

EDITORIAL: 'Selma' is a powerful lesson about voting



Oprah Winfrey locks arms with David Oyelowo, who portrays Martin Luther King Jr. in the movie "Selma" as they pray just before they march to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015, in Selma, Ala.

BRYNN ANDERSON — AP Photo

California's education policymakers are in the process of overhauling civic education. It is part of a larger transformation of public school curriculum and funding and administrative reforms intended to make students smarter by making schools more effective at teaching them.

It can't come a moment too soon. Voter participation rates among young Americans have dropped to new lows. Lousy civics education is partially to blame.

Teachers are sure to dream up creative ways to meet the new History-Social Science Content Standards, as what many think of as "civics" is called in the dense vernacular of education policy. We respectfully offer this suggestion for their consideration: Show the movie "Selma" to all seniors.

The film, directed by Californian Ava DuVernay, tells the story of a pivotal time in the civil rights movement that culminated in a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and, ultimately, the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The movie could be a great force of inspiration and outrage. A needed kick in the pants, if you will, to show students what they are squandering when they choose not to vote.

If students of every ethnicity are not moved by this true story of how African-Americans, just 50 years ago, were systematically denied the right to vote; if they are not outraged by the images of peaceful protesters brutally beaten by police; if they don't cry or at least choke up a little at the accurate portrayal of hatred and violence experienced by people simply asking to fill out a government form, well, maybe it's better they not vote.

But seriously, our democracy is in danger if we can't re-engage teenagers and young adults in the most basic exercise of civic responsibility.

A report by the California Civic Engagement Project at U.C. Davis, released Thursday, noted that already low youth voter participation rates in California plummeted in the 2014 midterm elections. Worse still, the percentage of people between the ages of 18 and 24 going to the polls in California is projected to continue to decline, from 8.1% in 2012 to 6.9% in 2040. Something must be done.

Latinos are particularly affected by this as their voting participation rates are exceptionally low in California. While Latinos make up more than one-third of the state's population, their voter participation rate is only about 17%.

That's where schools can have an impact. According to the CCEP report: "Nationally, existing preregistration programs have been most successful when voter registration was included in school activities, providing students with welcome guidance on the voting process." That's especially important as the state's students are overwhelmingly Latino and first-generation Americans who don't have family voting traditions to follow.

Teachers can follow up the movie with a lesson plan that brings home the injustice. It may surprise kids to discover that there are still attempts to stop poor and disenfranchised Americans from voting. Most of these efforts are now aimed at Latinos, such as the law in Arizona that required a birth certificate or passport to register to vote. That was struck down by the U. S. Supreme Court last year, but not all of the bad laws have been blocked.

Last year, the high court upheld a Texas law that requires photo identification to vote, clearly aimed at poor Latinos.

Like the laws that prompted the protests in Selma, these new rules are engineered to keep poor people from participating. Why would anyone care about that? Because those in power understand the equalizing power of one-person, one-vote, and it scares the heck out of them.

After letting all this sink in, teachers can hand out voter registration forms to seniors. California does allow preregistration for 17-year-olds, and voting experts say that getting people to vote when young is a key in starting a lifelong habit of voting.

If we can accomplish just one thing with whatever new civics curriculum the state devises, it ought to be reconnecting students to democracy. Sharing this terrible tale of injustice might be the way to accomplish it.

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