

YEAR 24

OCTOBER 28, 2026

ODYSSEY ORACLE

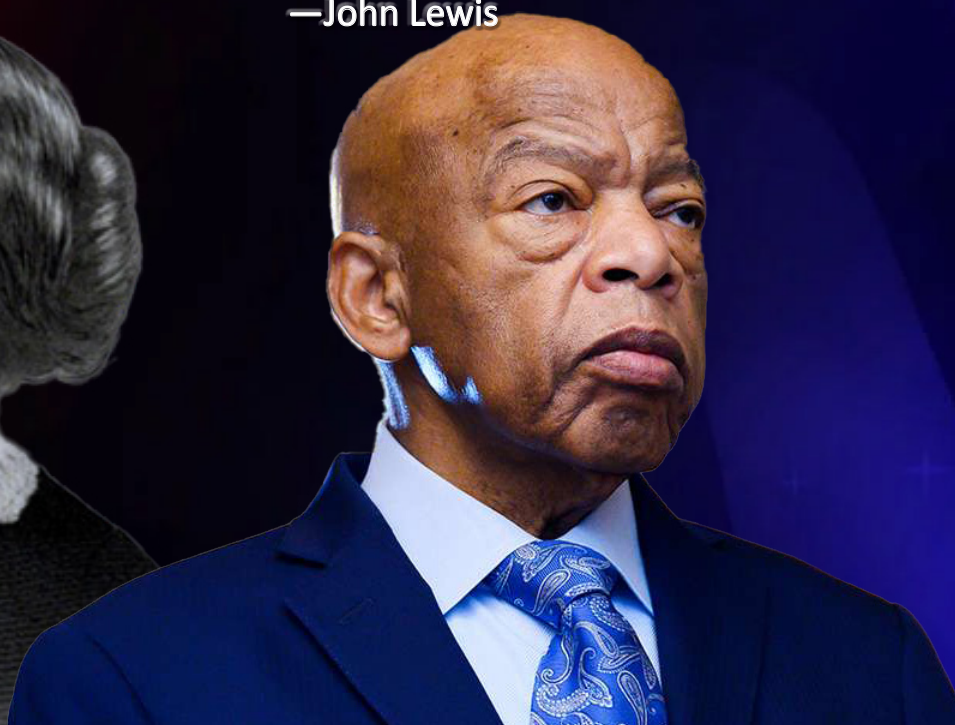
SPECIAL EDITION: A CELEBRATION OF VOTING

*"Women must have their opinions
counted at the ballot box."*

—Susan B. Anthony

*"The vote is precious. It is almost sacred.
It's the most powerful non-violent tool
we have in a democratic society, and
we've got to use it!"*

—John Lewis



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UW ODYSSEY PROJECT: WHY VOTE?

The UW Odyssey Project empowers adults to overcome adversity and achieve dreams through higher education. Each year since 2003, Odyssey has admitted 30 adults into a free, two-semester UW course to earn six credits in the humanities while discovering their voices. Over 700 adults have graduated from the Odyssey Project, and over three-fourths of them have completed more college. Some have moved from homelessness to UW bachelor's and master's degrees, from incarceration to meaningful work in the community. Whole families have broken a cycle of generational poverty.

The Odyssey Project encourages civic engagement and sponsors a "Why Vote?" contest and event every other year. Current students in Odyssey, past students in Onward Odyssey, Odyssey Junior, Odyssey Senior, Odyssey Beyond Wars for veterans, and students released from our Odyssey Beyond Bars program for incarcerated learners were invited to submit short essays, poems, songs, and artwork designed to persuade others to vote. Starting on the next page, you can sample the winners of the 2026 contest. Some will be showcased on October 28th, 5:30-7:30 PM, at the Black Business HUB for Odyssey's nonpartisan "Celebration of Voting" event. The Urban League of Greater Madison's CEO Ruben Anthony will speak, along with Odyssey students and staff.

We thank our partners for this event: the Cap Times, the Madison Public Library, and the Urban League of Greater Madison.

Visit odyssey.wisc.edu to learn how you can apply for Odyssey, volunteer, donate, and support us.



ESSAYS



First Place Winner: Tandalaya Taylor (Odyssey '18)

Silence Will Not Save Us

Let me get straight to the point: not voting does not protect. The system does not stop because you refuse to participate. It does not become fair, rethink choices, or feel like it is being punished. The system moves on without your voice while someone else makes decisions in your name. You do not use your voice; someone else will.

