

There is a place for you in the voting booth

As we celebrate Diversity Week in this Presidential election year, the League of Women Voters of Morgantown-Monongalia County is pleased to be able to celebrate a place in the voting booth for all West Virginia citizens who are eighteen years of age or older. Getting there has been a long and rocky road and even today, there are actions in some areas which threaten the right to vote. In 1776, the Constitution gave white men with property the right to vote, and it took 144 years, and the 19th Amendment to that Constitution, for the last group of citizens—women-- to be enfranchised. The year was 1920. But that is misleading because the key word is “citizens”. Native Americans were not granted citizenship until 1924 and although the Indian Citizenship Act declared them to be citizens, state laws governed voting rights. It was not until 1962 that the last state declared that Native Americans had the right to vote. The 26th Amendment, ratified in 1971, extended voting rights to citizens aged 18 and over.

Over the years, there have been many subtle and not so subtle efforts to limit access to the polls. In 1890, poll taxes and literacy tests were introduced in some states. These were specifically designed to reduce African American, and in some cases, Native American, voting power. It took 74 years and the passage of the 24th Amendment in 1964 to outlaw poll taxes nationwide. The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 eliminated literacy tests.

However, threats to voting rights continue. According to Human Rights Magazine (a publication of the American Bar Association) Vol. 39, No. 1 2012, “legislative activity in the states since the 2010 midterm elections marks a sharp departure from the trend of expanding access, with more than 180 restrictive voting bills introduced in forty-one states...” Some restrictions include photo ID procedures, limits to early voting, restrictions to voter registration, proof of citizenship, elimination of voting rights restoration for felons who have served their sentences, flawed voter roll purges, elimination of polling places, etc. Most of these do not technically prevent people from voting, but instead, make it harder to vote, thus discouraging many voters.

WV makes it fairly easy to register and vote. We can register online, by mail and in person. People can visit the County Clerk’s office or the Secretary of State’s website for information on registering to vote, and various organizations, including the League of Women Voters of Morgantown-Monongalia County, hold voter registration events throughout the county.

If you are registering to vote for the first time in West Virginia or your county, and you have not voted in a federal election in this state, you must show a valid ID with your application or the first time you vote. If you mail your application, you may send a copy of a valid ID. You can show a copy of a utility bill, bank statement, paycheck, government check or other government document that shows your current name and address.

So, there IS a place for you in the voting booth. The key to insuring this access is USING that voting booth. Citizens need to pay attention to any attempts to limit access and use their power as voters to show their displeasure with any legislators who try to take that power away.