

Exercise your privilege to vote

Bernie Patterson, For USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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"Bad governments are elected by good citizens who don't vote."

In less than 10 days – and some would say not soon enough – Americans will exercise their right to vote. It is one of the most fundamental rights we have. Yet close to half of those eligible to vote do not bother.

I encourage everyone to honor the right, the privilege, to vote. Since the earliest days of our country, free elections have been fought-for, protected and revered. We owe ourselves the same determination and dedication to vote and to expect an orderly transition of power.

As we go to vote Tuesday, Nov. 8, we will not see militia, guard dogs or armed vehicles in the streets. Struck by this realization several years ago, I called my best friend whose son is an officer in the U.S. Marines to say thank you for protecting our freedoms.

Many Americans take this freedom for granted. United States is one of 86 free countries among 195 surveyed by Freedom House. This independent watchdog organization listed 59 countries as partially free and 50 not free in 2015. The global share of free countries has declined in the past decade. Forty percent of the world's population live in free countries while 36 percent live in countries that are not free.

With the right to vote comes several responsibilities. Each of us has the responsibility to:

- Be an informed voter. Learn about the issues. Understand the candidates' positions, especially on issues important to you. Besides president, know who's on the ballot for various local and state races. Even if your candidate is not elected to the highest office, your vote will determine the outcome of races for U.S. Senate, Congress and state legislators, among others.
- Know where to vote, and how. If you don't know your polling place, call your municipal clerk. Be sure to bring identification to the polls. Request an absentee ballot if you cannot get to the polls Nov. 8.
- Engage in civil debate. As individuals with different values, experiences and beliefs, we have differing opinions. It's healthy to discuss opposing viewpoints. And it's imperative to engage with mutual respect.

This lesson is being learned in classrooms and residence halls across campus as well as in homes, workplaces and public spaces across our country. Listening to diverse views teaches us to solidify, or modify, our own. It helps us understand and appreciate others' perspectives.



This is best done without personal attacks, heated emotions or threatening gestures. No one should be bullied or ostracized for their beliefs. Words do have consequences.

Our community is stronger when all voices are welcome. Even if you do not agree with someone, recognize their right to express their opinions. To learn more about civil discourse, consider attending an event Tuesday, Nov. 29, on campus. Details will be available soon.

Elections give us opportunities and responsibilities to express our views. University campuses have a rich, important role as places to examine ideas, even unpopular ones. Citizens who emulate this level of engagement throughout the community lead us to a stronger society.

My hope is we will come together after the election on Nov. 9 and move forward as a country. Because, as Winston Churchill quoted an unknown predecessor in 1947, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others."

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