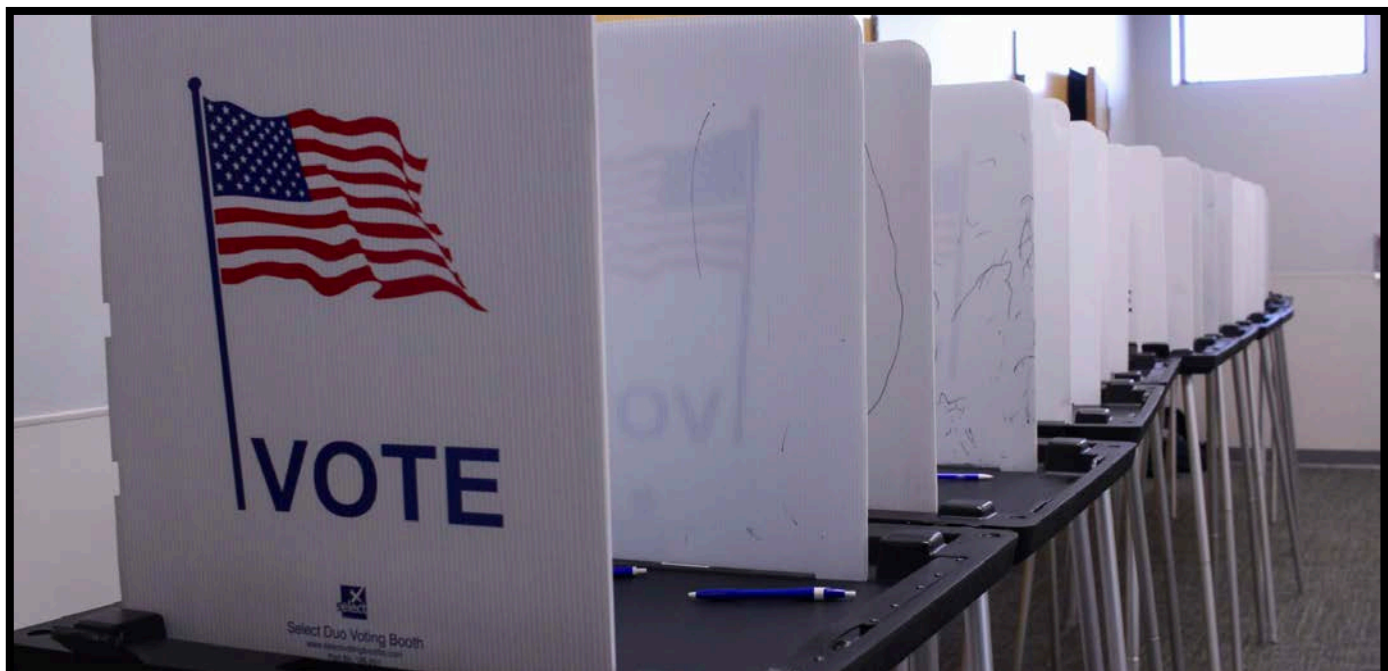


As a black woman, I understand questioning a system that was never designed to treat everyone equally. I have been around and watched communities be promised change while continuing to struggle. I know the frustration of wondering whether leaders truly see us, hear us, or just do not value our lives. Giving away your vote will not fix what is broken.

I have learned that policy is personal. It determines what communities have resources, how people in crisis are treated, if families can access healthcare, and whose rights are protected. We may think we are teaching them a lesson by not voting, but our needs are easier to ignore when we do not show up. Our collective power begins with each person who shows up.

Question every candidate, challenge broken promises. Go to city council meetings, and this is where you find out what is happening for you. Hold politicians accountable before and after elections, but under no circumstances do you hand your power to someone else.

Silence will not protect our families or give our community strength. Change requires speaking, acting, and voting.



**Second Place Winner: Otis Harris (Odyssey '09)****If My Vote Doesn't Matter, Why Do You Want It So Bad?**

They tell me my vote doesn't matter. Interesting - because people have spent generations deciding who may vote, where we may vote, and whose votes will shape the future. That is an extraordinary amount of effort for something supposedly meaningless.



I understand the frustration. Politics can feel corrupt, divided, and deaf. But I refuse to protest by becoming invisible.

I learned that while running for Dane County Supervisor. I lost by 11 votes. ELEVEN.

While campaigning, I met residents who had lived in their neighborhoods for more than 20 years yet had never met a candidate for County Supervisor. Some did not know who represented them. Some had not planned to vote.

Then I knocked on their doors. I listened. I asked what they needed. And some decided to vote - not because I made grand promises, but because someone finally made them feel seen.

That changed me.

My absence does not explain me. A ballot does not record, "I stayed home because I was angry, betrayed, or disgusted." It records nothing. And nothing cannot defend my family, challenge injustice, or build the future I want.

Will one vote fix everything? No.
One brick does not build a house either.
But remove enough bricks, and the whole structure falls.

So vote angry. Vote disappointed. Vote hopeful. Vote tired.
Run. Organize. Ask questions. Show up.
But never confuse silence with resistance.

I lost by 11 votes. Tell me again that one vote doesn't matter.



**Third Place: Adrianne Farrow (Odyssey '24)****My Journey to Becoming a Voter!**

I am a beautiful Black woman, and my voice matters. My vote counts, and my concerns about this government deserve to be heard. Today, I say these words with absolute conviction, but I did not always possess this mindset. When I was younger, I mistakenly believed that voting was a waste of time. I used to fall victim to self-defeating thoughts, telling myself, "I'm Black, so my vote won't matter," or "I'm a girl, so they won't think my opinion counts." Like many others, I struggled with the exhausting question: How can my one single vote really make a difference?

Now I know the answer: it can.

I did not start voting until shortly after my 27th birthday. Today, at 33 years old, it brings me a sense of sadness to realize it took me that long to recognize my own power. I missed years of opportunities to realize that my one vote, my one voice, and my one thought could truly impact the world around me.

What completely changed my outlook was diving deep into this country's voting history, combined with my hands-on experience working as an election canvasser. I worked with Freedom Inc., an amazing nonprofit organization in my area. While making phone calls to encourage people to get out and vote, I regularly ran across a wall of rebuttals. People gave me endless lists of reasons why they couldn't vote, why their votes didn't count, or why the system made it too difficult to participate.

