

Catalina J. Alvarez Flores

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Frank Harrison and Harry Austin Scholarship Essay

When I turned 18 in 2015 I never understood the importance of consistently staying engaged in the electoral process. I recall taking my U.S. Government class in high school and constantly being pushed by my teacher to register to vote and exercise my right. At the time I didn't think it was important because even at home my family never really engaged civically. Part of me at that age also wondered why or how my one vote mattered with millions voting across the county, state and overall country.

When the time did come to participate in my first presidential election voting opportunity, I remember the sense of excitement and then immediate frustration and discouragement. I opened my ballot and I was taken aback because of how complicated it actually was. The wording was challenging and I didn't even know who the people were or what their roles were and how to even read the complicated paragraphs describing new propositions and laws. I also never learned how or where to look for this type of information. The overall experience was quite discouraging and I remember bubbling in whoever in the end after trying to get through the ballot without any help. After that experience, I found myself dreading the next election because I felt like I was voting blindly.

Moving forward to 2018, I attended an informational session on voting and the history of voting at Arizona State University that was hosted by the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona (ITCA) and the American Indian Student Support Services. Through this experience, I was able to watch the Frank Harrison and Harry Austin video for the first time and learned more about why voting was

especially important for Indigenous people and our communities. The experience was really eye opening and I learned more about the different resources, statistics of voting turnout and challenges faced by Indigenous people. After this experience I felt highly inclined to consistently engage in the electoral process whether it was an election year or not.

Social media, the local news and non-bipartisan resources such as ITCA, Clean Elections and Native Vote are a few of the major ways that I continue to stay civically engaged when it is not an election year. I have seen a lot of the hype behind voting is usually when the “major” elections are coming up such as presidential elections but rarely city and state level elections receive as much attention. By keeping up with the different issues and sharing what is ongoing with my family and friends, I try to encourage others to follow the issues because these issues eventually affect us in some way, shape or form. Through my engagement, I have also learned how much Indigenous people and communities of color are lacking in educational resources on registering to vote, how to vote and even how to run for a position. This has led me to try to learn more on my own time and try to help others or share resources that have helped me get to where I am today.

When it is an election year, I try to help with non-bipartisan texting campaigns through Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona or through my tribe’s networks to spread the word on dates to register to vote, where to find polling locations, and what your rights are when voting. These are something that are vital in ensuring that individuals are able to exercise their rights that Frank Harrison, Harry Austin and the other countless individuals who consistently questioned the U.S. Government for this right. This past election, I was able to follow the journey of Gabriella Cázares-Kelly through social media and it was something that also pushed me to get more involved to encourage others to exercise their voting rights in my county (Pima). This was the

first time I saw someone who looked like me trying to pursue something like running for a position that was going to advocate and uplift the Indigenous vote.

The more I have been able to stay engaged, the more I felt empowered to encourage others to exercise their right and also share why this is something important. There are a lot of misconceptions around voting and I enjoy breaking those stigmas against voting. Over the past few years, we have seen more and more about how important it is to vote and how impactful our voices are as indigenous people. One example is how great of a turn out we had last year in the elections in Arizona and across the country.

As Indigenous voters, we were able to express our voter voices by coming together, encouraging and helping each other to exercise their vote. We find as Indigenous people challenge after challenge when it comes to voting such as firstly having access to polling locations, issues with addresses and the list goes on. Like our ancestors we must continue to question the narrative to ensure that we have equitable representation and rights for our future generations.