

ECE Commentary

Understanding How Government Works Will Empower Vermonters

As I begin my first term as Vermont's 39th Secretary of State, I am keenly aware of my role as Chief Elections Officer for the state and the responsibility we all share in civic life. Despite the enormous role democracy plays in our everyday lives, many Vermonters are not civically engaged. This lack of engagement creates a void in Vermont's democracy, a void that is oftentimes filled with dis- or misinformation, attacking the integrity and transparency of government. Elections and voting have been especially popular focus points of these attacks in recent years, but all facets of civic life are negatively impacted by these attacks, which exacerbate apathy and suspicion. It is time for action, not just reaction, against such attacks. This office will spearhead a new civics initiative and bring on a new position, an Education & Civic Engagement coordinator, to implement it; and we will need all the help we can get.

Voting is a Constitutional right, and free elections are the foundation on which faith in government rests. Examples of democracy in action exist around us every day. There are municipal meetings almost every night of the week, citizen petitions and calls to action on Front Porch Forum every day, and lawn signs every spring and fall for town meeting and elections. Despite this, there are many Vermonters who simply don't vote. We need to recognize that sometimes people don't vote because they don't know how to vote, or they don't know the candidates, or they don't know whether their vote will make a difference.

The next phase of strengthening elections in Vermont needs to be addressing these gaps. Many of us grew up understanding that civics is about the three branches of government, checks and balances, and one person one vote. And some of us remember being told from a young age that we have an obligation to participate in civic life. But as the demands of a 21st-century education have pulled schools away from requiring civics, and modern life has become increasingly full, many of these lessons have been lost.

Our focus on civic engagement will be on how you make democracy work for you. Civics is about being able to affect change, solve problems and make life better for all of us. Individuals can only do so much on their own. Working together through civic participation allows us to accomplish things that any one individual would be unable to do themselves.

The Education & Civic Engagement Coordinator will be part of the leadership team at this agency and will work with me to create a civics curriculum for our schoolteachers, will engage Vermonters in their communities on how to do democracy, and will create a voter guide for the 2024 General Election, among other activities and initiatives. We have more tools and platforms than ever to engage with voters that my predecessors just did not have at their disposal. But this campaign will also be about "boots-on-the-ground" work, with events, school visits, and other in-person interactions.

I plan to have much more to share about this initiative in the weeks to come. I am excited to start this campaign and energize more Vermonters to participate in 2023 and beyond.

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