



TOWNSHIPS TODAY

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Your Vote Counts in More Ways Than One, Studies Say

It's happened in Alaska, Illinois, Kentucky, Texas, and even right here in Pennsylvania. In all of these places, a coin toss determined the outcome of a tied local election.

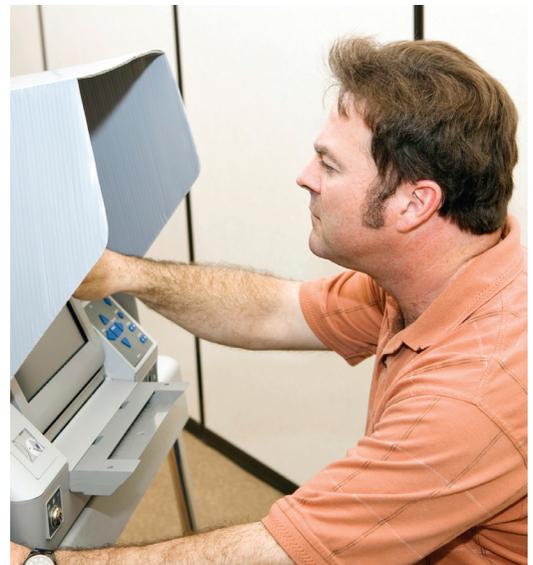
"One vote matters," a political activist said recently. "If one more person had shown up, if one more person had voted, they would have decided the election. Instead, nobody's vote counted, and [the races were] decided by a coin flip."

Situations like these are more common than you may think and underscore the importance of participating in the political process. If that isn't enough to convince you, researchers have uncovered another reason why you should head to the polls in November: Voting may improve your mental and physical health.

Admittedly, researchers say, voting and better health are not directly related. For example, casting a vote is not going to lower your cholesterol or cure cancer, but several studies show that being a politically active member of a democratic society can benefit your health in ways beyond determining the government's health care policies.

Voting provides mental and physical health benefits

The usual health advice comes in the form of familiar phrases like "take this pill," "eat more



Despite what some might say, your vote counts during local elections. On top of that, researchers have uncovered another reason why you should head to the polls: Voting may improve your mental and physical health.

fruits and vegetables," or "figure out a way to reduce your stress."

However, psychologist Marc Zimmerman says part of the overall picture of good health is to learn how you can empower yourself. ➤

“Engaging in the community is part of that, and voting is a part of that,” says Zimmerman, a professor at the University of Michigan’s School of Health.

For instance, a recent study conducted by Lynn Sanders, Ph.D., associate professor of politics at the University of Virginia, indicates that voting may help ease the psychological stress and other mental health problems that stem from being economically, politically, or socially disadvantaged.

“I think that people who are on the wrong side of the disadvantage divide, measured according to anything — health, income, quality of community, or job status — those are the people who stand to benefit most,” Sanders says.

Her study also shows that voting and being engaged in the political process can reduce the risk of future psychological problems, especially among those with a history of depression.

Sanders notes that psychologists have long linked community involvement with psychological well-being, a notion her study supports.

Kids can benefit from voting, too

The health benefits of voting are not limited to those old enough to enter a voting booth. Researchers say children and adolescents can benefit from discussing political issues.

“Having parents engage children in how they’re thinking about voting and expressing their right to vote is helpful to prepare kids for that piece of being active, engaged citizens in our country,” says Zimmerman.

Research also shows that children who are engaged in their community are less likely to experiment with risky behaviors, such as drugs and violence.

“Parents don’t realize that even though kids can’t vote, they can learn about the voting process and learn about how their parents think about different issues,” says Zimmerman.

“There is also some evidence that talking about politics may help kids become better critical thinkers and help parents build communication patterns with their kids.”

Zimmerman says many parents shy away from talking about politics at home, but that may inadvertently send the message that politics and voting aren’t important.

If children have difficulty relating to Medicare or Social Security issues, Zimmerman says parents can talk about issues closer to home that affect them, such as the elections for township supervisor or funding for a new local park.

Parents can also take their children to the local polling station on Election Day so they can

see democracy in action.

“The more we can model this kind of critical and analytic thinking, the better off we’ll all be because we will have kids who are more prepared to think in those ways, which is what it takes to search the Internet, as well as read something and decide if this is what you believe or not,” Zimmerman says.

Win or lose, it’s voting that counts

Researchers say that whether your candidate wins or loses, there is evidence that having voted can help you cope with the results.

“Of course it’s better if you win,” says Sanders. “There will be a stronger positive effect, but my bit of evidence shows there is still a positive effect from voting.”

Zimmerman agrees and says that even if you don’t end up with the outcome you wanted, having an opportunity to make your opinion known is beneficial for people psychologically.

“We find people are happier with the outcome and feel more in control of their lives if they voted,” says Zimmerman. “That is better for their psychological functioning than feeling that whatever they do doesn’t matter anyway.”

This is particularly true at the local level, where elected officials live in the communities they represent, and township residents can have a tremendous influence on the decisions that affect their day-to-day life.

Voting puts you in the driver’s seat and ensures that, as the nation’s Founding Fathers intended, your township represents needs and desires of the people who live there.

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(Note: Portions of this article originally appeared on www.webmd.com.)

How to confirm if you’re registered to vote

Not sure if you are registered to vote? You can find out by contacting the county board of elections or by calling toll-free, (877) VOTESPA.

Once you have registered to vote, you are not required to register again unless you change your residence, name, or political party affiliation.

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