

80% of New Bedford's eligible voters stayed home – is the apathy fixable?

The excitement of the New Bedford elections has passed. Yesterday, I wrote about the higher registered voter turnout – today I write about the embarrassingly low eligible voter turnout.

12,466 of the 54,726 registered New Bedford voters showed up to the polls on Tuesday which means 42,260 didn't. In a city with an official population of 95,072 (2010 census), 50% of the New Bedford took to time to register to vote, but only 25% of them actually found the energy to vote for New Bedford's future. Sadly, spending countless hours on social media complaining and campaigning for a candidate is valued more than actually voting.

Of the 95,072 residents, 71,250 are 18 years or older and eligible to vote. This means while we had a 25% voter turnout of registered voters, we only had a 19.7% turnout of eligible voters. This means one of five adults decided the future of the city. To put it another way, 80% of all those who had a voice, remained silent.

Apathy is one of New Bedford's biggest problems and defines New Bedford as much as fishing. Head to debates sponsored by local community organizations and you'll mostly find candidate campaign workers and supporters in the audience. Sadly, this apathy is true with most community events in New Bedford ranging from school events asking for parent involvement to city council meetings. To be honest, I give zero credit for registering to vote as it seems Massachusetts almost requires it when you register your car or do almost any official paperwork with the state. Showing up is all that really

matters in the end.

How do we “fix” New Bedford’s apathy problem? Is it even fixable? Does it even need fixing? For me, I don’t want everyone to vote, I’d prefer a low turnout of informed voters than a high turnout of uninformed ones. Figuring out who is informed and who is uninformed is an impossible metric, so we just have to go with inspiring the next generation of people to vote.

Inspiring voters needs to start early in our society and it starts at home with those not eligible to vote – our youth. Parents need to lead by example by showing up to their kid’s school events and activities. Parents can get our youth involved by taking them to community neighborhood meetings and by teaching them that voting is a voluntary civic responsibility that should be taken seriously. Parents should get their kids involved on election day – children under 18 can’t vote, but they sure can learn about and start to appreciate the value of elections. I feel this is the difference between the 19.7% that registered and voted on Tuesday and the 80% that didn’t bother – somewhere along the way the ones that voted learned the value of democracy.

Want to reduce voter apathy in New Bedford? Have a discussion with the youth now and get them involved with politics early. Or don’t and let the same 20% of eligible voters and their children decide the future of New Bedford for decades to come.