

When it's not an election year, how will you stay engaged in the electoral process?

In the 2016 Presidential election, I was fourteen years old. That year I finally understood the process of a Presidential election. Before that, a conversation about the electoral college or political parties would have been foreign. It wasn't until I realized the role each voter had in this important process that it made sense to me.

I remember telling myself in 2016 that in four years when the country would return to the polls, I would be old enough to vote and cast my ballot for who I wanted to represent the country. Little did I know I would cast my ballot during a global pandemic.

In 2020, when the world encountered COVID-19, voters across the country knew that we needed to maintain our role as voting citizens and elect a leader that would steer us in a positive direction. With this mindset, the country had a significant turnout of voters. A true sign of determination and resiliency. Observing this national effort made me realize that change can start on the individual level.

My role in the 2020 presidential election was to be an informed voter, voting for change. I knew I wanted to make a decision that would support the nation's health, and the only way to do this was through education.

As a scientist and aspiring medical doctor, my knowledge relies on the truth and established information. If I were to enter a patient's room not knowing who they are and what medical attention they need, I could hurt the patient. This is how voters affect the country when they are voting uninformed. With this in mind, I want to continue educating myself on current laws, policies, and legislative actions to cast an informed vote.

My plan during non-election years is to observe what issues are affecting the people and determine which official supports a positive change in that issue. Coming from a small Native

American tribe, I can speak with my tribal representatives and advocate for change by utilizing the nation-to-nation concept between Native Americans and the Federal government. By keeping ourselves educated and current on legislative changes we as constituents can make a change for the better.

Furthermore, during non-election periods, I want to hold myself up to the responsibility of communicating with my representatives. During the election process, many individuals advocate for clear communication and voice their affection for the community. However, once an official is elected, by the power of each voting individual, they tend to neglect their commitment to the community they represent. By continuing to remind the elected official of who they represent it can be expected that concerns will be heard and change can occur.

As voting Native Americans we have the power to create change. In my culture, we are responsible for taking care of the land and serving as its stewards. The only way to uphold our responsibility is to use our current power of voting. By voting informed and educated we can see the change that we desire.

When it is an election year, what will you do to encourage your family, friends, and community to participate in local, state, and national elections?

“Our voices don’t matter.”

“We can’t make a change.”

“The Native American voice is insignificant compared to others.”

These conversations are common within Native communities during local, state, and federal elections. We as Native Americans have been excluded for many years and the decisions made by past representatives have greatly affected our lives.

With this forever scar of Native American exclusion lingering on our skin, the Native American community is finally starting to heal with the help of Native representation in the federal government. Having Secretary Debb Haaland serving as the lead for the United States Department of the Interior and many Native representatives fighting for progressive change like Representative Myron Tsosie and State Senator Jamescita Peshlakai proves we are on a better path with leaders who can advocate for Native communities. The representation of Native Americans in government helps establish trust and promote healing that has hurt the people for many years. Having this representation required support from Native communities in the state of Arizona and across the country. This is an encouraging sign as it indicates that more and more Native people are finding the importance of local, state, and national elections.

As a student who strives to be innovative, my mind begins to turn when it comes to increasing voter turnout in the elections process.

Reflecting on what is already provided to our Native communities to promote voters in the elections process, there have been many efforts to provide awareness of the importance of

voting. However, thinking innovatively, I want to see what we can do differently and try something new.

What I have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that community members appreciate clarity and transparency. When the community is unsure of what to do when faced with a local challenge, the community turns to leadership. If the leadership is uncertain, frustration and a decline in trust can begin to increase among the community. Therefore, to promote voting within my community, I want to provide a consistent message to the community of how and why they should vote in a clear and concise method using the leadership authority of local government. I believe it is important to provide the community with information on where they can gain education on what each potential official can provide to the community compared to others. With this consistent message, we can provide answers to the community that is often unanswered. Furthermore, we can take an approach that would encourage the use of familiar, local faces.

As mentioned before, my community is small. It is common for each community member to know one another. If familiar faces such as tribal royalty, community leaders, and small business owners create messages to encourage voting within the community, others may see the importance of voting.

My goal as a student is to continue to help my community with my education and I believe by utilizing these ideas to promote voting I could establish a project that focuses on this issue to create change.