

A Vote for Understanding

Lisa Braun
Psychology Major

University of Wisconsin- Richland

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A single ballot dropping into a ballot box has the power to shift public policy, and the lives of many individuals, for the better. It is an action that brings beliefs and preferences into decisions, creating guidelines that shape communities. In 1956, U.S. politician Adlai Stevens explained, “As citizens of this democracy, you are the rulers and the ruled, the lawgivers and the law-abiding, the beginning and the end” (Trust). This quote emphasizes the strong role each person can play in the democratic process. Voting is an act of civic engagement that gives citizens a voice in their government. In the United States, we are fortunate to inherit our democratic government through the sacrifices and challenges of many generations before us. It is important that we recognize the responsibility that accompanies this right and privilege. The experience and knowledge cultivated through liberal education provide the tools and perspective needed to effectively participate in the democratic process.

When voters pull the curtain behind them and look at their ballot, they are asked to choose one candidate or solution that best matches their views. Knowing the issues and the candidates, therefore, is of utmost importance. A liberal education provides the skills and experience necessary to find this information. When forming an opinion, it is important to know all sides of an issue; taking information from a variety of sources leads to a more thorough understanding. The broad range of subjects studied allows for a variety of different information-gathering methods. Surveys, interviews, text research, internet research, and mathematical problem-solving can all be used to research candidates or current social issues. Liberal education brings real tools to the learning process. During election season, campaign information presented to voters can be confusing and contradictory. These methods bring objectivity and discretion to

the research process. The learning process reminds us how much more there is to know, and also how much there is to gain from learning.

The content of a liberal education provides a broad base of knowledge to build on. Studying a greater variety of subjects allows us to see connections and relationships in a bigger frame. John Henry Newman wrote in his 1854 work, "The Idea of a University," that, "A truly great intellect...is one which takes a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and which has an insight into the influence of all these one on another; without which there is no whole, and no centre." Liberal education provides the opportunity for these connections and relationships to be made. History, philosophy, sociology, and economics all help us understand the path to our current national recession. These same subjects may also contribute to the solution that will steer our nation out of this economic disaster. This "big picture" vision is one of the most valuable results of a liberal education. This broad vision leads to a greater ability to problem-solve. History plays a leading role in many decisions, as well. When presented with an issue, history is often one of the greatest predictors of outcomes. Even when history does not produce a success, past failures can serve as examples that need not be repeated. For example, if someone puts a piece of bread into the toaster, and the toast comes out burnt, it would not make sense to simply put a new piece of bread into the toaster. It would be best to re-evaluate the toaster setting. This is a learning experience.

Liberal education also prepares us for a variety of communication methods used throughout life. Voting is our voice in our government. It is expression. Poetry, journalism, song-writing, short stories, and historical writing are also used to convey social and political views. Written communication skills allow these concerns and ideas to be shared with others. Writing formal letters directly to those elected officials who create new laws can be an effective way to

encourage change, or simply spark a conversation about an issue. Letters to newspapers or universities can start conversations about current events. Public speaking and internet communication also play a role in sharing information. The importance of these skills in sharing information cannot be underestimated. The pen, after all, is mightier than the sword.

Participation in the democratic process, particularly through voting, often has global effects. This makes our understanding of global situations crucial. Without understanding, there can be no real opinion, nor can there be any predictions of future outcomes. Religion, culture, language, and politics all vary from country to country. These differences, when understood, can be celebrated. When these differences are not understood, discrimination can occur. Unchecked, discrimination can lead to resentment and anger that far too frequently result in war. Liberal studies encourage education in diversity, a fierce weapon against ignorance and apathy. Foreign language study is also strongly encouraged. Language can bring understanding through the sharing of stories and perspectives. Psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung went so far as to say, “The reason for evil in the world is that people are not able to tell their stories” (Quotes). Traditional barriers to cross-cultural peace and cooperation diminish as understanding increases. Liberal education offers opportunities to explore differences in individuals and cultures, extending an olive branch to hatred.

Civic engagement benefits all who participate. There are countless ways to get involved. Canvassing, serving meals at soup kitchens, volunteering to rebuild after a natural disaster, participating in school board or town hall meetings, water monitoring, and tutoring are all ways to get involved. All of these activities fill a community need. Voting is somewhat different. If a homeless man is hungry, it is civic engagement to serve him lunch, but it is also civic engagement to vote for additional job and housing options to prevent him from being homeless

in the first place. If a person's house falls into a lake during a flood, it is civic engagement to help clean up the lake shore, but it is also civic engagement to vote for stricter shoreline preservation zoning laws. Voting places us directly into the decision-making process of democracy. It is up to each and every one of us to learn about our communities and get involved in making positive changes for our neighborhoods, our nation, and the global community that we are a part of. Liberal education prepares us to achieve that goal.

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