Why Vote? Whose Voice Is Viable, and Who Is Vulnerable?

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Abstract

Just as the fall of the year itself undergoes a transformation, frequently the season conjures up the notion of new beginnings—of change. Besides the detaching, accumulating, and blowing of autumn’s multi-colored leaves, the ripe and over-ripe bounty of summer’s growth is ready to harvest. A shift of the November wind’s flow, too, stirs a sense of readiness for change. November evokes a time for deliberation about voting that sometimes signifies change and new beginnings or perhaps signals transformation. A desire for change is often the catalyst for casting a ballot. Voting is repeatedly upheld as a privilege and a right of people living in freedom within a democracy. Is it really? What is freedom exactly? Where did the idea of voting begin?

Introduction

Greeks living before the common era voted with black and white stones. Black stones indicated a no vote, while white meant yes. Only male landowners participated in Greek elections. Colonialists from the United States voted in much the same way. Only male property owners were allowed to cast colored kernels of corn as ballots. Jews and Catholics were excluded. Amusingly, the term ballot is derived from the Italian ballotta because in the 13th
century, colored balls were first cast for voting purposes in the republics of Venice and Florence, Italy.

Just last year in our democratic republic of the United States, Americans celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The anniversary commemorated marchers who gathered together in Selma, Alabama, to demonstrate and cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in order to access full freedom and the legal right to vote that was withheld for close to 200 years. On the first attempted crossing of the bridge on Bloody Sunday, March 21, 1965, demonstrators were tear-gassed, beaten, hurt, and hospitalized. The second crossing was a more orderly and larger demonstration due to the presence of National Guard troops who accompanied the marchers from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Having federal protection granted scores of pluralistic protesters who had come from all over the United States to join in solidarity for voting and civil rights protection from the white supremacy groups that did not share in “the dream of equality.”

During the Civil Rights movement, people were martyred. Many were children, simply struggling for just democratic rights, mainly the right to vote. President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 five months after Bloody Sunday. This legislation legally terminated discriminatory voter registration and unjust voting practices imposed upon people of color. By 1966, sixty-six percent of the African Americans in Selma were registered to vote.

Is it not a function of best practice in social studies teachers’ work for social justice to encourage learners to examine the privilege and right to vote? Realistically, should not caretakers of social justice concern themselves with the nature of the democracy? If education is a political act, it cannot be a politically neutral endeavor (Kincheloe, 2001).

Educators for social justice assist students in examining the dominant societal power structures in place. Together, they consider groups that seem to traditionally endure suffering and whose lives are exploited. They consider how dominant power structures intersect with people who are being, or have been, marginalized or appointed as vulnerable in our society (Kincheloe, 2001). Students naturally ask, “How can this occur in a democracy?”

In what ways can teachers support learners as advocates for emancipatory social change and social justice for the betterment of common good within a democracy? Voting is the one right that is too seldom enacted. Ironically and unfortunately, citizens in the United States presently vote less than any other eligible voters in Western societies (Mintz, 2004). Imagine that!

Whose vote-casting eligibility has been vulnerable in the past? To name a few marginalized and vulnerable groups of people in the democratic republic of the United States since the ratification of The Constitution include African Americans, Native Americans, Women, People of Poverty, and Young People. People who could not read and write were barred from the right to vote at one time in the history of this country. Convicted felons are, for the most part, still ineligible in the majority of states, as are people who live and work in the US and pay taxes but are not citizens of this country. Most states require voters to register to vote.

What if suddenly one of the groups listed above was again barred from exercising the right to vote? Would there be protests? Would voters dissent and become more active? Would voter registration drives become more prevalent? Additionally, yet ever more caustic, more people voted in the latest American Idol television contest than in any Presidential election in the United States. What a stark fact.

Fall, November, voting, change, transformation, BIG problems—here we are. Assisting students to confront existing problems in order to solve them puts the act into the action.
component that social studies educators for social justice enact. Friere’s (1970) proposal of “problem posing” is an active means of involving students in discovering the nature of the contextual world and in working to solve an existing problem. First, the problem has to be dissected or deconstructed. In the case of voting, students of all ages can observe and speculate about why it is, throughout the history of the United States, so many groups of people have been excluded or dominated when it came to the democratic ideal of the right to vote. Sometimes, teachers of social justice have to enable learners to look askance at the status quo to even determine a problem. Given direction and varied materials, resourceful social studies teachers for social justice nudge students to research elected local and national government officials. Are the people holding elected offices of the people, by the people, and for the people? If not, then voters vote for others to take their place. If they are, voters vote for them again.

Democracy is extremely difficult to achieve, but solidarity and equality are hallmarks of its certainty (Friere, 2001). The social studies teacher has a tall order if she or he is to put social justice into practice. If the hallmarks are absent, how do we cultivate and ennoble students about the ability of the right to vote to transform the context in our midst?

As human beings, we are like the transitioning autumn leaves in early November, ready for change. Some of the smallest leaves, especially the youngest of learners, have to be properly nurtured to transform through opportunities presented to search, change, grow, and dream. Freedom, in the form of transition and transformation, begins with connections and others of like-mindedness. Ah ha! Here are the hallmarks of solidarity and equality that Friere (2001) mentioned: the foundation of democracy.

Opportunity is created by and through freedom. Social justice educators perch themselves on the springboard of change, ready to offer opportunities for students to consider and act on freedom. Transformation is possible. Youth studying social justice have to examine who has voice in the vote. Is that voice viable or vulnerable? Helping social studies learners to deconstruct domination and injustice is one way to encourage the necessity to vote. Taking action on the problem, exercising a choice to solve a problem is an act of freedom within a democracy. As Maxine Greene (1988) reminds us, if freedom is a problematic question, then it is time to begin.
References