

After the Rally: Finding the Work That Actually Protects Democracy

By Luisa Herrmann, Wellesley League of Women Voters Board Member

I haven't been to a protest in a long time, and I feel really guilty about it.

Not guilty enough to actually go to one, I'm a single working parent with a seven-year-old, and my time is a commodity in very short supply. But guilty enough that when I see photos of thousands of people on Boston Common holding "Defend Democracy" or "No Kings" signs, I think: I should be there. I should be doing something.

And then I think: but what would that actually accomplish?

My brain kept getting stuck on a cost/benefit calculation: A protest would cost me a weekend afternoon. You have to factor in travel, parking, the actual rally, my son's tolerance for crowds, or the cost of babysitting. And the benefit? Feeling connected to other people who share my concerns, feeling like I'm doing something instead of just worrying. Those feelings would last maybe through Sunday and by Monday, I'd be back to reading the news and feeling like nothing changed. I couldn't just do nothing, but I needed to find something that actually worked with the constraints of my life.

I'm an immigrant. I'm a woman. I'm a mom. I'm a single parent running a tech company. When I solve problems (whether it's building AI systems or helping my son with his STEAM fair project) I look for practical solutions that work within real constraints.

So I thought back: if I thought about engagement with democracy, what did that remind me of? What was my first experience with it?

The day I became a U.S. citizen, a volunteer from the League of Women Voters was waiting outside the naturalization ceremony with a clipboard and a voter registration form. Less than thirty minutes after taking my oath, I was registered to vote – someone had showed up to make sure my voice could be heard, because that was the whole point of citizenship.

That was my first experience with participating in American democracy, and how I eventually joined the League of Women Voters. How ironic then, that this experience has now been taken away. In August 2025, USCIS published Policy Alert PA-2025-21, banning nongovernmental organizations like the League of Women Voters from providing voter registration services at naturalization ceremonies. The policy restricts this crucial work to "only state and local election officials," citing concerns about the "administrative burden" of ensuring nonpartisan conduct. The document dismisses the impact, claiming that new citizens have "no reliance interests" in having civic organizations present at ceremonies.

The policy was implemented under Executive Order 14248, titled "Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections," which explicitly revoked Executive Order 14019 that had promoted access to voting. The policy assumes that because most states now offer online registration, there's a "reduced need" for organizations to help new citizens navigate the process. Anyone who's tried to figure out voter registration requirements while juggling everything else that comes with starting life as a new American knows this is wishful thinking at best. The message is unmistakable: making it easier for new citizens to register to vote is now framed as a threat to election integrity, rather than the democratic imperative it actually is.

I think about that League volunteer who registered me. She wasn't there because the government told her to be. She was there because the League believes that democracy requires active, organized citizenship. That presence sent a message: your participation matters, here's your first step, and there's a community ready to support you. That's the work we should be protecting and expanding, not restricting.

So if you're feeling the same way I was (worried about democracy but unsure where to plug in) I recommend getting involved locally, and you should give the League of Women Voters a look. I found their website and they had an online calendar, so I showed up to a board meeting listed for a Tuesday afternoon at the Warren Building that said "All Members Welcome!".

Finally, I had found my people. The energy, the goals, the sheer practical focus on getting things done. These weren't people holding signs and going home. These were people doing the work in-between, the "boring", relentless work: registering voters, hosting candidate forums, helping people run for office, teaching high schoolers how democracy actually works, advocating for voting rights at the State House. And that's where I could jump in and help!

The organization is not just for women, and it's focused on the ongoing, unglamorous, essential work that makes democratic systems function:

We turn out the vote. Not in a partisan way, we're strictly nonpartisan and don't endorse candidates or parties. But we make sure every eligible person knows where to vote, what's on their ballot, and why it matters.

We help people run for local office. We provide sessions on how to become a candidate, navigate the filing process, and run an effective campaign for local positions. This year's How to Run for Local Office will be held on December 3, at 7:00pm in the Juliani Room at Wellesley's Town Hall.

We host meet-the-candidates nights so voters can actually meet and question the people running for school committee, select board, town council – the positions that affect your daily life but get almost no media coverage.

We stimulate civic engagement in young people. We partner with Wellesley High to teach practical civics to get young people engaged and running for office early and often.

We advocate for voting rights. We testify at State House hearings on legislation that affects voter access, and we push back against policies like PA-2025-21 that make it harder for new citizens to exercise their fundamental right to vote.

We provide infrastructure. This is the part I was looking for: we're the bridge between "I want to do something" and actually doing it. We have regular meetings. We have concrete projects. We're always looking for ways to help, and we make it work with diverse schedules and skills.

If you're looking for a way to get involved, we'd love to hear from you. We can be reached at <https://my.lwv.org/massachusetts/wellesley> or lwwellesley2@gmail.com.