

# Democracy, Voting & Civic Duty

*Motivating Quotations on  
Individual and Collective  
Responsibility*

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## Introduction

Of its many interpretations, democracy is perhaps most simply understood as a system of governance “of the people, by the people, for the people,” a definition attributed to Abraham Lincoln from his Gettysburg Address. But there is nothing simple about democracy. The people of, by, and for whom it exists struggle to implement it effectively, have difficulty reaching consensus, and sometimes neglect to carry out their civic duties and responsibilities—especially the responsibility to vote.

By nature, democracy cannot be easy because it demands the input of its citizenry, whose inherently different visions challenge consensus. Yet, a renewed wave of civic participation can be felt in America today. People are standing up for democracy.

A core right of American citizenship is the ability to vote and elect our leaders. It is critical that this responsibility is upheld—not only in Presidential elections every four Novembers, but in all elections at the federal,

state, regional, and local levels.

Voting is a core right of democratic citizenship. But, it is also a responsibility to one's fellow citizens as we elect leaders in pursuit of our common purposes.

It is our hope that the quotes that follow will inspire you to exercise your right to vote and to engage with your government.

*Marc Holzer, Ph.D.*  
*Distinguished Professor*  
*&*  
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# Critical Democratic Values

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

**Thomas Jefferson**

*3rd President of the United States*

Democracy is not a spectator sport.

**Marian Wright Edelman**

*Founder, Children's Defense Fund*

Democracy rests on the well-grounded assumption that society is neither a collection of units nor an organism, but a network of human relations.

**Mary Parker Follett**

*American Organizational Management Theorist*

Democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth.

**Martin Luther King Jr.**

*Civil Rights Leader*

The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another, so as not to depend upon the understanding of one man.

**Woodrow Wilson**

*28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom.

**Alexis de Tocqueville**

*French Diplomat and Political Philosopher*

We can enhance democracy by making it in line with its original vision. Read the dollar bill - E pluribus unum, out of many, one; novus ordo seclorum, a new order of the ages.

That's democracy.

**Barbara Marx Hubbard**

*Co-Founder, Foundation for Conscious Evolution*

Democracy is the absolute value that makes for human dignity.

**Kim Dae-jung**

*Former President of South Korea*



We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.

**John F. Kennedy**  
*35th President of the United States*

We can have a democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both.

**Louis D. Brandeis**  
*Associate Justice on the Supreme Court of the United States,  
1916-1939*

The ideas and principles of democracy should not be limited to politics, but must pervade all areas of social life.

**Bruno Kreisky**  
*Austrian Politician*

“Democracy is not just the right to vote, it is the right to live in  
dignity.”

**Naomi Klein**

*Canadian Writer, Filmmaker, and Activist*

“Democracy is necessary to peace and to undermining the  
forces of terrorism.”

**Benazir Bhutto**

*First female Prime Minister of Pakistan*

Democracy is worth dying for, because it's the most deeply  
honorable form of government ever devised by man.

**Ronald Reagan**

*40th President of the United States*

The primal principle of democracy  
is the worth and dignity of the individual.

**Edward Bellamy**

*American Writer*

Democracy has complex demands, which certainly include voting and respect for election results, but it also requires the protection of liberties and freedoms, respect for legal entitlements, and the guaranteeing of free discussion and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment.

**Amartya Sen**

*Indian Economist and Philosopher*

To view the opposition as dangerous is to misunderstand the basic concepts of democracy. To oppress the opposition is to assault the very foundation of democracy.

**Aung San Suu Kyi**

*State Counsellor of Myanmar and Nobel Peace Prize Recipient*

The only sure bulwark of continuing liberty is a government strong enough to protect the interests of the people, and a people strong enough and well enough informed to maintain its sovereign control over the government.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt**

*32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States*

Democracy is itself, a religious faith. For some it comes close to being the only formal religion they have.

**E. B. White**

*American Writer*

There is an intimate connection between democratic values and the fundamental values of human goodness. Where there is democracy there is a greater possibility for the citizens of the country to express their basic human qualities, and where these basic human qualities prevail, there is also a greater scope for strengthening democracy. Most importantly, democracy is also the most effective basis for ensuring world peace.

