



First Place

2024 STUDENT ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

What Voting Means to Me

By Nat Fang, Helena High School

When my mother was younger, she tried to convince her father, my grandfather, to vote.

To that, he asked her, “Why? You know our votes will just cancel each other out.” At first, this sounds like a classic case of low voter efficacy – that my grandfather didn’t want to vote because he didn’t feel it would make a difference. However, the more I thought about this story, the more I began to respect his choice.

My grandparents are first generation immigrants from China. Historically conservative compared to Western standards, the culture my grandparents were raised in was a whole different world. Simply put, their political views are widely different from that of their children’s. That being said, my grandfather chooses not to vote. It’s not that he doesn’t *want* to vote, and it’s not that he thinks his vote won’t matter. In fact, the fact that his vote holds weight is the exact reason he chooses not to. By being able to recognize this and withhold his vote for the sake of his daughter, his decision signifies what voting means to me.

Despite its writing in the Constitution, we must first recognize that voting is not necessarily a right – it is a privilege. The ability to influence politics, to voice your own opinions, is something not guaranteed for everyone in the world. Even in America, many groups have found themselves unable to vote and represent themselves in the past. Relatively speaking, the fact that an Asian American like myself *can* influence American politics would have been unheard of at certain points in history.

In today's world, however, countless people can influence politics – millions of voices bouncing around in the political chamber. So, what will we do with this power? The best thing we can do is exercise it – get involved and advocate for ourselves. After all, the generations before us didn't fight just so we could “not have time” to vote. And this is something my mother taught me. Throughout her years, she grew to become very politically active in issues such as the environment and minority representation. As I grow older, I find myself following in her footsteps, with a few differences in ideals, of course.

This brings me back to my original story. If voting is such a powerful ability that we hold, why wouldn't my grandfather do it? Truthfully, it could not have been easy for him. One of the most prominent factors of political socialization and why we believe what we do is influence from our family. To see his daughter outright oppose his political views at times must have been frustrating. However, he didn't get frustrated; he didn't cancel her vote. Instead, he recognized that his vote has the potential to hinder and discourage his children and the future generations.

Putting aside his pride and political beliefs, he understood that his ability to vote, and more specifically, his withholding of his vote, can be an investment in the future. And *that* is what voting means to me.

A vote may not seem like much – just one of millions of numbers tallied up – but ultimately, a vote is much more than that. A vote is the ability for progress. A vote is the power to stand up and say, “This is what I believe.” This is a power that gives voice to the voiceless.

Ultimately, my grandfather knew this, and wanted to give his children and his children’s children a voice. Coming to America, he had no idea what it would mean for his children, whether or not they would find their voice, find their power; but he was able to recognize that he could give them this voice and actually encourage them to vote.

Knowing all this, I refuse to let this voice go to waste. My grandfather did not put aside his political ideals so that I might remain idle. The ability to vote is a privilege that generations before me have worked to obtain, and now it is my duty to earn that privilege and utilize their efforts, working to shape the world into something that I believe would be best for the future.