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KNOW YOUR RIGHTS WITH SOPA

VOTING RIGHTS Q&A WITH COLORADO SECRETARY OF STATE JENA GRISWOLD

Last month on November 8th, 2022, the United States held its midterm elections. This election decided who will hold power in the two chambers of congress and who our governors, state representatives, and local candidates will be for their upcoming terms. Voting is an essential piece of our nation's democracy. Yet, many still struggle to understand that voting is a right and is more than just filling out a piece of paper.

HOW WAS THE RIGHT TO VOTE GRANTED?

It is essential to realize that state governments still regulate voting. For example, in many states, the right to vote is taken away from felons or those considered mentally incompetent. Although our early nation had the 15th amendment, which allowed the right to vote, it wasn't until the 19th amendment and the Voting Rights Act (1965), and the ratification of particular amendments that ALL adults could participate in elections. The 15th amendment reads:

"THE RIGHT OF CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES TO VOTE SHALL NOT BE DENIED OR ABRIDGED BY THE UNITED STATES OR BY ANY STATE ON ACCOUNT OF RACE, COLOR, OR PREVIOUS CONDITIONS OF SERVITUDE."

Although an amendment does not grant the right the vote, it only prohibits the federal and state governments from placing these certain restrictions. After all, the right to vote is all up to the states.

It wasn't until the 19th amendment when were allowed women to vote in government elections. The 19th amendment reads:

"THE RIGHT OF THE CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES TO VOTE SHALL NOT BE DENIED OR ABRIDGED BY THE UNITED STATES OR BY ANY STATE ON ACCOUNT OF SEX."

Even though there was progress, this still excluded millions of African Americans.

In 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed, outlawing discriminatory voting practices directed towards African Americans and, on occasion, poor white Americans primarily in the south following the Civil War. The Voting Acts Rights Act of 1965 states:

"NO VOTING QUALIFICATION OR PREREQUISITE TO VOTING, OR STANDARD, PRACTICE, OR PROCEDURE SHALL BE IMPOSED OR APPLIED BY ANY STATE OR POLITICAL SUBDIVISION TO DENY OR ABRIDGE THE RIGHT OF ANY CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES TO VOTE ON ACCOUNT OF RACE OR COLOR."

There were other legislation that had been passed to ensure the right to vote, like the 26th amendment, which allows all those over the age of 18 to vote, and others. Still, these three are the most significant contributors to our voting rights today.

WHY IS VOTING STILL AN ISSUE TODAY?

Even with the many ways our representatives have made it easier for one to cast a vote, millions of Americans decide not to. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, around 60% of Americans vote. This percentage is even lower for midterm elections. While voting can be a direct outlet to change, many Americans fail to get involved. It is up to the generations that will follow to appreciate the right to stand up for what you believe in, vote and set a standard for getting involved in politics. Without participating in this democratic process, our leaders can't make decisions that accurately represent the people.

I conducted a phone interview with Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold to talk about how our generation can get involved and understand the voting process.

Q&A WITH COLORADO SECRETARY OF STATE JENA GRISWOLD

Q- WHEN YOU TALK TO OUR GENERATION (AGES 16-21), WHAT ISSUES COME UP THE MOST CONCERNING VOTING AND WHAT DO YOU HEAR FROM OUR GENERATION THAT IS THE MOST CONFUSING?

"[Issues] concerning with a lot of things not voting whether it's climate change, reproductive health care, the cost of going to school, the cost of living, and understanding that all of those issues if you want to have any forward progress it is inherently tied to the vote... Here in Colorado we have one of the most accessible, secure voting systems in the entire country. We fight voter suppression, we increase access, but across the nation we've seen a massive attack on voting rights and I think younger folks are very aware of that, and that is how folks get their freedoms taken away. That is a concern for every American"

Q- WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS MY GENERATION, WHO ARE TOO YOUNG TO VOTE, GET INVOLVED IN POLITICS AND BECOME ADVOCATED FOR CHANGE?

"Number one is just choosing an issue and joining an NJO or starting your own group to solve and issue. Identify something you're passionate about, and learn about it. My first political activism was actually sophomore or senior year of high school, where I grew up in Estes Park and Estes Park decide to take away MLK holiday. So we organized to push back on the school to make sure that was still recognized. There are so many ways to get involved, and once you're older you could also run for office."

Q- HOW DO YOU ENCOURAGE MY GENERATION TO VOTE? WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO ENCOURAGE THEM?

A lot of your readers are not eligible to vote because they are not 18 yet, but they can get pre-registered so that when they turn 18 it will be easier to vote. Over the last four years I've increased box offices by 65%, we guarantee access on every public university so that young people could have a more accessible way to cast a ballot, we've set up new systems for example the system called text secure."

"Younger generations have this huge responsibility and opportunity to really take hold of this country and protect people's rights, protect the air, land, and water, make sure our fundamental freedoms are respected, and I am really excited for your generation to start voting and get active."

Q- WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU KNEW ABOUT VOTING WHEN YOU WERE MY AGE?

"The times we're in now are a lot different to the times we were in when I was your age. The country is going through a big change...we're seeing an increase of political violence, increase in anti-semitism, increase in racism, misogyny...I'm going to guess that your generation is more aware of how all this intersects with the vote. I hope that you think about, and those around you think about, in times of volatility there is a great opportunity to reaffirm the country to what it can be and should be. What gives me hope is what you guys are going to do, and what younger people are already doing."