**Dalai Lama**

*Tibetan Spiritual Leader*

To win the cause we all believe in, the spread of true democracy all over the world, we need to win by example, not just with speeches but by example; not just with military might but by gaining the respect of the world.

**Barbara Boxer**

*Former United States Senator from California*

Now the first step has to be taken, the step towards democracy.

This step is full of risks, and requires trust on all sides. We don't know where it will lead. But if we just stand still, we will have no chance of escaping the violence.

**Daniel Barenboim**

*Argentine-Israeli Musician and Conductor*

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions: Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinion? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up, trusting our fellow citizens to join us in our determined pursuit—a living democracy?

**Terry Tempest Williams**

*American Writer and Conservationist*

The lesson of history is clear: democracy always wins in the end.

**Marjorie Kelly**

*American Writer and Social Responsibility Researcher*



# The Right to Vote

The well being of democracies regardless of their type and status is dependent on one small technical detail: The right to vote.

Everything else is secondary.

**Jose Ortega y Gasset**

*Spanish Philosopher*

Suffrage is the pivotal right.

**Susan B. Anthony**

*Women's Rights Activist & Abolitionist*

Wherever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.

**Thomas Jefferson**

*3rd President of the United States*

Suffrage, noun. Expression of opinion by means of a ballot. The right of suffrage (which is held to be both a privilege and a duty) means, as commonly interpreted, the right to vote for the man of another man's choice, and is highly prized.

**Ambrose Bierce**

*American Writer and Civil War Veteran*

A share in the sovereignty of the state, which is exercised by the citizens at large, in voting at elections is one of the most important rights of the subject.

**Alexander Hamilton**

*American Statesman and First Treasury Secretary*

The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.

**Lyndon B. Johnson**

*36th President of the United States*

In a democracy dissent is an act of faith. Like medicine, the test of its value is not in its taste, but in its effects.

**J. William Fulbright**

*Former United States Senator from Arkansas*



Without a democratic election, whereby people choose and remove their rulers, there is no method of securing human rights against the state.

**George Meany**

*Former President of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations*

“Democracies have been, and governments called, free; but the spirit of independence and the consciousness of unalienable rights, were never before transfused into the minds of a whole people....The feeling of equality which they proudly cherish does not proceed from an ignorance of their station, but from the knowledge of their rights; and it is this knowledge which will render it so exceedingly difficult for any tyrant ever to triumph over the liberties of our country.”

**Sarah Josepha Hale**

*American Writer, Editor, and Bunker Hill Monument Fundraiser*



# Civic Duty

Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience  
like individual responsibility.

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton**

*Writer, Suffragist, and Abolitionist*

Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote.

**George Jean Nathan**

*American Drama Critic and Magazine Editor*

Voting is the most precious right of every citizen, and we have  
a moral obligation to ensure the integrity of our voting process.

**Hillary Rodham Clinton**

*Former United States Secretary of State*

Anywhere, anytime ordinary people are given the chance to  
choose, the choice is the same: freedom, not tyranny;  
democracy, not dictatorship; the rule of law, not the rule of the  
secret police.

**Tony Blair**

*Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom*

Voting is how we participate in a civic society - be it for president, be it for a municipal election. It's the way we teach our children - in school elections - how to be citizens, and the importance of their voice.

**Loretta Lynch**

*Former United States Attorney General*

Freedom means to build a democratic system enshrined with the respect for fundamental rights of Man, of the human being, of the individuals.

**Xanana Gusmão**

*First President and Fifth Prime Minister of East Timor*

We are bound by ideals that teach us what it means to be citizens. Every child must be taught these ideals. Every citizen must uphold them.... I ask you to be citizens. Citizens, not spectators. Citizens, not subjects. Responsible citizens building communities of service and a nation of character.

**George W. Bush**

*43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States*

The freedom and human capacities of individuals must be developed to their maximum but individual powers must be linked to democracy in the sense that social betterment must be the necessary consequence of individual flourishing.