Instead of pushing them away, I met them with empathy. I took the time to share my own story, dismantling their doubts and addressing every obstacle they faced. By the end of our conversations, the shift was undeniable. They no longer had an excuse not to vote. Instead, they had a concrete game plan to make it to the polls. Nine times out of ten, they ended the call feeling genuinely excited to get out and vote. The entire tempo of our conversations became lively, motivated, and determined to demand change.

Through these powerful encounters, I felt a deep spiritual connection to those who came before me. I could hear my ancestors whispering how proud they were of me. I could hear the voices of all the women and people of color who were denied the right to vote for centuries, singing praises for the profound change this generation is finally capable of making.

Your Vote Matters!



EXCERPTS FROM HONORABLE MENTION ESSAYS IN THE ODYSSEY “WHY VOTE?” COMPETITION



Yaressi Lara '27

It is very important for an American citizen to vote, especially in this economy with everything going up such as gas, groceries, rent, mortgages, etc. It sounds crazy to me that a lot of people don't vote. As a mother of three children, I want my kids to know how to use our voice, even if it doesn't feel like it counts. You're voting for governor, mayor, and even school board. Your voice does matter! If you don't know who to vote for, do your research, go to the library, ask friends or family; know that the power is in your hands, and one person can make a difference.



Claudia Gomez '27

Voting is more than a right; it is a responsibility. Political decisions can affect our families, community, school, workplace, healthcare, economy, our food, land, natural resources, climate, and even animals that cannot speak for themselves when human decisions affect them. Democracy does not require us to agree. It requires us to participate, learn, and understand our choices. Generations before us struggled to have their voice heard. Today, I have a voice, you have a voice, we have a voice, so . . . what am I going to do with my voice?



Hedi Rudd '12

When I was in elementary school, we had a mock election, back when School House Rock showed us the journey of Bill and how bills became law. I was fascinated by the process and that, as an American, I could participate. I researched the candidates. My mom was a single mom and struggled to raise us; we were on public assistance and shopped with food stamps. It stung when Reagan spoke about “welfare queens” and hit close to home. I remember proudly voting for Carter. I also remember the sadness I felt when he lost. Most importantly, I learned that my vote matters, even when we lose.



**Marilyn Sims '06**

I was almost ten when I stood out on the sidewalk in front of 1835 S. Hamlin Ave.,

Chicago, IL. It was the evening of Thursday, April 4, 1968. This was the day that the late great Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. With all the deaths, beatings, and bloodshed to gain the opportunity to vote and protect our legacy for our voices as human beings, it irritates, disturbs, and angers me that we must persuade people who have been marginalized to vote. Now at 68 years old, I am trying to galvanize everyone that reads my essay to vote.

**Jessica James '27**

Why vote? Because you can. I know what it feels like when having a voice does not feel like being heard. When I first started working at a hospital, I was assigned a preceptor who made me feel invisible. I went to HR. Months later, I was running the department. Being counted means having a voice, having the opportunity to use it, and refusing to believe that your voice is meaningless simply because someone else failed to hear it.

**Ahmanda Sanford '27**

Our people fought, protested, and made sacrifices so that we could have a voice in elections. The 15th amendment prohibited denying the right to vote based on race; the 19th amendment recognized women's voting rights; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 strengthened protections against racial discrimination in voting. Everybody's voice and views matter! How would you feel if we still didn't have the right to vote and those elected were making decisions against how we think things should be?

**Cinderria Harwell '21**

You can vote by finding out where your polling places are and then going there on Election Day to cast your vote, or you can vote early or by mail. Voting can change a lot in real life. It can affect our finances, our childcare, and what happens in our communities. The people we vote for make decisions that can either help or hurt regular people. Voting gives us a voice and a chance to make a difference. Even if one vote feels small, every vote counts and gives us a chance to be heard.

**Joy Bally '17**

I vote for voting's sake, I protest for protesting sake, but none of my voting power or protesting power will ever get rid of racism in the USA. The Native American community, the black community, the Japanese community, the Hispanic community, and everyone else who suffered for the sake of voting will never be compensated and the leaders we vote for will never be held accountable for their crimes. But hey, I vote!

**Sherri Bester '06**

I realize how important it is to VOTE to provoke change, to express my freedom, and to speak up for my rights. It honors many others who have fought a battle long and hard to help us win the freedom to vote. Being in the UW Odyssey Project family opened up an educational pathway to freedom, giving me a chance to graduate from the UW Madison in 2013 after I had given up on finishing my degree. Right now, I am in Odyssey Senior.

Odyssey classmates, use your voice to vote.



POEMS



1st Place Winner: Otis Harris, Jr. (Odyssey '09)

THEY HOPE YOU STAY HOME

They hope you stay home.

Hope you're too tired, too busy,
too disappointed to go.



Hope you say,
"What difference can I make?"

Because silence
has always been easier to manage
than people who know their power.

My people once stood
where democracy's door was locked,
knowing freedom lived on the other side.

They marched. They bled.
Some died for a ballot
I can now hold in my hand.

So don't tell me it means nothing.

My vote carries fingerprints
from hands I never got to shake.
It carries prayers whispered by ancestors
who dreamed of freedoms
they would never live to see.

