



MY WEEK

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We earned our precious votes the hard way

When I was growing up during Jim Crow and segregation in the US, my grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins – all born in America – could not vote. We obtained that right only during my lifetime – and it was a hard-won right. Parts of the United States, especially the South, strongly and brutally resisted. And, as displayed in photographs and on TV screens around the world, local people in power didn't care that the whole world saw their hate-filled resistance.

The passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, when I was a boy, was required to force states to give black people their constitutional right. Even

after this federal law was enacted, many states, again primarily in the South, continued to create laws, reclassify minor offences as felonies, and establish cleverly onerous requirements – all designed to prevent or make it difficult, even impossible, for African-Americans and other people of colour to vote.

And here we are in 2020, after the Supreme Court of this great democracy has re-established the power of individual states to suppress and disenfranchise voters by eliminating a key section of the Voting Rights Act. The battle to be allowed to vote, to have our voices properly counted and included, has again become front-and-centre news. Again, the people in power don't seem to care that the world knows this, can read and see the evidence of it. They repeat the same denials as in the past.

Voting and all the related issues around it – voter registration, voter suppression, voter apathy – have dominated almost every conversation I've had or heard for several weeks. I see the word everywhere. When I check postings on social media of people I follow, getting out the vote is their mission.

When I open the morning newspaper and see an article about young people not registering to vote, a knot forms in my stomach. Then I see the word *Vote* on people's masks and feel hopeful. Four of the large street-level windows at Saks' Fifth Avenue store display four bold black letters: VOTE – Voice Your Beliefs, Overcome Adversity, Take Down Barriers, and Empower Others – and invite onlookers to register to vote on the second floor.

Talking about voting will only intensify as US election day approaches on 3 November. Everyone who is voting wants to make sure their vote is counted. Many are concerned that waiting queues at voting sites could lead to them contracting Covid. Many are voting in-person early, during designated periods, before the election. Others are voting by mail even if worried about the negative comments and propaganda about the US Postal Service. They are mailing in their ballots as early as possible to make sure their vote reaches the proper vote-counting site in time.

In all these conversations, it is apparent that, internally, the determination of many individuals is strengthened by wrestling with fear – and not only that of Covid-19. The most emotionally difficult conversations I have about voting are with people who are not voting, especially black people of all ages. When I hear this, I feel myself becoming infuriated, almost instantly. I can feel words about the brutal Civil Rights clashes that our elders endured to gain the right to vote in America rushing up my throat. But I stop them at my lips, take a long, soft breath, and I ask a simple question: “Can you explain to me why?”

One reason I often hear is: “It doesn't matter.” They mean their vote doesn't matter and that voting in general doesn't matter. Inside, I feel as if I've lost the war before I even start, regardless of the coming verbal skirmish. But I try anyway. Lack of belief in the system and disillusionment usually comes from a personal encounter with institutionalised racism.

For example, the person or someone they know has been falsely and unjustly accused of doing something and then fired from a job without any recourse; or they have absorbed years of scepticism due to their or others unjust encounters with the criminal justice system.

Even though I relate stories of others who overcame similar encounters, often the wall the person has built is just too high. Still, as we part, I hope the stories I shared with them might resonate and might – just possibly – inspire them to vote. When I reflect on this conversation as well as many others, I realise each one strengthens my resolve to get people to vote. I understand that continually oppressed people get discouraged, disheartened, disgusted, and, in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

But, like the people who marched and suffered for the right to vote during the civil rights, I still believe in the power of the collective vote to bring about the change we want to see – the change we must see. I'll be among the first in the queue, with a few friends, on Election Day to cast my vote – my sacrosanct right and an obligation I will exercise and protect.