Voting: Getting the HIV community's voice at the ballot box

October 22, 2018 By Andrew Spieldenner, PhD

HIV advocacy and activism changed the world. Today, we see that the biggest gains in the HIV epidemic have been due to community movements. When we didn't have effective medication, we had each other.

The HIV community is diverse – in terms of identity and party affiliation. Mary Fisher, a woman openly living with HIV, spoke at the GOP convention in 1992 and 1996. Multiple people living with HIV have spoken at the DNC convention over time: Elizabeth Glaser and Bob Hattoy in 1992; Phill Wilson in 1996; Jesse Milan in 2000; and Daniel Driffin in 2016. I have been registered as an Independent, a Republican and a Democrat. In the past, the HIV community has been ardent in support of public health, health services, treatment and housing. What does the HIV vote look like today?

Does my vote matter? Nothing ever changes, anyway. I don't trust politicians. I don't have time. I don't even know what these measures are for. Who is going to pay for all this anyway?

We've all heard these sayings before; most of us have thought and believed in them at one time or another. Maybe even today.

I lived most of my adult life in New York City, and so most of my voting behaviors are shaped by New York State. Elections in New York happen on one day, and you have to find time to stop by your polling place or run the risk of having your vote discounted (as mine did a couple years). In this circumstance, voting is a pain; I never had enough information about the measures. When I voted, it was a lot of guesswork.

I felt a little ignorant, and often like my vote carried little weight. What was the point besides getting a silly sticker and sharing a pompous smile with other "voters"?

This is how disenfranchisement works. I felt like my voice didn't matter and so I stopped voting at some point.

I moved to San Diego a little over a year ago. I have met with my local California State Assembly Members – Todd Gloria where I live, and the Chief of Staff for Brian Maienschein where I work.

Voting is very different in California. I get my ballot in the mail a month in advance. I look over various websites to look at pros and cons of the candidates and the measures. While I couldn't find information on judges, I was comfortable with my choices.

I spent an afternoon talking with students about their ballots, and reviewing information together online. I showed them how important candidate statements were, as well as the arguments pro and con for each measure. I asked them who pays for some of these measures, and whether they thought it was reasonable.

This is how enfranchisement works. I feel like I have the time to get my vote together and make the best choices for me. I want my students to feel the same way.

We have seen that elections matter: it's been a mad couple years for most of us in the HIV community. From the overt sexism and racism to dismantling the Office of National AIDS Policy, we have been struck consistently from this Administration's overtly hostile agenda. We understand that this Administration wants to take away our healthcare, hold our potential need for public benefits against us, and remove our human rights.

Only our vote can change this.

Some of us live in key places. Are you in Georgia? Check out Stacey Abrams and how she is expanding the public dialogue and serving all of the state. Are you in Texas? Beto O'Rourke is asking for change in old school politics. In Florida, Andrew Gillum is asking for a state of compassion and forward-thinking. In Minnesota, Angie Craig is pushing an agenda to serve all the people in Minnesota. In California, where I work, Ammar Campa-Najjar has an uphill battle against an incumbent who inherited his father's job and is under criminal investigation. These are a handful of the races where the HIV community can make a real difference.

Who doesn't want you to vote? I wonder about this strategy - pushing people to think our voices do not matter, that our vote is a nuisance rather than a right. What kinds of people do not want us to vote? Some people do not want us to get our voices heard: especially as we are concerned with healthcare, human rights, public health and housing.

These mid-term elections are vital, and I want to encourage people to get out and vote in their jurisdictions. For more information on how to get involved, the Positive Women's Network-USA has this helpful toolkit.

Even as we feel assaulted regularly – pushed to disenfranchisement, we still have each other. Let's show the values of the HIV community and get our needs, voices and vision for community heard.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/voting-getting-hiv-communitys-voice-ballot-box