And now -
I have children watching me.
One day they'll ask what I did
when the world felt divided,
when truth felt negotiable,
when people stopped listening
to one another.

I won't tell them I stayed home.
I'll tell them: I showed up.
Not because the system was perfect.
Because it wasn't.
Not because one vote could change everything.
Because millions of "one votes" always have.

So be angry. Be tired. Question everything.
But show up.
Because when you surrender your voice,
someone else gets louder.
They hope you stay home.

Disappoint them.



**2nd Place Winner: Jessica James (Odyssey '27)****BE COUNTED**

You say, "Not voting is how I stand.
I won't play along with a broken land.
One voice won't matter, one vote won't sway.
Why waste my time when it won't change the day?"



But I know what it means to go unheard,
to carry a truth without saying a word,
to stand in a room with your heart on the line
and wonder if anyone heard you in time.

I know what it's like to speak and feel small,
to wonder if anyone heard you at all.
To reach for a voice, only to find
the world has already made up its mind.

But silence is different when no one can see
the message you meant it to be.

A ballot looks small. A name, a mark,
a quiet little choice made out of the dark.
But imagine each hand, each person, each face,
saying, "I'm here. I still have a place."

One drop seems small, alone in the sea.
One heartbeat seems small but it keeps you and me.

Maybe your vote won't change everything.
Maybe mine won't make the whole world sing.

But if we silence ourselves before we're heard,
how can we know what our silence has stirred?

Your voice may be quiet.
Your voice may be small.
But a voice unused
is no voice at all.

So step through the door.
Put your mark on the page.

Not because you trust them.
Not because you're their pawn.

But because you were here.
You had a say.
And you chose to be counted that day.

**3rd Place: Teresa Tellez-Giron (Odyssey '04)**

Yes, I flew from the very place where butterflies are born,
where they begin their journey north so they can fly very high.
Very high.

I arrived in the North,
where I thought I had no voice and no vote.

Yes, coming from a culture where women many times have
neither a voice nor a vote. For years, I tried to find my voice, almost silently, but it was difficult.

Suddenly, like a butterfly that finds a flower where it can rest and gather strength, I found Odyssey, my perfect flower. There I rested, and I did not fly away until I was filled with pollen. Pollen that gave me the strength to raise my wings and my voice.

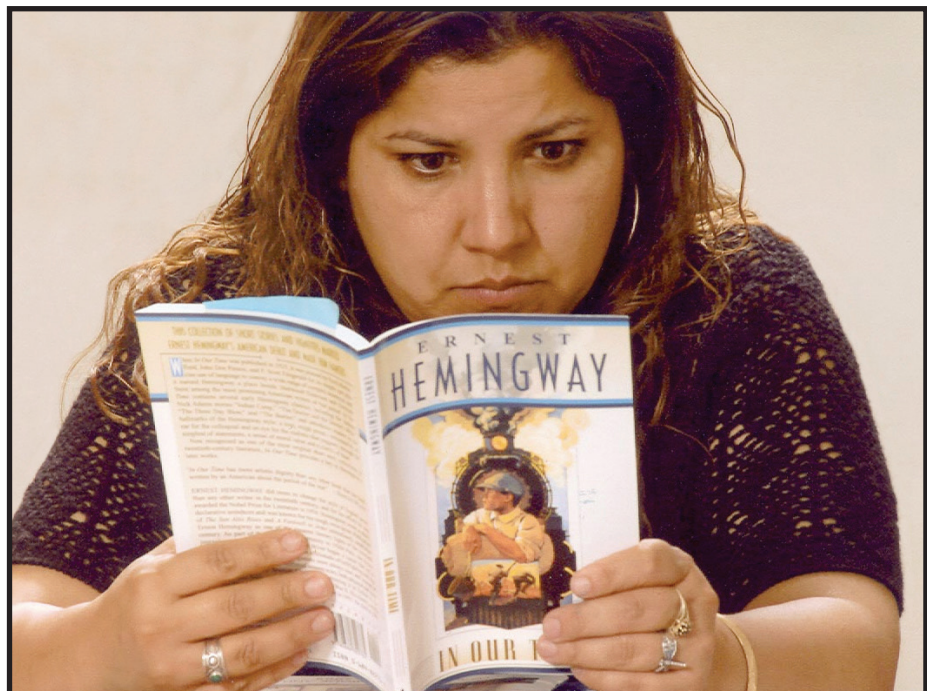
I spread my pollen among other flowers, and now I can see the fruit that grew from that day. The day I arrived at Odyssey and found exactly what I needed.

Hoy sé que sí tengo voz y sí tengo voto.
Y así como aprendí a alzar mis alas, aprendí también a alzar mi voz.
Porque nuestra voz importa. Nuestro voto también.
Y cuando usamos los dos, podemos volar muy alto. Muy alto.
Encontré mi voz y mis alas.
Por siempre agradecida.

Today, I know that I do have a voice, and I do have a vote.
And just as I learned to raise my wings, I also learned to raise my voice.
Because our voices matter. Our votes matter too.
And when we use both, we can fly very high. Very high.

I found my voice and my wings.

Forever grateful.



EXCERPTS FROM HONORABLE MENTION POEMS IN THE ODYSSEY “WHY VOTE?” COMPETITION



Tandalaya Taylor '18

They paid poll taxes for a right that should have been free.
They faced literacy tests not to test their knowledge,
But to silence them was the goal.
They marched while being threatened, stood firm while being beaten,
And some gave their lives just to be counted.