**Henry Giroux**

*American & Canadian Scholar and Cultural Critic*

I have defended democracy, human rights, and brotherhood between peoples. And I'll keep doing so for as long as I live.

**Leyla Zana**

*Kurdish Politician*

Democracy works when people claim it as their own.

**Bill Moyers**

*Former White House Press Secretary*

Elections belong to the people. It's their decision. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters.

**Abraham Lincoln**

*16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

The first step toward liberation of any group is to use the power  
in hand...And the power in hand is the vote.

**Helen Gahagan Douglas**

*Former United States Congresswoman from California and Actress*

Democracy doesn't recognize east or west; democracy is simply  
people's will. Therefore, I do not acknowledge that there are  
various models of democracy; there is just democracy itself."

**Shirin Ebadi**

*Iranian Lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize Recipient*

Being adequately informed is a democratic duty, just as the vote  
is a democratic right. A misinformed electorate, voting without  
knowledge, is not a true democracy.

**Jay Griffiths**

*British Writer*

Democracy is the most demanding of all forms of government in  
terms of the energy, imagination, and public spirit required of  
the individual.

**George C. Marshall**

*U.S. Army Chief of Staff (1939-1945)*

To make democracy work, we must be a nation of participants,  
not simply observers.

**Louis L'Amour**  
*American Writer*

Young people need to vote. They need to get out there. Every  
vote counts. Educate yourself too. Don't just vote. Know what  
you're voting for, and stand by that.

**Nikki Reed**  
*American Actress*

Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to  
vote except the American people themselves and the only way  
they could do this is by not voting.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt**  
*32nd President of the United States*

As free citizens in a political democracy, we have a  
responsibility to be interested and involved in the affairs of the  
human community, be it at the local or the global level.

**Paul Wellstone**  
*Former United States Senator*



# Collective Responsibility



The thing about democracy, beloveds, is that it is not neat, orderly, or quiet. It requires a certain relish for confusion.

**Molly Ivins**

*American Writer*

Democracy is not simply a license to indulge individual whims and proclivities. It is also holding oneself accountable to some reasonable degree for the conditions of peace and chaos that impact the lives of those who inhabit one's beloved extended community.

**Aberjhani**

*American Historian and Writer*

Elections remind us not only of the rights but the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy.

**Robert Kennedy**

*Former United States Senator and Attorney General*

To safeguard democracy the people must have a keen sense of independence, self-respect, and their oneness.

**Mohandas Gandhi**

*Indian Activist*

If you have a sense of purpose and a sense of direction, I believe people will follow you. Democracy isn't just about deducing what the people want. Democracy is leading the people as well.

**Margaret Thatcher**

*Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom*

We must add our voices to those who cry out that there is a standard below which we will not allow human beings to live, and that that standard is not at the freezing nor starving point....In a democracy all are responsible.

**Hannah Solomon**

*Founder of the National Council of Jewish Women*

The life of a republic lies certainly in the energy, virtue, and intelligence of its citizens.

**Andrew Johnson**

*17<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

I still have great faith in democracy. I have great belief in the  
power of community.

**Terry Tempest Williams**

*American Writer and Conservationist*

The strongest democracies flourish from frequent and lively  
debate, but they endure when people of every background and  
belief find a way to set aside smaller differences in service of a  
greater purpose.

**Barack Obama**

*44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

Democracy is not just a question of having a vote. It consists of  
strengthening each citizen's possibility and capacity to  
participate in the deliberations involved in life in society.

**Fernando Henrique Cardoso**

*Former President of Brazil*

The motivating force of the theory of a Democratic way of life is still a belief that as individuals we live cooperatively, and to the best of our ability, serve the community in which we live.

**Eleanor Roosevelt**

*American Diplomat, First Lady, and Activist*

We believe in the vocation and participation of our people, who day to day are awakened to their political conscience and express their desire for change and the complete democratization of society. A change based on justice, built with love, and which will bring us the most anxiously desired fruit of peace.

**Adolfo Perez Esquivel**

*Argentine Activist, Artist, and Nobel Peace Prize Recipient*

In a democracy, the individual enjoys not only the ultimate power but carries the ultimate responsibility.

