

Upfront

“Early voting” has begun. Or...voting...since your place in the sequence isn't relevant, if you think about it. Jenna once observed critically: “Why do they call it ‘pre-boarding?’ It's just boarding.” So it is, as it is with your vote. No matter when you do it, we're all going to end up at the same place at the same time.

“Voting is a sacred right.” You hear it a lot. Search the phrase online. The notion bridges the political gap.

Near the top of your search results, you'll find a link to the Lobby for Social Justice and a speech by Georgia senator Raphael Warnock – more a sermon than an attempt to argue a particular philosophy of governance. “We believe democracy is the political enactment of a spiritual idea – that we are all children of God and therefore, we ought all to have a voice in the direction of our country and our destiny within it. Democracy honors the sacred worth of all human beings, the notion that we all have within us a spark of the divine, to participate in the shaping of our own destiny. The right to vote is a sacred right,” Warnock said to Congress in 2021.

A few links down you're likely to encounter Kay Cole James, a former official in the Bush (W) administration, writing for the conservative Heritage Foundation about election integrity. Cole said simply, “The right to vote is among the most sacred rights we have as Americans.” She goes on to suggest that illegitimate votes cancel the sacredly granted ones, and we must never surrender our sacred privilege.

What does “sacred” mean? I go to the Oxford or Cambridge Dictionaries for such a question, as they invented the language we use over here. The first definition – everywhere I looked – ties to God. Well down the list, like the third meaning in some reference books and as marginal as seventh in others, is that sacred connotes a personal perception of importance.

From whence, then, comes the right to vote? It's legally established by the U.S. Constitution in Article 1. Interestingly, the Constitution makes no reference to the divine, though the Declaration of Independence does (...all men are created equal...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...). So, by the strictest reading, voting is a fundamental right associated with American citizenry, rather than a sacred one.

What about voter privacy? The modern conception of a “secret ballot” originated in Australia and was initially adopted in America in the late 19th Century. By allowing voters to keep their ballots secret, they could make their voices heard without the fear of coercion or intimidation (according to the Campaign Legal Center). Secrecy, however,

is not a component, sacred or otherwise, of the original democratic principles defined by our Founders.

Constitutional scholarship aside, to me, my vote is both precious and my business, alone. Yet voting feels less good than it once did. Choosing a candidate has become a declaration of identity rather than a rational and analytical exercise. The intense exertion of influence from all corners is overwhelming. I get texts – most calling me by my first name, but some mistaking me for one of my daughters. They come every day, several times a day. They go beyond asking for my vote. Rather, they ominously demand it, and suggest that withholding it from a particular candidate would be akin to self-harm.

The messages to my daughters that somehow erroneously make their way to me implore me to take back control of my body, all other considerations be damned. Unfortunately, as a 60-year-old man, that ship has sailed. These days, my body seems to have a mind of its own, and its ideas don't comport with my notion of what it should be.

Some texts insist I click to respond and affirm my intentions. Who with a healthy skepticism regarding live links and unknown senders accedes to this demand? Not I. But who keeps a record of my silence, and what will my silence cost me someday?

There are texts that plead for money, as though my dollar is going to alter the course of history. I naively once thought my vote might. And it was ostensibly free.

Speaking of dollars: The total cost of the 2024 federal election is projected to top \$15.9 billion, a nominal record, according to OpenSecrets, a nonpartisan nonprofit that tracks money in politics. I often tell my business school students and anyone else willing to listen: “It's all about incentives.” In other words, humans act in ways that they are directed by systems that impact their self-interests, as do organizations. While we might fall prey to the occasional impulse buy (like a Hawaiian shirt during a tropical vacation), \$16 billion is more than an expression of collective passing fancy. If so much capital is at risk, somebody is expecting a substantial return on investment.

This thing that ought to be an uplifting celebration of the miracle of democracy has become exhausting. It seems to have devolved into a cynical showcase of our worst selves. But it's good for political consultants, news-opinion personalities, and the people who make those little yard signs.

But don't let any of this get you down. If your vote isn't technically a “sacred” right, at least it's a reminder of what America can aspire to be. So vote early, but not often...or on the day of. Despite all the reasons not to, you'll be glad you did.



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