

## Voting - our Privilege and our Children's Legacy

This November, fewer than 50% of registered voters made vital decisions for the majority of our citizens. This small number determined who would be our next Governor, as well as our federal, state, and local elected officials. They also made decisions on several important amendments to our constitution. Even more discouraging was the 19% turnout for the September primaries – an extremely low number that ultimately decided who would serve as our judges and school board members. Unfortunately, recent trends show that voter participation in terms of percentages have been on a decline, and without change, could have a profound effect on the future of our community.

### ***How can one vote make a difference in a child's life?***

You've heard it before...every vote counts! Our elected officials continually make decisions that affect children – from laws about health care and education to taxes and spending for roads and schools, elected officials directly impact the lives of children each and every day. This November, citizens also voted on direct changes to our Florida Constitution to:

- Require the Legislature to fund the state youth tobacco prevention program;
- Cap the Legislature's ability to spend certain dollars in the state budget; and
- Make it more difficult for future voters to amend our state constitution.

Obviously, voter turnout directly affects the type of society we're creating for our children. With less than 50% voter participation, it's easy to question whether we're giving children a healthy, vibrant democracy where citizen participation and self-governance are valued.

### ***Who's missing out?***

Traditionally, younger people have not voted in high percentages, as well as individuals with lesser educations and lower incomes. Many don't feel voting matters, are too busy, don't have enough information, don't know the candidates, don't like the negative ads, or simply feel politicians are "all the same." Whatever the case, it's important to consider that your vote does make a difference and can be the catalyst that changes an entire election. Additionally, elected officials and candidates are interested in the opinions of people who are known to be frequent voters -- they respond to their opinions with their platforms, and send them mail and other information.

### ***How to encourage voting?***

If you're reading this article, you probably *already* vote and strongly believe in the importance of this unique privilege. The difficulty lies in sparking an interest in those who are not involved in the process. There is not a "quick fix" to increase voting, it requires the encouragement of people to adopt a new activity that involves their knowledge, habits and spare time. Fortunately, our government has taken a proactive approach in making it easier to vote, such as:

- Opening early voting sites two weeks before the final election date;
- Making it easier for absentee or "ballot by request" voting; and
- Enacting a new state law that requires more civic education in Florida schools.

Our Supervisor of Elections and the public schools encourage voter outreach and education, and the media has recently been providing a significant amount of candidate information and debates in both newspaper

and television. Private organizations such as the [League of Women Voters](#) and [Kids Voting USA](#), political parties, and others are active in education and outreach, and are seeking members and volunteers.

### ***Take an 18-year-old to vote!***

Research indicates that children who are educated about voting are more likely to vote as adults. As well, young adults who vote in their first eligible election are more likely to continue as voters throughout their lives. Perhaps we should start a “take an 18-year-old to vote” movement. As individuals, we can all do our part to increase voter turnout, such as:

- Helping others to become informed about issues and the political process;
- Encouraging friends, colleagues and young people to vote;
- Joining and supporting organizations working to increase voter knowledge;
- Asking our elected officials to continue their efforts to make voting easier, and to enact reforms that will encourage voter participation.

### ***Do your part***

In recent elections, the Children’s Board used our website to provide a link to the Supervisor of Elections Office regarding where and how to register and vote. I urge organizations and media sources that provide voter education to contact us about possible links that could assist us in informing our community.

Within the next several months, there will be City Elections in Tampa where both the Mayor and all seven City Council seats are up for election. Also, Plant City will hold Commission elections in April, and a Mayoral election in June. These are exciting opportunities for citizens who live within these municipalities to become engaged, involved and make a real difference! Ask the candidates what they plan to do to help children get a healthy, safe, nurturing and well-educated start in life.

For more information about the upcoming elections – how to register to vote – or to become involved in elections activities, visit the [Supervisor of Elections](#) website or their Office in the County Center.

The Children’s Board is proud to serve our community and is continually looking to provide citizens with the latest links and opportunities for civic involvement. I look forward to your suggestions and contributions.

**Lisa DeVitto, Director of Public Policy & Advocacy**