

Engaged and Plugged In: Strengthening Civic Participation in America

BY AMERICA FERRERA



On November 6, 2012, just hours before the election results would begin to come in, a trip to a neighborhood bodega put me in a state of panic.

Two young women about my age were going about their shop-keeping routine when one asked the other her thoughts on that day's election. "Who cares," she replied. "Same old s*** either way."

The young woman's response wasn't shocking for its content—I've lived in New York City long enough to be unfazed by such passing expletives. No, what upset and disheartened me was that, with just minutes left before the polls closed, I didn't have enough time to change this young woman's mind. And that broke my heart.

Now that the 2012 election has come and gone—an election marked by the overwhelming turnout of young voters and voters of color—I believe the roots of civic participation in America are strong. Despite this, it is the future of civic participation—one having new branches that will reach out into new and uncertain places—that must be strengthened, and strengthened now.

Through my work with Voto Latino, I had a front-row seat to the most dynamic and engaged political class of young voters and voters of color that our country has ever enjoyed. And this year I've been blessed to work on "Chavez," a film that celebrates the life and works of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the many unnamed organizers who changed the course of civic participation in America. Wherever I went working with Voto Latino or filming, I met

people who were engaged and plugged in. I saw the America of my dreams playing out in real life.

As I traveled across the country with Voto Latino organizers, we met so many people who were taking brave steps to represent for themselves, for their friends, and for their family members who might not yet have a voice in our politics. Every conversation on a college campus, every media appearance with a local news outlet, we all brimmed with pride and optimism for the result we knew we would see: a record turnout on Election Day and proof that generations of organizing that focused on building the social infrastructure of participation had indeed borne fruit.

It was easy to get swept up in the excitement, but that isn't to say this work has been easy. To help affect record voter registration and turnout, groups like Voto Latino put everything they had into empowering our communities to claim their own voice and their own future, through civic participation and engagement.

We thought that 2012 would be a vindication of a strategy put in place long before us, delivering on a promise made by generations of policy and civic pioneers and organizers who had laid out the path we were now following. Our parents and families had done right by their future by investing not just in all of us, but by investing in a nation where we could build our own dreams and doggedly pursue them. And powered more than ever by social media platforms and digital connection technologies, we

expected young voters and voters of color to harness these networked bonds into a greater and more perfect participation.

At a time when the stakes for young people couldn't have been any higher, we saw record participation—but it was far from complete participation. Having been snapped back into reality by the conversation of those two young women in my neighborhood bodega, I realize now that we don't just need louder megaphones to get our messages out. We need



stronger messages—and more messengers—messages that reach deeper into our communities and spread the word that civic participation doesn't just mean action, it means results. And most of all, we need to honor our rich legacy of commitment and continue building the infrastructure to enable civic participation at all strata of American life.

As a society, we make these promises to young people: Your most basic needs are attainable; you will have a path to improve your life; and the world around you can be changed through your action and determination.

If any one of these promises is broken, we put our country's well-being at risk. And while as a nation we work to fully deliver on the important ideas and services that have been unequally distributed in our recent history—access to the Internet, strong public

education, affordable housing—we must also work to ensure that the infrastructure for civic participation reaches everywhere and everyone.

In the 2012 election I saw the efforts and sacrifices of previous generations bear fruit. But if we allow the broad disparity gap between communities to widen, how can we guarantee against future political apathy and disenfranchisement? If we don't fight for the infrastructure required to increase participation in the world around them, how can we expect our future generations—all of them—to get involved?

I'm more optimistic than ever that we—my generation—will keep this promise and preserve and build upon this rich infrastructure of civic participation. But my experience on Election Day will stay with me forever, and I'll never take our promise for granted again. ■