They understood something we cannot afford to forget:
The Vote is Power.
Honor the past, show up in the present, vote for the future.



Char Braxton '06

Justice can turn away
From Black babies,
From bright young boys,
It is a deadly divide.
So remember your roots

Remember Americka.
Remember the lives lost.
Your voice is yours.
Your vote is your choice.
Use it. Speak. Stand. Be counted.
Do not forget to vote!



Sherri Bester '08

V: Victorious Valid Voices
O: Overflowing Outward Openly Speaking
T: Talented Truthful Stories Together
E: Everywhere Equality for Everyone

**Lettice Murphy '27**

I am alive and able to speak, so trust in yourself
Now is not the time to be meek
Stand up tall and be your true self
Don't let them put your opinions on a shelf
You have the option to choose who will be

Sitting in that seat

Use your words, and vote for me.

**Abigail Israel, Odyssey Senior**

My grandmother was treated as a nobody until she voted.
My grandfather was treated as a dirty rug until he voted.
In those days, we were scorned, tortured,
dragged for blocks on the ground, tied to pick-up trucks.
We were not people until we voted.

Yes, one vote counts. It helps a million votes get across the line to say:

Let us have peace, justice, and equality today.



ART



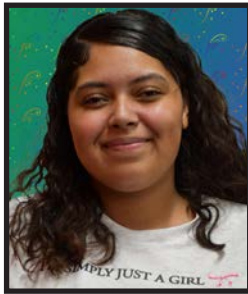
1st Place Winner
Vanessa Martinez
Odyssey '25



