

August 5 2021 My name is Preston Faulkner, I am a resident of Rochester NY

(I loathe public speaking but I appreciate the opportunity to offer my thoughts on an important topic.)

I grew up in a rural town in Allegany County in a blue collar, working class, military family. My family never voted or talked about voting or civic engagement. To this day, I am not sure why.

It wasn't until well after college that a friend expressed his surprise that I was not registered and had never voted. Even after I did register and started to vote, I was not engaged. For most elections I would simply ask him to put together a list of who I should vote for, and I was always waiting until the last minute and I may have missed a few elections because of that.

Unfortunately, it took a dark and dangerous period in our democracy's history to jolt me out of all those years of civic laziness. I remember one day last summer pulling into my carport filled with more despair than ever before in my life. The seemingly endless barrage of hateful, derisive, and divisive dialogue at the highest levels in our government seemed only to get worse each day - and just when we needed the exact opposite. When we needed leadership to bring the country together against a global pandemic and extraordinary social unrest.

I needed to do something with this anxiety – something that would work toward restoring a respect for the foundations of our democracy that were being trampled upon. I realized at that moment that I needed to become politically active. I share this background because it was the journey that followed that made me finally understand the true wisdom of Frederick Douglass – how he upheld voting as the most sacred right of all.

My political activism as a campaign volunteer over the past year afforded the privilege of talking with hundreds of voters in Rochester NY, as well as with hundreds if not thousands of voters in no fewer than 6 other states including NC, FL, MI, and AZ. It wasn't until I had the opportunity to speak with such a broad range of voters that I realized how consequential every step of the voting process

can be for a legitimate vote to actually make it into the system, and hopefully not get wrongfully thrown out or disqualified along the way!

From registering to actually casting a ballot - to varying degrees it can seem like an Olympic event. Particularly when compared to the simplicity of a country like Sweden that has features like automatic registration and not surprisingly - an average turn-out of over 83% compared to the U.S. average of 54% (see links below.)

Two stories that stick with me include a conversation with a former felon in FL who didn't think he had the right to vote. In fact he did have the right to register and to vote and we did our best to get the information to him, though time was running very short and it seemed unlikely his vote would be cast. This was in late October in the days leading up to the most important election in my lifetime.

The other involved an elderly Rochester woman who needed to rely on family members who would hopefully be able to provide transportation on Election Day. She was not comfortable asking busy family members to make alternative arrangements so that she could vote early. I asked her if she was sure that she would have a ride on Election Day. Even though she expected that she would, I sensed that the schedules of the family members were complicated based on work and other demands that if something did go awry on Election Day, that her vote would likely not make it to the ballot box.

My impressions from these two experiences, alone, caused me to be very disappointed and really saddened that our nation is not the leader it should be in the world in voting access and engagement. By the same token, I feel that NYS should be leading the way in our nation, demonstrating exemplary practices from start to finish. I agree with my state senator, Samra Brouk, whose comments I appreciated on the radio the other day. As much as I love Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon (and every other state that has seemed to get ahead of NYS in terms of sensible, voter-centered practices) I bristle at the fact that those states are looking at NYS in the rear view mirror when it comes to voting practices when it should be the other way around! C'mon New York, we've got decades on these

other states – it's time to act our age as a senior state and to set the standards for democracy-centered election practices for the nation to follow.

Voting should be the least encumbered civic responsibility we undertake and our election laws should support this across the board. If you are eligible and want to vote, it should NOT be an Olympic event, it should be one of the easiest things to do. Voters should be spending their time learning about candidates and issues and not sorting out confusing processes to actually cast the ballot.

IF THERE IS TIME!

- Establish Election Day as a National Holiday to help improve access broadly and hopefully help curb the multiple initiatives underway to make voting more difficult for marginalized citizens. As an alternative to a holiday, what about having an Election Weekend with Early Voting on a Saturday and Election Day on a Sunday?
- Legislation that would make it illegal for state and local officials to manage elections in which they are running.
- Providing the Federal Elections Commission with the tools necessary to seriously address campaign finance crime
- Reintroducing and passing the DISCLOSE Act to make public the names of donors to organizations spending money to influence elections

I would like to thank everyone and all of the moving parts that made today's hearing possible – particularly all of the behind the scenes, unsung heroes involved. Never again, can we take our front line champions for granted. Thank you, Edline, for your email and invitation, though it did take over my evening last night – as I realized I needed to prepare!

<https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/206/> Sweden 83%

<https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/226/> U.S. 54%