

EBK Gallery at 218 Pearl Street in Hartford is hosting an exhibition of artworks that eschew the usual interpretive ambiguities and subtleties associated with art. Titled "VOTE", the show features work by Erik Williams, Tim Wengertsman, Peter Waite, Rita Valley, Adam Niklewicz, Peter Kirkiles, Joe Bun Keo, Lindsey Fyfe, Ellise Chevarria, Felice Caivano, Sharon Butler and David Borawski each of whom urges the exercise of American's Constitutional right to voice their opinions and select their leaders. Scheduled only weeks before the 2018 mid-term elections this exhibition is less an exploration of contemporary aesthetic issues than it is a call to action on the part of the artistic community.

Voting is probably the single most important act performed by a citizen in a democratic country, even edging out serving in uniform in time of war. It is as close as we come to a sacred responsibility within a secular, political context. The right to vote exists only for the individual. Corporations do not vote. Political action committees do not vote. Ideological think tanks do not vote. And though these organizations pump millions of dollars into the political process they cannot outright buy anyone's vote. It is entirely possible that a popular, underfunded candidate could prevail over a less attractive candidate, even though the latter is backed by powerful financial interests. In the final analysis it is ballots that are counted, not dollars.

This is not meant to be blindly optimistic. Money does effect elections. For one thing, under-supported candidates can seldom survive to the end of a primary nominating process. By funding some candidates and not funding others moneyed interests can narrow the choices that the electorate ultimately has. So the voter ultimately chooses between candidates pre-selected by big money. Political action committees launch barrages of negative advertisements against those politicians unsympathetic to their agenda. This has the effect of discouraging undecided voters from voting at all. The constant character assassination convinces those who are not among the ideologically committed that all politicians are corrupt, that one party is no different than another, and that their single vote is meaningless. Over the years a persuasive argument has been made for this cynical point of view. But it is not entirely accurate.

In the past several election cycles some races have been settled by a very small number of votes. The 2000 presidential election was settled through a hand recount of ballots in the state of Florida. The margin of victory was 537 votes. In 2016 Hillary Clinton won the popular vote only to lose the Electoral College vote. Had a few thousands of voters in three mid-western states chosen her over Donald Trump the outcome would have been different. In state and local elections it can be as few as one or two votes that makes the difference.

Both parties are controlled by wealthy donors and PACs. Each party serves legions of special interests, but they do not necessarily serve the same interests. It is up to the voter to decide which party best represents their goals and aspirations.

Recently money in politics has been operating under the radar. Ad campaigns are public events, but some of the financial backers of political parties are working in the unseen depths of the political process. Money has been pouring into states that are considering measures to limit or trim the voter rolls. State legislative candidates receive donations from national organizations in the hope that legislation to require official identification in order to cast a ballot will be passed. Other bills to purge from the voting rolls anyone who has not voted in a certain number of years are supported by national organizations. On the surface these initiatives do not seem particularly sinister until one realizes that they overwhelmingly disenfranchise minority and lower income voters. This demographic of voters is seen as likely to back the candidates opposed by those national organizations. Efforts are underway across the political spectrum to discourage citizens from participating and to make it nearly impossible for others. This is the precise opposite of the ideal of universal suffrage.

State legislatures draw the shapes of the districts from which members of the U.S. House of Representative are elected. By backing one party or the other PACs can insure that district lines are determined in such a way that virtually permanent incumbency exists. Clever design can result in one party receiving the most votes

statewide while still winning the fewest number of House seats. Currently, on the national level, our country is being governed not by a majority party but by a minority party. This flips the principle of majority rule, minority rights on its head. The sitting president lost the popular election by almost 3 million votes, but in our system it is the Electoral College that prevails. In the Senate one party holds a slim majority, but they do so by attracting a strategic minority of the votes. In our system each state is represented by two senators regardless of size. This means that North Dakota, with a population of under 800,000, is represented by the same number of senators as New York's 8 and a half million residents. In fact, New York State has more residents than the states North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Iowa, Nebraska and Wyoming combined. But those six states can muster 12 senate votes against New York's two. It is estimated that by the year 2050 70% of the nation's population will live in just ten states, but those states with only 30% of the population will control the reins of government. This completely perverts the notion of one-person one vote.

It is incumbent on each of us to exercise our franchise and vote. Vote at every opportunity, for fire district commissioners, mayors, state legislators and federal offices. By exercising our rights and having our voices heard we stand the best chance of creating a government that represents the electorate. Vote for those candidates who will work to remove the influence of the big money PACs. Vote for those candidates who will work to see that house districts are drawn fairly. Vote for those who want to see people vote.

Use it or lose it.

-G.S.