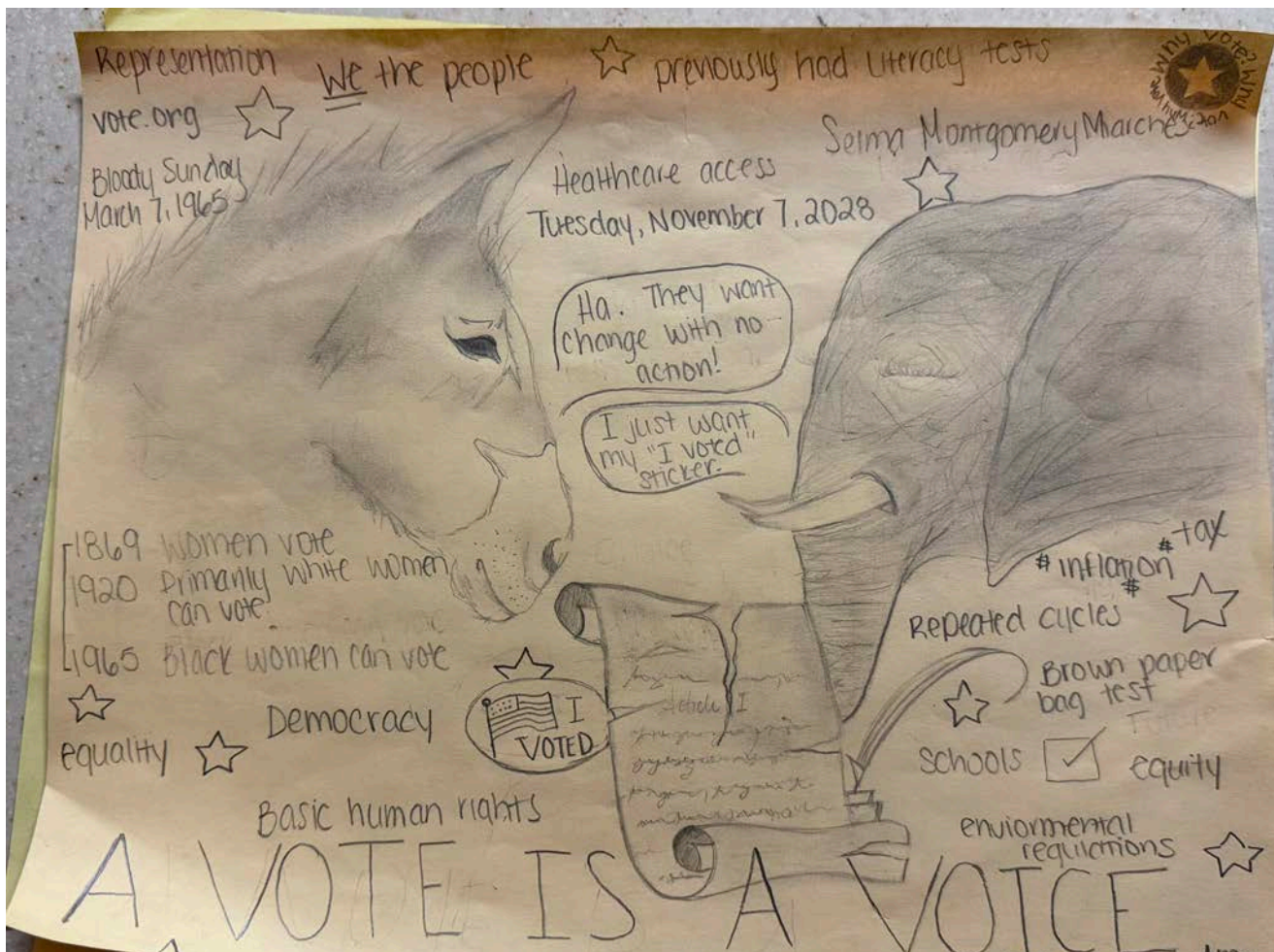


2nd Place Winner
Angelica Valenciano Alvarez
Odyssey '25



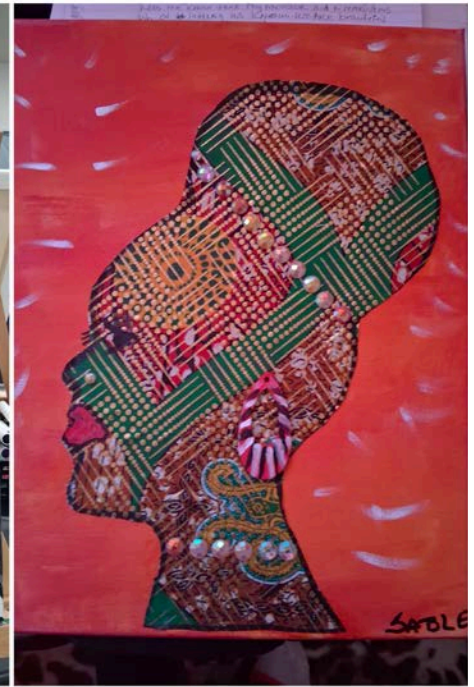


3rd Place Winner
Alexis McClain
Odyssey '25



ART FINALISTS

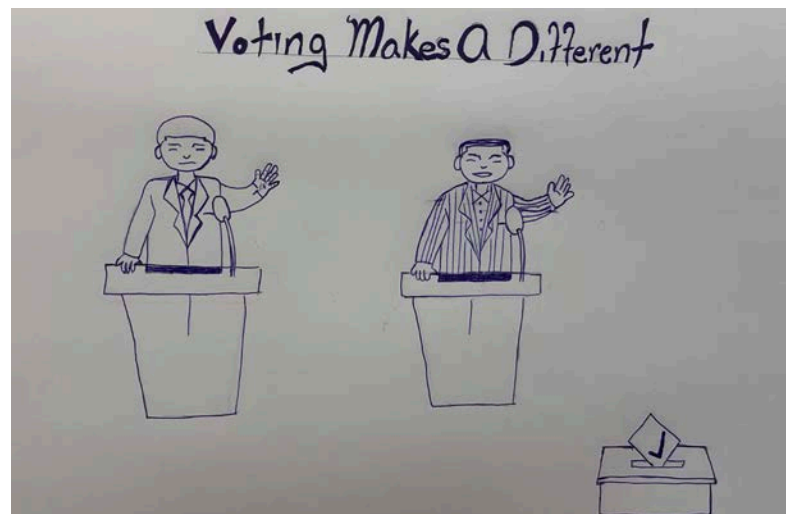
Sable Wright
Odyssey '25



Abigail Israel
Odyssey Senior

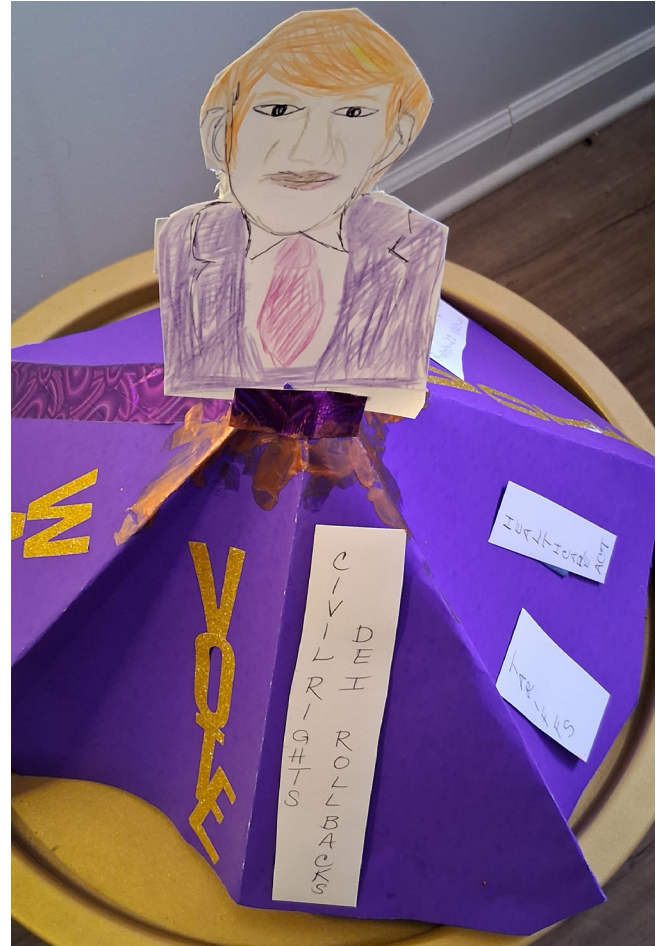


Cinderrria Harwell
Odyssey '22





Marilyn Sims
Odyssey '06



Sherri Bester
Odyssey '08

SONGS



1st Place Winner
Otis Harris, Jr.
Odyssey '09

Count My Vote

They say my vote won't change a thing
What difference could it bring?
They tried to keep our voices down,
But it's our time now.