**Norman Cousins**

*American Journalist*

Impress upon children the truth that the exercise of the elective franchise is a social duty of as solemn a nature as man can be called to perform; that a man may not innocently trifle with his vote; that every elector is a trustee as well for others as himself and that every measure he supports has an important bearing on the interests of others as well as on his own.

**Daniel Webster**

*Former United States Senator and Secretary of State*

Let us continue to strive together for a more inclusive, democratic, and peaceful future for us all.

**Fernando Henrique Cardoso**

*Former President of Brazil*

We are Americans, trustees of a vision and a heritage that commit us to the values of democracy and the universal cause of human rights.

**John Kerry**

*Former United States Senator and Secretary of State*



# Equality

The voting booth is the one place on earth where the least powerful and the most powerful are equal. Who would pass that up?

**Gloria Steinem**

*Feminist Icon, Journalist, and Activist*

Democracy is when the indigent, and not the men of property, are the rulers.

**Aristotle**

*Greek Philosopher*

Democracy begins with freedom from hunger, freedom from unemployment, freedom from fear, and freedom from hatred. To me, those are the real freedoms on the basis of which good human societies are based.

**Vandana Shiva**

*Indian Physicist*

Democracy is not the law of the majority but the protection of the minority.

**Albert Camus**

*French Author and Philosopher*

Everybody counts in applying democracy. And there will never be a true democracy until every responsible and law-abiding adult in it, without regard to race, sex, color or creed has his or her own inalienable and unpurchaseable voice in government.

**Carrie Chapman Catt**  
*American Suffragist*

That government is the strongest of which every man feels himself a part.

**Thomas Jefferson**  
*3rd President of the United States*

No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline.

**Kofi Annan**  
*Ghanaian Diplomat*



I have tremendous confidence in the capacity of the poor to transform not only their own lives but also to build a just, humane, and democratic society.

**Ruth Manorama**

*Indian Activist*

There cannot be true democracy unless women's voices are heard. There cannot be true democracy unless women are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives. There cannot be true democracy unless all citizens are able to participate fully in the lives of their country.

**Hillary Clinton**

*Former United States Secretary of State*

The primal principle of democracy is the worth and dignity of the individual.

**Edward Bellamy**

*American Writer*

A democracy, to be fully alive, must include all its citizens.

**Swanee Hunt**

*American Activist and Academic*

I understand democracy as something that gives the weak the same chance as the strong.

**Mohandas Gandhi**

*Indian Activist*

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

**Reinhold Niebuhr**

*American Theologian and Writer*

We've come a long way, but we still have a distance to go before all of our citizens embrace the idea of a truly interracial democracy, what I like to call the Beloved Community, a nation at peace with itself.

**John R. Lewis**

*United States Congressman from Georgia*

The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.

**Lyndon B. Johnson**

*36th President of the United States*

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people - women as well as men.

**Susan B. Anthony**

*Women's Rights Activist & Abolitionist*

I swear to the Lord  
I still can't see  
Why Democracy means  
Everybody but me.

**Langston Hughes**

*American Writer*

If liberty and equality, as is thought by some are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.

**Aristotle**

*Greek Philosopher*

Individual rights are not subject to a public vote; a majority has no right to vote away the rights of a minority; the political function of rights is precisely to protect minorities from oppression by majorities (and the smallest minority on earth is the individual).

**Ayn Rand**

*Russian-American Writer*

“This right to vote is the basic right without which all others are meaningless. It gives people, people as individuals, control over their own destinies.”

**Lyndon B. Johnson**

*36th President of the United States*

A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess.

**A. Philip Randolph**

*Civil Rights Leader*

Democratic principles are the result of equality of condition.

**Mercy Otis Warren**

*American Writer and Satirist*

Neither democracy nor effective representation is possible until each participant in the group...devotes a measurable part of his life to furthering its existence.

