



# 2020 CIVICS EDUCATION ESSAY CONTEST



## **FIRST PLACE: MICHELLE TAN, 12TH GRADE HIGH SCHOOL WINNER FROM CALIFORNIA**

### **IS VOTING A RIGHT, PRIVILEGE OR RESPONSIBILITY? WHY?**

Growing up, I never really realized how lucky I was to be able to be living here, to be an American citizen, and to have the power to vote when I turn 18. As I am months away from being able to actually cast a vote, I begin to develop a better understanding of my right, privilege, and responsibility.

First and foremost, American citizens are given the right to vote by the Constitution, but even though it is a fundamental freedom, I would still consider voting a privilege. After gaining independence from Britain, the framers of the Constitution knew that it would be important to give power to the people, to let the people determine who they wanted to lead the country, to let the people influence the decisions of the federal government to better the country—and they did just that.

While many countries have developed a voting system for electing representatives, while our government and systems aren't perfect, I would still consider America's elections to be the most secure and influential, at least, before the 2016 elections. For presidential elections, even though we are technically voting for our electoral college, it is comforting to know that my vote will still count and that every voice is considered. I am also allowed to vote for my own representative to ensure that someone with similar values as myself can make a difference up in Capitol Hill. It is very reassuring to know that someone out there is fighting for what I believe in, which is not always guaranteed in other parts of the world. This is why I consider voting to be a privilege.

Because we are given this precious right, I believe it is our responsibility to use it to the fullest, to help improve our country one vote at a time. If there is a change people want, we must use voting to be able to make it happen. For example, if we want to take action against climate change, it is our responsibility, as citizens, to vote for a representative with the same values and with the same drive for the cause, to vote for a president who promises to put climate change at the top of their agenda. Our main job as citizens of the United States is to express our opinions on matters about the country and to show our passion at the polls. By taking just a small portion of our day and voting, our voices are heard and action can be taken.

Voting, along with our 1st amendment freedoms, is arguable our most valuable asset as citizens of America.

So, is voting a right, privilege, or a responsibility? It is all in one, and I'm grateful for it. I'm grateful I can be a citizen who has the right to share my stance with little to no judgement or penalties. When I finally turn 18, you bet I'm going to vote!



## SECOND PLACE: **MARKIS CHENG, 12TH GRADE** HIGH SCHOOL WINNER FROM CALIFORNIA

### IS VOTING A RIGHT, PRIVILEGE OR RESPONSIBILITY? WHY?

November 4, 1980. A small Chinese woman eagerly waits for her turn to vote amidst the hustle and bustle of the Simi Valley Community Center. She gingerly peers towards the front of the line, careful to not lose her spot, as she steps closer towards the front desk. Her patience is finally rewarded with a polling pencil and a thick paper packet, and she is directed towards the protective enclosures of the voting booth. The woman fills some nonsensical boxes, for some seemingly make-believe positions, and finally, she reaches the most coveted section of all, the boxes for president. Set on Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, there is no hesitation to fill in the box next to his name, and for the first time as an American citizen, cast her first vote. For my mother, voting was and still continues to be a privilege, an opportunity to project her voice as an immigrant into the reaches of government. Given the chance to make an impact with her tiny hands, she continues to embrace her ability to vote as an American citizen.

However, the journey has been long and unrelenting to achieve equality for all in terms of voting. The U.S. has always boasted the extent of our democracy, but it has never truly conveyed the true intentions of the American people until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The Fifteenth Amendment may have expanded the right to vote for men, but women were completely unrepresented until the 1920's, when Women's Suffrage gave birth to an expansion of rights to women. To be an American citizen entails the rights to vote, no matter race, gender, or religion. Born of this country, it is inherent that we are allowed to cast our voice into the government, to make a stand on grounds that cannot be normally ventured on. Our country is fueled by the voices of the masses, hence, it is only in due diligence that voting is in our arsenal of rights.

At the dawn of the 2020 election, it infuriates me that I miss the cutoff date to vote by eleven days. With such a nominal number, I wish there could be some exception. As the future generation, I strongly believe that it is now my responsibility to dictate what I want to see in my government. It is my duty to exercise my right as a legal citizen and choose what I think best represents my ideologies as well as the people around me. I envy the people who will be voting in November, as I feel as I have neglected my responsibility to exercise my right as an American citizen. It is imperative that as the contemporary generation, we do not become disillusioned with government, but rather, we embrace its properties and what it has to offer. Only we can uphold our responsibilities, and pave the way for a newer and tailored future.



## THIRD PLACE: ASHLEIGH RUMBAQA, 12TH GRADE HIGH SCHOOL WINNER FROM HAWAII

### IS VOTING A RIGHT, PRIVILEGE OR RESPONSIBILITY? WHY?

There is no stronger way to articulate the power of voting than through the words of Abraham Lincoln, "The ballot is stronger than the bullet." Voting is the citizens' way to express opinions, thoughts, and values on issues that affect individuals and the communities they belong to. Collectively, voting allows us to make decisions on the people who represent us and the values that we hold. A bullet may be able to start a war, but the ballot can definitely end one.

In modern-day America, we take pride in the fact that nearly every citizen has the opportunity to vote regardless of race, religion, color, gender, and sexuality.

