

Bridget Smith

Women's March Speech

January 18, 2020

I'm a proud member of the League of Women Voters. We are part of a national group of women and men with this mission: TO MAKE DEMOCRACY WORK. Democracy works when we engage with our representatives and with each other. League facilitates this by bringing every eighth grader in Juneau to visit the Capitol during session to learn firsthand about the three branches of government.

Since our founding in 1920, we have been an activist, grassroots, nonpartisan organization that believes that voters should and must play a critical role in democracy.

Sixth months after The League of Women Voters was founded, the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified. That amendment gave white women the right to vote after a 72-year long struggle.

I come to this work from a personal place in my family history. Almost 100 years ago, in the 1920s, shortly after the League was founded, the Ku Klux Klan was very active in the state of Washington, particularly in eastern Washington where my family lived. It was at this time that my grandfather, George Mullins, decided to run for office. His campaign angered the members of the Klan who placed flyers under the door of every household in Yakima. The flyer read: Did you know that George Mullins is Catholic? That his wife is Catholic? That his two children are Catholic? The Klan hated Catholics and Jews and all people of color. They still do. Then the Klan underlined their message to the voters by burning crosses on the hills surrounding the Yakima Valley. The Klan accomplished two things through their actions: they intimidated voters and they also intimidated any Catholic candidates from running for office. Sound familiar? How frightening to be targeted by anonymous and violent men in hoods! It is like being targeted by anonymous and violent men online, which sadly, we know that many more women than men experience.

My grandfather lost that election and when he wanted to run again, my grandmother, despite being a good Catholic woman, was so against it that she threatened to divorce him, afraid for the

safety of her family. But then my grandmother turned her fear into action. She began her decades long dedication to elections by working the polls at every opportunity. She understood the importance of voting. Women had just gotten the vote, but many were still afraid. She wanted to serve democracy by making sure that voters, especially female voters, knew that their votes were protected and counted. By showing up, as a woman, to work at a polling place, she encouraged other women to exercise their right to vote. We give courage to each other.

Women are 51% of the population. We are often called a minority. In what universe is 51% of the population a minority? Do we see that 51% reflected in our representation? No, we do not. We have never had a female President or even Vice President. Less than a quarter of the members of both houses of Congress are women. Nationally, less than a third of state legislators are women. In Alaska, it is also less than a third. However, in our district, we are indeed fortunate to have two women, Representatives Hannon and Storey. Here in our local government in Juneau, we have a female mayor, Mayor Weldon, and on our Assembly, four of the seven members are women.

How can we make democracy work for everyone! I ask myself this every day. I always think that I'm not doing enough. But then I tell myself that I'm not alone. Every action I take makes a difference. We give courage to each other.

Here are some actions that you can take:

Make it a point of pride to be the person in your social group that others ask about candidates and issues. Read newspapers, local and national. Attend the candidate forums that League sponsors. Listen.

Write a letter to the editor. Write a My Turn. Speak up when you are bothered by something. We give courage to each other.

Make voting a social affair. Since the year 2000, the range of voter turnout for local elections has been between 19-45%. We have to bump that up! I know a man here who brings a group of his friends to vote first thing in the morning and then takes them all out to breakfast. Give a neighbor a ride. Take care of little kids so that their parents can vote. Bring your kids with you and let

them see you vote and get a sticker that says I VOTED. Vote early and wear your sticker. It reminds others to vote.

Attend League's "How to Run for Office" workshop. Volunteer to help a candidate. Knock on doors. Volunteer to gather signatures for petitions.

Volunteer to work at a polling place like my grandmother did. You don't have to have any special experience.

Keep track of legislation like the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2019 that the US House has passed, but the Senate has not taken up. It restores the full protections of the original, bipartisan Voting Rights Act of 1965 which was gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013. It would protect all Americans' right to vote. League supports it. Call our Senators to tell them to take it up!

Put the phone numbers of Senators Murkowski and Sullivan and Representative Young in your cellphone contact list. It makes it easy to call them and talk to their polite staff who will pass on messages to them. Whether you agree with them or not, they need to hear from you.

Get to know your local legislators. They are your representatives. Contact them when you have something on your mind.

Pay attention! Politics affects our lives on a very personal basis, whether we engage with it or not. The purity of the air we breathe and the water we drink, the quality of the schools our kids go to, the safety of our communities—these all depend on who we elect. Politics is the way we decide what kind of country we want. And it is all about voting. Voting is the foundation of a democracy. The act of voting is the culmination of acquiring knowledge, applying critical thinking and making decisions. Remember, vote as if your life depends on it. Because it does!