**Lewis Mumford**

*American Philosopher and Historian*

"The vote is the emblem of your equality, women of America, the guarantee of your liberty. That vote of yours has cost millions of dollars and the lives of thousands of women... Women have suffered agony of soul which you can never comprehend, that you and your daughters might inherit political freedom. That vote has been costly. Prize it! The vote is a power, a weapon of offense and defense, a prayer. Understand what it means and what it can do for your country. Use it intelligently, conscientiously, prayerfully.

**Carrie Chapman Catt**

*American Suffragist*

We have learned to say that the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class. But we have not yet learned to add to that statement, that unless all people and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having.

**Jane Addams**

*American Social Worker and Activist*

A free America... means just this: individual freedom for all, rich or poor, or else this system of government we call democracy is only an expedient to enslave man to the machine and make him like it.

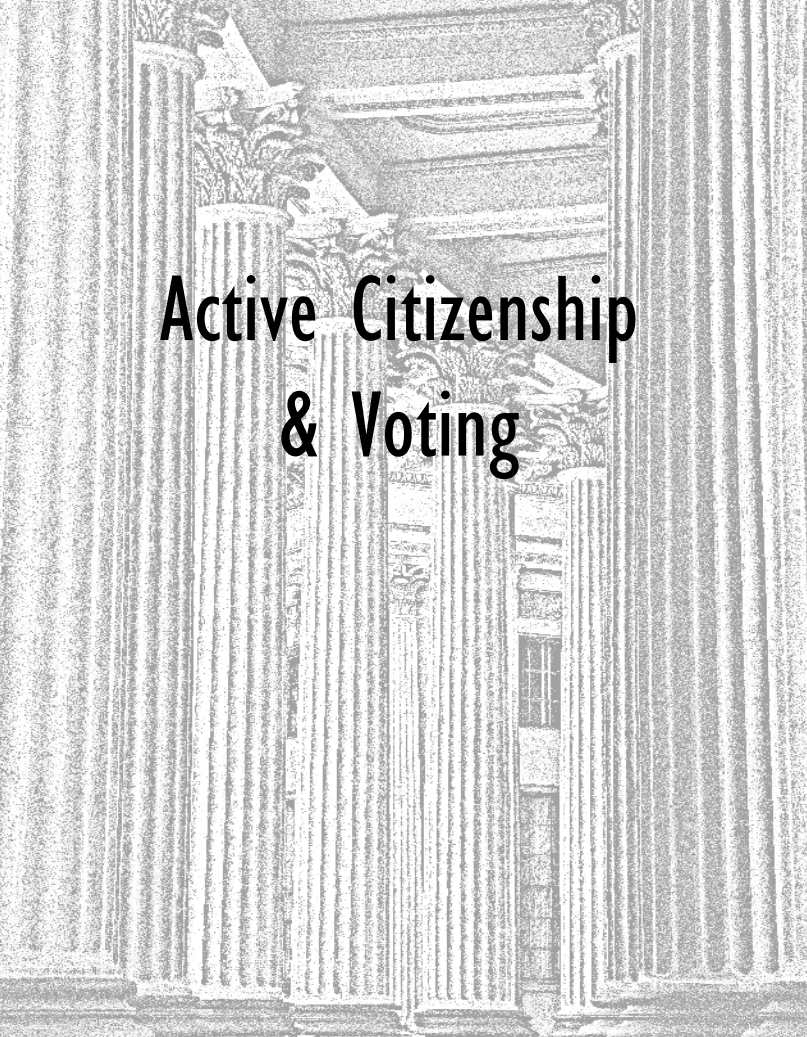
**Frank Lloyd Wright**

*American Architect*

Peace cannot exist without justice, justice cannot exist without fairness, fairness cannot exist without development, development cannot exist without democracy, democracy cannot exist without respect for the identity and worth of cultures and peoples.

**Rigoberta Menchu**

*Guatemalan Political and Human Rights Activist*

A black and white photograph of a grand classical building entrance, featuring tall, fluted columns and a pediment. The image is used as a background for the title text.

# Active Citizenship & Voting

You need to vote, because our democracy depends on it.

**Barack Obama**

*44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

A generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit the community is a generation that is not learning what it means to be citizens in a democracy.

