

Does Your Vote Count?



GHS sophomore Rebecca Olshen also presented her findings at Summer Nexus — a week-long leadership program by Leadership Greater Hartford. She said she was pleasantly surprised by many of her experiences at the program, including trust exercises. (Steve Smith/Courant Community)



Steve Smith Staff Writer

The Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative held a community conversation called "Does Your Vote Count?" on Jan. 31, at the Riverfront Community Center in Glastonbury.

"Dr. King was concerned about voting, most of his professional life," said Darwin Kovacs, president of the GMLKCI. "Voting is the foundation stone for political action."

Panelists presented and discussed many obstacles voters or potential voters face, including whether it's actually worth it to participate in the voting process.

Max Feldman, a counsel in the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice, said how one is able to register to vote has a great impact on the numbers who do. "States often don't make it easy," Feldman said. "As a result of state policies, 51 million eligible voters remain unregistered." Feldman said other problems with registration records are that they are difficult to maintain. "The reality is that it doesn't have to be this way," Feldman said, adding that automatic voter registration, or an opt-out system, will make sure eligible people who go to the DMV or other agencies

are automatically registered to vote, unless they choose not to be. States are starting to embrace that idea, Feldman said. Connecticut is in the process of implementing an automatic system.

UConn political science professor Paul Herrnson spoke about the different ways Americans vote, the importance of voting technology and ballot design, as well as voter fraud. He explained in-person, absentee, and early voting, and made note of how issues like "hanging chads" and other problems with ballots are important, because they call into question what the voter's intention was, and whether a vote is actually valid or not. "You can cast a flawed ballot," he said, speaking about Connecticut's paper voting system. Direct reporting voting machines, such as touch screens, may be more efficient, because they can catch a missed selection or too many votes in one category. Computer usage, age, education level, income, and race/ethnicity are all factors that can affect the voting experience. "Not only do voting systems matter, and ballot systems matter, but how you interact with them matters," Herrnson said.

But once a vote is cast, assuming it's correctly cast, does it count? Jonathan Perloe, spokesperson for National Popular Vote CT, said that may not be true. Of more than 500,000 elective offices in the country, one highly visible one — the presidency of the United States — does not always go the way of the highest vote-getter. Perloe said that with the winner-take-all part of the electoral process, individual votes don't appear to matter, except for in a few battleground states. Potential voter suppression, including voter identification rules, can sometimes be larger than the margin of error in presidential elections. The National Popular Vote Interstate Compact is a movement aiming to combat voter suppression and enable all votes to count. The compact would award Electoral College votes from participating states to go only to the candidate with the most individual votes from across the entire country. "That's the way we elect everybody to the CT general assembly and other state offices. I can't think of why it should be any different for the president," Perloe said.

Luther Weeks, executive director of the Connecticut Citizen Election Audit and CTVotersCount, said he's been asking the question of whether one's vote counts since 2004. He said that since we're still asking the question, there's a problem. Voting integrity, engaging more people in democracy, and the cost of elections are the three components of the lens through which Weeks said he views voting. The 2016 presidential election cast doubts in the minds of Americans as to whether such integrity exists. "First, did the Russians hack our election systems? Second, were the winners of the primary elections actually determined?" he said. "There are legitimate, but often-exaggerated, questions of integrity. It is especially important that losers believe they lost fair and square."

Secretary of State Denise Merrill was also on the panel. Merrill said that Connecticut has been forward-thinking and has improved its election processes. In 2008, Connecticut was determined to be 19th in election performance, based on ability to get people voting, ease of registration, and other election mechanics. As of 2014 — the last date data was available — CT ranks fifth. "We vote on paper, and that has proven to be a very good decision over the years," Merrill said, adding that Election Day registration has been instituted in the state, but not yet at every polling place. Merrill said that helps eliminate errors on the registration list. Online voter registration has also helped. Merrill said that while there are flaws in the way voter registration is handled, that doesn't necessarily amount to the voter fraud that some people are claiming. "I believe that a democracy is strongest when everyone is at the table," Merrill said.

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