However, history is proof that it wasn't always this way. It wasn't until 1869 that African American men gained the right to vote under the Fifteenth Amendment. Even then, they were restricted by voter suppression tactics like literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses. Women fought for suffrage for nearly 100 years before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The wait was even longer for Native Americans who, despite earning citizenship by 1924, weren't allowed to exercise their right to vote until more than 40 years later. Historically, Americans fought long and hard to be heard; it's because of this that voting is a right that I hold important to me. People who were stripped of their voices worked together to ensure that future citizens would have a say in the government. It's in this way that voting is a right—one that was solidified in the Constitution by people who fought tooth and nail to get it there.

However, despite the fight for voting rights for all American citizens, there are still millions of Americans who are restricted from exercising said rights. Citizens who reside in U.S. Territories such as Puerto Rico and American Samoa can't vote in presidential elections. Although voting is supposedly a guaranteed right, this shows that, in some cases, it also stands as a privilege—a benefit that most get that many others do not. With the power that we have as voters, it's important to also speak up for those who are not offered a voice.

Voting stands as a civic duty, a responsibility that we have toward the communities that we belong to. Voting stands not as a responsibility to ourselves or the Constitution, but to others—people in our communities, especially those who are unable to speak up for themselves. The impact of voting goes farther than just the officials that represent us; it dictates the issues we prioritize. We, as voters, make decisions on policies that affect everyone—public education, homelessness, and environmental sustainability—to name a few. Exercising the right to vote is a personal choice that affects everyone, including future generations of citizens that will reap the consequences of the decisions we make today.

Voting itself is a nuanced and complex system that our democracy is built on. It represents many various things for many people. Whether you see voting as a right, a responsibility, a privilege, or a combination of all three, the decisions we make as voters will have real consequences on the freedoms that we hold, the responsibilities that we fulfill, and the privileges that people receive. The ballot itself is just a piece of paper, but it represents the voices of millions of citizens that make their values and concerns heard.

# MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNERS

## WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT THAT ALL CITIZENS HAVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE?



### 1ST PLACE

#### REID SPEARS, 8TH GRADER FROM NEW JERSEY

Our nation began with an experiment. The idea came from the bright minds of a small group of immigrants who longed for freedom. They had fresh ideas about giving people the opportunity to pursue their dreams in a society where the government reflected the will of the people, rather than one where the government's will was imposed on its people. The beautiful democracy that was created remains today a shining example for the world to see. Just how brightly our nation shines depends entirely on all of our citizens' absolute right to express their hopes and dreams by voting.



### 2ND PLACE

#### BROOKE EUBANKS, 6TH GRADER FROM VIRGINIA

In 5 years, 8 months, and 13 days, I will officially become a guardian of democracy--a citizen with voting rights. Within a democracy, decisions made by the government should reflect the will and needs of its citizens--not some of them, not most of them, but all of them. Voting gives citizens a voice to express their will and needs. Without every citizen having the right to vote, those voices are silenced, needs go unmet, and inequality prevails. Ultimately, decisions would benefit a few, while harming others. This is not who we are. After all, we the people are guardians of democracy.



### 3RD PLACE:

#### WILLIAM MCDAVID, 8TH GRADER FROM COLORADO

America's votes are the words of the country.  
Without it, our voices would cease abruptly.  
The choices of our country must come from us,  
Or the people will be helpless,  
As Europe once was.

If we didn't pick our leaders,  
Then who'd be their successors?  
To the people of our country I say, be the voices!  
For we are the ones who get to make the choices.

We can be the heroes in our nation,  
But we must start with a strong foundation.  
Vote to be part of our country's story,  
So that we may experience all of its glory.

# ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WINNERS

## WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT THAT ALL CITIZENS HAVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE?



### 1ST PLACE

#### AYDIN DANIEL, 5TH GRADER FROM ARIZONA

Imagine democracy as a house constructed with the citizens as its building materials, regardless of their race, gender or status. Each citizen has a crucial role to play. If it's decided that a few bricks are not needed, or some tiles of the roof should not be involved, or a few of the frames that support the house are unnecessary, or if a part of the foundation is declared to be unseen and so is unworthy, the whole building would become dysfunctional and would collapse. It's vital that all citizens have the right to vote for a fully functional democracy.



### 2ND PLACE:

#### ABBY NORRIS, 3RD GRADER FROM ALABAMA

The most important right that a citizen has is the right to vote. Without voting, the power would be taken from the people and our government would not be a democracy. Our government was founded for the people and with power to be held by the people. Not all countries give their citizens the right to vote. In the United States, it is fair, important, and necessary, because our country is made of lots of different people, and our vote represents who we are. It is a right, and a responsibility we all share.



### 3RD PLACE:

#### LEAH DINGAL, 5TH GRADER FROM FLORIDA

Imagine the world with no voice. It is not fair that one person should decide how to live. This is why all citizens should have the right to vote. The United States is a big melting pot, full of cultures with different ideas and opinions on what is important to them. Giving the right to vote allows all these views to be heard. When people are heard and laws are made that make their life better, the country runs smoother and happy. Voting allows people to change and make their life better. All people should have this opportunity.

It's vital that all citizens have the right to vote for a fully functional democracy.



Without voting, the power would be taken from the people and our government would not be a democracy.



When people are heard and laws are made that make their life better, the country runs smoother and happy.

The beautiful democracy that was created remains today a shining example for the world to see.



Without every citizen having the right to vote, those voices are silenced, needs go unmet, and inequality prevails.

To the people of our country I say, be the voices! For we are the ones who get to make the choices.



I'm grateful I can be a citizen who has the right to share my stance with little to no judgement or penalties.



Only we can uphold our responsibilities, and pave the way for a newer and tailored future.



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