**Elizabeth L. Hollander**

*American City Planner and Activist*

Democracy is not just an election, it is our daily life.

**Tsai Ing-wen**

*First Female President of Taiwan*

The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen.

**Louis D. Brandeis**

*Associate Justice on the Supreme Court of the United States,  
1916-1939*



Voting is the foundational act that breathes life into the principle  
of the consent of the governed.

**DeForest Soaries**

*American Minister and Writer*

Deliberation and debate is the way you stir the soul of our  
democracy.

**Jesse Jackson**

*American Civil Rights Activist*

There can be no daily democracy without daily citizenship.

**Ralph Nader**

*American Political Activist and Consumer Advocate*

Democracy is not something you believe in or a place to hang  
your hat, but it's something you do. You participate. If you stop  
doing it, democracy crumbles.

**Abbie Hoffman**

*American Political and Social Activist*

So long as we have enough people in this country willing to fight for their rights, we'll be called a democracy.

**Roger Nash Baldwin**

*Co-Founder of the American Civil Liberties Union*

The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.

**James Madison**

*4<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

Every election is determined by the people who show up.

**Larry J. Sabato**

*American Political Scientist*

“Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country.”

**Franklin D. Roosevelt**

*32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States*

We are part of a nation only in so far as we are helping to make  
that nation.

**Mary Parker Follett**

*American Organizational Management Theorist*

When widely followed public figures feel free to say anything,  
without any fact-checking, it becomes impossible for a  
democracy to think intelligently about big issues.

**Thomas L. Friedman**

*American Journalist*

Freedom rings resoundingly in a democracy each time we speak  
freely.

**Dennis Kucinich**

*Former United States Congressman from Ohio*

Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a  
mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated  
experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence  
towards fellow men.

**B R Ambedkar**

*Indian Politician*

Patriotism is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.

**Adlai E. Stevenson II**

*Former United States Ambassador to the United Nations*

“Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow men.”

**B R Ambedkar**

*Indian Politician*

Democracy is no easy path, but those of us who believe in it must be prepared to sacrifice in its cause more willingly than those who are prepared to die in the wars of aggression. We, too, must be dedicated to the cause of freedom.

**Ossie Davis**

*American Film Director and Political Activist*

Students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have the chance to live in one today.

**Alfie Kohn**

*American Writer*

Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.

**H.L. Mencken**

*American Journalist & Satirist*

I love voting day. I love the sight of my fellow citizens lining up to make their voices heard.

**Beth Broderick**

*American Actress*

I promise you, when we keep at it, when we change enough minds, when we deliver enough votes, then progress does happen.

**Barack Obama**

*44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

We need to be activating deep democracy because democracy is fleeting through our fingers, and most people are unaware of it. Democracy is about dispersing power among the interconnected people. As a people, we need to rise to the level of forcing our leaders to abide by our stated principles - really exercise democracy, not only on our behalf but on behalf of the world.

We need to continue, as part and parcel of the American experience created by the founding forefathers, and now the foremothers, to insist, "We want democracy to work, and that means every voice counts."

**Dr. Azizah al-Hibri**

*Legal Scholar*

Always vote for principle, though you may vote alone, and you may cherish the sweetest reflection that your vote is never lost.

**John Quincy Adams**

*6<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

Democracy is never a thing done. Democracy is always something that a nation must be doing.

**Archibald MacLeish**

*American Poet*

The hope and ideals of our country are bigger than the ego of any one person, and voting in accordance with your love of others is no small thing—it is and always will be a significant act of service.

**Cory Booker**

*United States Senator from New Jersey*

The ballot is stronger than the bullet.

**Abraham Lincoln**

*16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

You can't just vote when you're excited. When you say 'I'm not gonna vote,' you are voting—to hand over your power.

**Tyler Perry**

*American Actor and Director*

Voting is completely important. People in America think democracy is a given. I think of it as an ecosystem, and what gets in the way of it is politicians and apathy.

**Henry Rollins**

*American Musician and Actor*

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Register to vote at [www.vote.gov](http://www.vote.gov)



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