settle a number of state initiatives and determine the balance of the legislative and executive branches. There are issues that matter to the nursery and greenhouse industry and to each member's personal perspective.

The right to vote is a privilege — one that is taken for granted far too often by our fellow citizens. Sometimes it is easier to grouse about problems and feel like there is nothing we can do about them. My \$100 contribution to my favorite congressional candidate is not going to sway an election — but my voice and my vote? They sure can.

The shot clock for the next big election has started and we all have skin in the game to help shape our state and our country.

Hard-fought rights are taken for granted

A couple of wars have been fought for our right for self-determination. A woman's right to vote became the law of the land in 1920 when Tennessee became the 36th and deciding state to ratify the 19th Amendment. Some 45 years later, the 1965 Voting Rights Act knocked down the barriers that had kept many African-Americans from voting.

The greatness of America is bolted to the bedrock of its citizens. Presidential elections normally drive voter turnout, and this year's election will be wide open for the first time in eight years.

The unfortunate truth is that apathy and anger drive weak voter turnout. The toxicity of the political environment is of our own making. Negative and destructive ads work. Flipping a vote is the most obvious reason for these ads — they tap into aquifers of anger. But many are designed to suppress turnout by making us so disgusted with the process that we simply don't vote.

Democracy is not weakened most by threats from outside our borders. Rather, it's our lack of resolve to perform our duty as voters that can steal democracy from our hands.

After the 2012 elections, a comprehensive study by Nonprofit Vote, a non-partisan group designed to encourage voter turnout, released their findings. Two factors boost voter participation — Election Day registration option and swing state status. Minnesota held the highest turnout rate at 76 percent, while Hawaii had the worst participation — a paltry 44 percent. Only four states turned out more voters in 2012 than 2008 — Utah, Colorado, Wisconsin and Massachusetts. Iowa was unchanged — all other states had their voter participation rates fall.

Oregon's seven electoral votes are meager, and so was our

turnout rate — just 64 percent (ranked 14th). Washington was 13th with a 65 percent turnout in 2012. California's 55 electoral votes (the most of any state) barely matched its voting power with a 56 percent turnout (41st place).

These numbers are anemic. The general public has a less-than-passing knowledge of civics and matches their intellectual indifference with voter apathy. This is not a good recipe for solving our shared problems.

Voter anger is real

The long and choppy economic recovery that came after the 2008 recession and partisan action at the state and federal level has soured public opinion on the institutions that we help shape every election cycle. Voter dissatisfaction is nothing new — it explains the pendulum “change” elections in 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2014 — with the incumbent president's party punished by the voters.

My sense is that voters normally look for a change of direction after a president serves two terms — as we saw with both President George W. Bush and now with President Barack Obama.

Our media has changed over the last two decades, with specialized cable news networks that push their own political narrative. If I want to only listen to a GOP perspective, Fox News is there for me. If I am led by a Democratic compass, MSNBC is at my disposal.

For the issues that you follow and those that impact the industry, getting information is critical. Like a twisted tennis match, I flip between the two and am fascinated at the disparity of what passes for straight-up news.

The surge of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the early parts of the presidential primary season is fueled by voter anger with the status quo, and a desire for authenticity. They are doing well by separating themselves from the political system that many everyday Americans view as rigged.

We can do better

I am like everyone else. I have core issues that drive my vote and stoke passion and anger. However in our communities, only 6 in 10 vote. Being a voter is something that was fought for and expanded and defended over time.

We have a year before we select a new president, a Congress and state legislatures, and cast votes for issues that impact our state. In the end, the person who looks back at us in the mirror is the one responsible for making the changes we want in our country.

I know we can do better than we have in the past. I have faith that we will get into the game. The clock is running down. ☺



By Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeff Stone'.