

America needs our vote

At a time of national challenge, we can either look at what divides us or what unites us.

Our nursery community is a critical ingredient in the great American experiment. We are a blessed and privileged few.

America is only as strong as her citizens. Our nation is a cauldron of different perspectives, ideologies and passions, all part of a hard-fought notion: a democratic republic.

The other day I watched the 1995 movie “The American President” starring Michael Douglas as President Andrew Shepherd. The crescendo of the movie was about the country itself and it resonates:

“America isn’t easy. America is advanced citizenship,” he says. “You’ve gotta want it bad, ’cause it’s gonna put up a fight. It’s gonna say, ‘You want free speech? Let’s see you acknowledge a man whose words make your blood boil, who’s standing center stage and advocating at the top of his lungs that which you would spend a lifetime opposing at the top of yours.’”

The right to vote has been hard-fought from Revolutionary times to the present day. Our founding fathers fought for American self-determination, but they didn’t trust the voting public. The battles to guarantee all citizens the right to vote would take decades of blood and tears.

America, you are not perfect. The journey has not always been something to be proud of. But when we look at America, the reflection in the mirror is you — the voter.

“The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.”

— Sir Winston Churchill, prime minister of the United Kingdom.

Our nation had to create its own meandering path toward democracy. Over the course of more than 200 years, lawmakers eventually ceded the franchise to all Americans — regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age or any other factors — through lawful amendments and rules.

It took a long time to assure voting for all. The U.S. Constitution originally left it to states to determine who was qualified to vote. Our founding fathers established severe limits on voting. They limited it to white

men, who often had to be property owners to boot. Many states also required religious tests — voting was for Christians only.

Following the Civil War, African American men were guaranteed the right to vote by the 14th amendment, which made them citizens, and the 15th amendment, which banned voting discrimination based on race, color or past servitude. However, southern states found ways around this with Jim Crow laws, using a range of barriers — poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses — to suppress the black vote.

“Someone struggled for your right to vote. Use it.”

— Susan B. Anthony, American women’s rights activist.

Women fought for more than 100 years before securing the right to vote. While some states allowed it, others did not until the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1920. Anthony is one that most historians point to. She and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the National Woman Suffrage Association, but sadly, they never saw the fruits of their labor. Each passed away 14 and 18 years before the right was secured.

Disagreements over strategy threatened to cripple the movement more than once. History is full of trailblazers from Abigail Adams to Harriot Eaton Stanton Blatch, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Lucretia Mott and Carrie Chapman Catt who pushed the issue over the finish line.

“I have been beaten, my skull fractured, and arrested more than 40 times so that each and every person has the right to register and vote.”

— U.S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Georgia), Civil rights activist, former Freedom Rider

Shamefully, in 1965 — 100 years after the Civil War ended — African Americans still were effectively denied their voting rights. Civil rights leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, John Lewis, and Rosa Parks led a series of marches, culminating in one from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. For this the peaceful marchers were viciously attacked.

That summer, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which was signed into law by President Johnson. The vote was



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decisive and bipartisan: 79-18 in the Senate and 328-74 in the House. It barred many of the policies and practices that states had been using to limit voting among African Americans and other targeted groups. Additionally, it required states and local jurisdictions with a historical pattern of voter suppression to submit changes in their election laws to the U.S. Department of Justice for approval.

In 2013, portions of the act were weakened by the Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*. The nation continues to struggle, but that is her beauty and her flaw — America is complicated.

“We do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.”

— Thomas Jefferson, Founding Father and 3rd President of the U.S.

Generations have fought and bled to give everyone a voice. Voter suppression is still a problem today, but its greatest ally is our own indifference. There is a palatable sense of powerlessness, anger and, with some, a glaring lack of accountability. Some still will not accept personal responsibility to cede the course of our great nation to others.

Look inside and take an inventory when ballots are cast. Our industry has a tremendous voice. Let’s not waste it.

“Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves and the only way they could do this is by not voting.”

— Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States. ©