A silence doesn't make a sound,
And it won't turn things around,
So I won't give my voice away,
So I'm showing up today.

Count it, count it, count it anyhow.
I stood up, loud and proud, so count my vote now.
Count it, count it, count it anyhow.
One voice, one vote, my voice, my choice.

They fought so we could have a say,
And I won't turn away.
Count it, count it, count it anyhow.



2nd Place Winner
Marilyn Sims
Odyssey '06

Vote, vote, vote.
Our lives depend on it.
It's an urgency
No, it's an emergency.
Vote, vote, vote.
They're destroying
Our democracy.

I'm pledging with you to
Vote, vote, vote.



FAMOUS PASSAGES ON VOTING

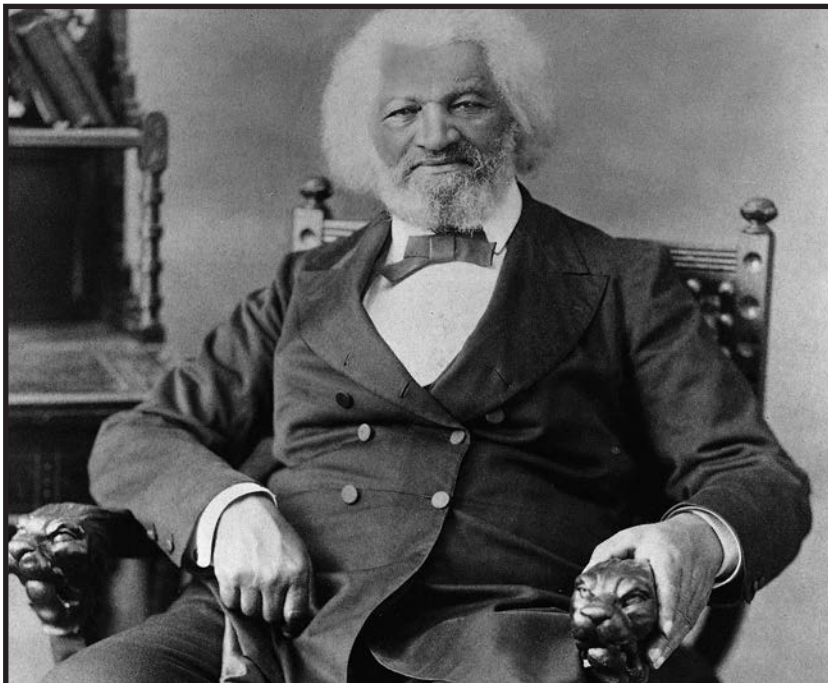
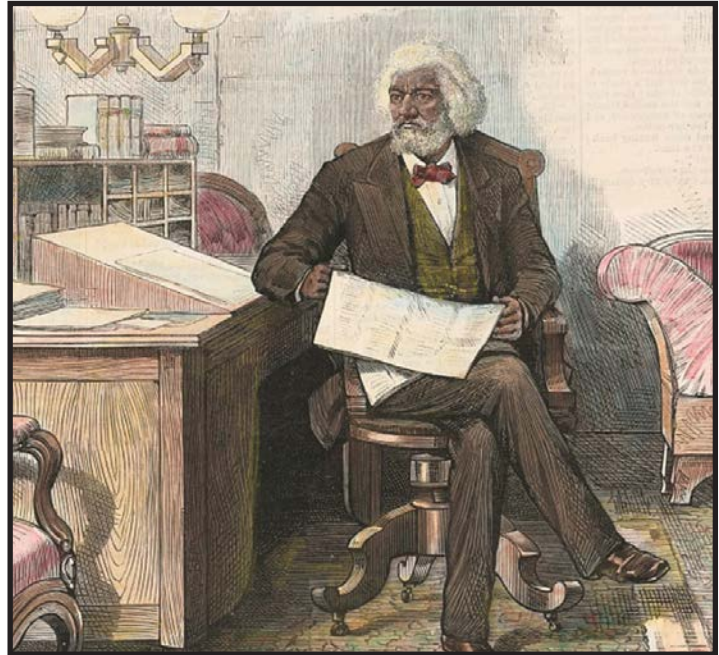


Frederick Douglass, excerpts from 1865 and 1869 speeches

By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to form an intelligent judgment respecting public men and public measures; you declare before the world that we are unfit to exercise the elective franchise, and by this means lead us to undervalue ourselves, to put a low estimate upon ourselves, and to feel that we have no possibilities like other men.

It is said that we are ignorant. But if we know enough to be hung, we know enough to vote. If we know enough to pay taxes to support the government, we know enough to vote.

I hold that women, as well as men, have the right to vote, and my heart and voice go with the movement to extend suffrage to woman; but that question rests upon another basis than which our right rests.



With us, the matter is a question of life and death. It is a matter of existence, at least in fifteen states of the Union. When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains dashed out upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.



