

Why Should You Vote?

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It's finally here. Next Tuesday, November 4, is Election Day. We've been swamped with ads and speeches, threats and accusations. Now it's our turn to speak.

Elections are important because government officials – the ones we elect and those they hire – decide how much taxes you pay and how those taxes are spent. They determine whether we go to war, whether to build or repair our roads and bridges, what our schools teach, and what social services to provide, and to whom.

Government decisions favor the rich instead of the poor because rich people vote more than poor people do. People least likely to vote are new voters, people with lower incomes, with disabilities, with criminal records, African-Americans, youth, and women. In 2004, 78 percent of voters who made more than \$100,000 voted, while only 40% of people with incomes less than \$20,000 voted.

Throughout the US, the government social safety net has seriously diminished during the past eight years. Federal government officials have transferred more and more of the human service responsibilities to the states, without the money to pay for them. Family income has decreased, millions of jobs have been lost, and fewer people have health insurance. More than 4,000 Americans, and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, have died in the war.

So, if you don't like these conditions, you CAN change them. Voting is just the beginning. Be informed about the issues important to you. Contact your elected officials, either on your own or as a group with your friends, neighbors, family, or co-workers. Join an organization that works on things you care about. If there isn't an organization, start one.

If you've never voted before, don't worry. There is a large sample of your ballot hanging on the wall of the room. You can look at it all you want and chat about it with anybody working the polls (inside or outside) or other voters who might be there. Take your time. Think about what's important to you. Don't worry about using the new voting machines. If you can use an automatic banking machine, you can operate a voting machine. The poll workers will help you if you ask.

You do not need your voter registration card to vote, but you do need to show ID if this is your first time voting. All of the standard forms of ID are accepted.

You cannot lose your job, or your benefits, or be evicted for voting. People with felony convictions, who are registered, can vote in PA once they are no longer incarcerated. Homeless people who are registered can vote. People with disabilities can get help from the person of their choice in the voting booth.

There is a Judge of Election at each polling place to help you if there is a problem with your registration. An Allegheny County Common Pleas judge will be on duty Election Day to handle voting disputes. Call 412-350-5463. You can call the Election Protection Hotline, staffed by the independent Project Vote at 1-866-OUR-VOTE (1-866-687-8683). If you are not permitted to vote, insist on a provisional ballot.

If you haven't decided how to vote yet, you can visit the candidates' Web sites, www.barackobama.com, or www.johnmccain.com. You can get impartial information from www.ontheissues.org or www.votesmart.org. You can confirm your registration and find your polling place at www.votespa.com. The Pennsylvania Department of State has a list of all candidates for all offices at www.state.pa.us/dos. An excellent nonpartisan voting guide is available at www.justharvest.org.

All polling places are open on Tuesday, November 4, from 7:00 AM to 8:00 PM. Take your children, so they can learn about voting.

So vote. Believe me, you'll feel great afterward.
(Portions of this column appear in the *Just Harvest News Voting Guide*, October 2008.)

For more information, go to:

www.county.allegheny.pa.us/elect, www.votespa.com, www.ontheissues.org, www.votesmart.org,
www.justharvest.org.

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