Susan B. Anthony, On Women's Right to Vote

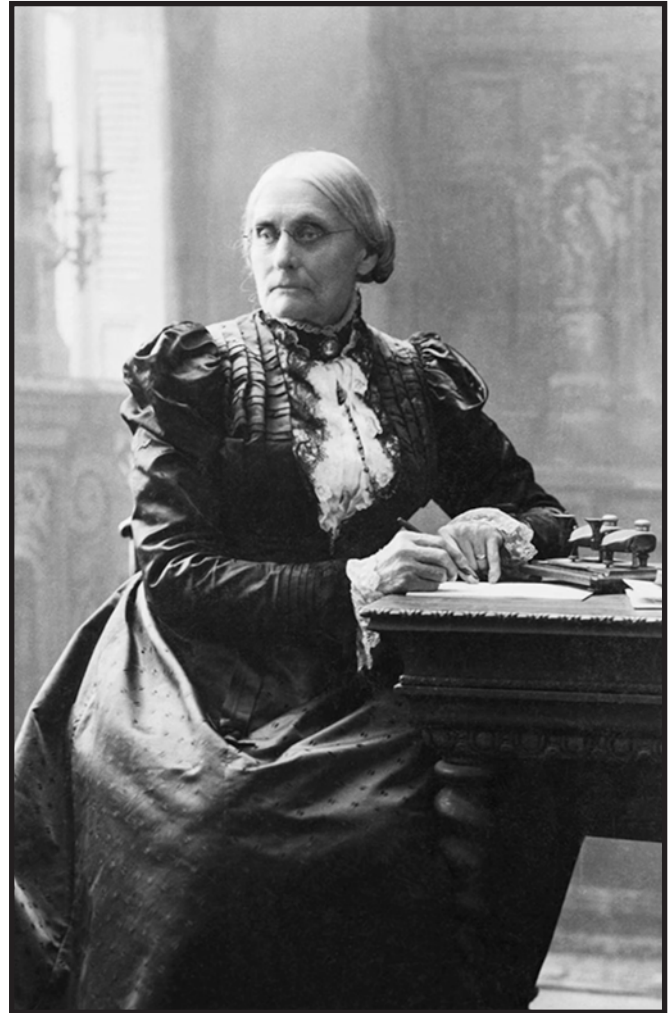
An excerpt from a speech given after her 1872 arrest for illegal voting:

I stand before you tonight under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted at the last presidential election, without having a lawful right to vote. It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that me thus voting, I not only committed no crime,

but, instead, simply exercised my citizen's rights, guaranteed to me and all United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any state to deny.

The preamble of the Federal Constitution says: "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people - women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government - the ballot.

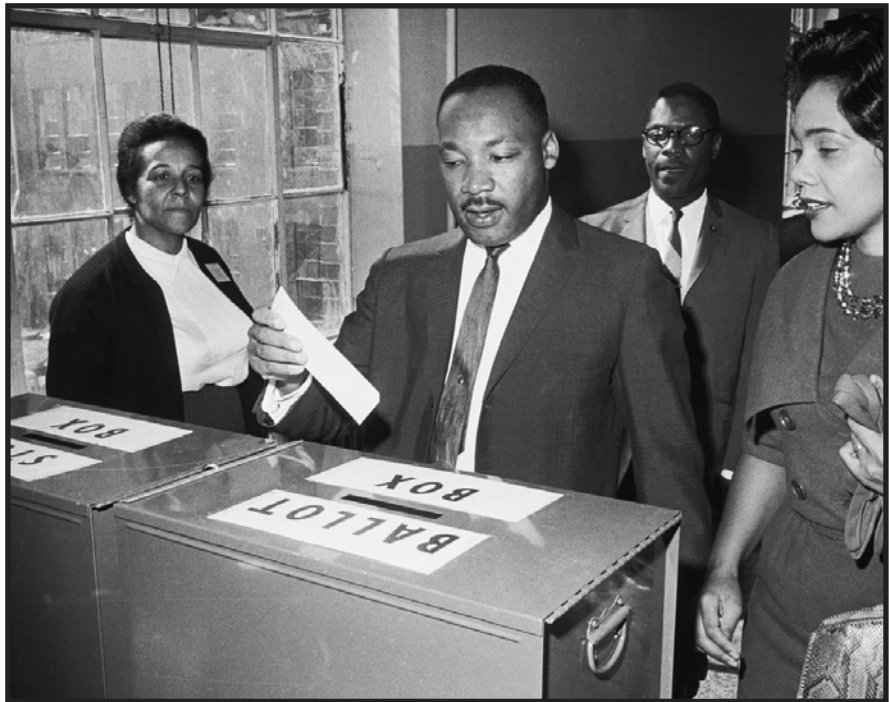


Martin Luther King, Jr., from 1957 speech at the Lincoln Memorial

All types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent us from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic traditions and it is democracy turned upside down.

So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote, I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind—it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact—I can only submit to the edict of others.

So our most urgent request to the president of the United States and every member of Congress is to give us the right to vote. Give us the ballot and we will no longer plead to the federal government about our basic rights. Give us the ballot and we will bring an end to the dastardly acts of the hooded perpetrators of violence. Give us the ballot and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision of May 17, 1954 that reaffirmed the gold old American doctrine of freedom and equality for all people.



John Lewis, comments on courage, action, and voting

If you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have a moral obligation to do something about it. You cannot be afraid to speak up and speak

out for what you believe. You have to have courage. Raw courage.

I gave a little blood on that bridge in Selma, Alabama, for the right to vote. The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It's the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democratic society, and we've got to use it!

People keep telling me they are frustrated and ask, 'what can I do?' I say organize, get registered, and vote like you've never voted before. You must not become bitter or hostile; be hopeful and optimistic. This is not a struggle for a day or a week, but the struggle of a lifetime.

