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Remarks

**“The Importance of Voting in This Presidential
Election”**

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Good evening, and thank you very much for having me here this evening.

The philosopher Plato, who was apparently a cynic when it came to politics and his fellow citizens, once said: “One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.”

I'm not sure that's true in every case, but I suppose it is a distinct possibility, and regardless, it's a heck of a good argument for participating.

Some of us participate more than others.

For some, politics is a vocation.

For others it is a hobby.

For many people, politics is something they think about just every once in a while, usually when their taxes go up, their road needs paved or their neighbor starts an argument with them.

No matter where you live on earth, however, politics affects you, whether you think about it or not, and whether you participate in it or not.

One of the great benefits of living in a democracy like ours, however, is that in this country, you are allowed to participate.

And one of the most effective ways to do that is also one of the easiest – voting.

With the presidential election upon us, almost everyone is thinking about politics these days, at least in passing.

And everyone who is eligible should also be thinking about voting.

No matter where you stand on the issues, or how you feel about the candidates, your vote in this presidential election is more important than ever.

Obviously, every presidential election is important.

But if we look back through American history, we can find certain elections that marked watershed moments when, had a different president been the elected, we can certainly make a case for a different course in American history.

What if Aaron Burr had been elected president on the 36th ballot of the House of Representatives historic vote in 1800 instead of Thomas Jefferson?

After all, both candidates were from the same political party – remember, that's back before the 12th amendment, when the second highest vote getter was automatically the vice president.

How much of a difference could there have been?

Well, Aaron Burr, as vice-president, ended up killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel and was eventually disgraced, while Jefferson went on to nearly double

the size of the United States with the Louisiana Purchase, send the country in a more populist direction politically, and cement his place as one of the country's most accomplished statesmen.

What if Abraham Lincoln had not been elected our 16th president?

Well, there's an argument to be made that there may not have been a Civil War, at least at that time.

I think that certainly qualifies as a huge difference in history.

But even if there still had been a Civil War, the chances that it would have been prosecuted in the same way, or that the issue of African American slavery would have become such an important part of the Northern cause, certainly could be debated.

And would any other man at that time have had the intellectual foresight and personal and political courage to see the war through for the North, even in its darkest times.

Most scholars agree that, at least from the perspective of the North, Abraham Lincoln was the right man for the times.

And, while Lincoln was re-elected in 1864, he was assassinated shortly after his second term began.

Would Reconstruction in the South – and the legacy it still leaves on this nation – have been different under a more benevolent Lincoln?

I believe you could make a very good case for that.

Finally, what if Franklin Roosevelt had not been elected in any of the presidential contests between 1932 and 1944?

Would America have recovered from the Stock Market Crash of 1929 as completely as it eventually did?

Would the federal government have as much influence on the national economy and fiscal policy as it does now had the New Deal never happened?

Would we have entered World War II before Pearl Harbor under a different president, and would we have fought the war differently once we had entered?

These are some of the questions to ponder when we start to think that maybe it doesn't really matter who is elected president.

To those who say their vote does not really matter this year, I can only wonder if they do not care about this nation's foreign policy, its approach to war, its economic and tax policy, its approach to balancing citizens' rights with homeland security and its policies on issues such as abortion, gun control, religion's place in society and a host of other foreign and domestic issues.

Because no matter what side you come down on regarding any of these issues, I believe that the results of this year's presidential election will have a huge impact on the direction this nation moves on all of them.

Think about it.

There is not one aspect of your life – no matter your age, income level, ethnic group, religion, region of

the country, etc. – that the policies of the federal government does touch or influence.

And the man or woman who sits in the White House sets the agenda for the nation on all those issues.

Yet there are still people who say to me: “Come on, my vote doesn’t really count.

“The candidates are all the same.

“Nothing will be different if I do not vote.”

Truthfully, there isn’t much I can say to someone who is so unaware of history – or unconcerned about the future -- that they would think who they vote for does not matter.

These people truly do not understand how individual's impact government, and how government impacts their lives.

Either that, or they are simply lazy, and little that you and I can say to them is going to make any difference.

But we can make a difference, and some very good counterarguments, for those people who claim that they do not vote because they do not see how their one vote out of more than 50 million can possibly turn the tide.

Now, I'll grant you that the chances of this presidential election being decided by one vote, or even a thousand or a hundred thousand votes, are perhaps not very high.

But that doesn't mean your vote, or more importantly, your failure to vote, does not matter.

There are a lot of interesting anecdotes out there about how one vote determined an election, or an event in the course of history – Cromwell ruling England, Hitler becoming head of the National Socialist party in Germany, one vote determining that English would be the official language of the United States and not German.

The problem with most of these anecdotes is that they are usually fallacies, a bit more complicated than the story portrays or downright false.

Hitler actually won control of the Nazi party by more than 500 votes – in fact there was only one vote against him.

And here is the real story behind the German Language myth: In 1794 some German settlers in

Virginia petitioned the U.S. Congress to have certain federal statutes translated into German and printed in both languages.

This petition was referred to a committee, which voted the idea down - by a margin of one vote.

We never came close to voting German as our official language.

As for Oliver Cromwell taking control of England by one vote, well, Cromwell became leader of the New Model Army in 1645, not the nation of England, which at the time, was in the midst of a civil war.

Cromwell did eventually establish his own government in 1649 – but only after expelling his opponents from Parliament.

It wasn't a single vote, but strong leadership and military force that established Cromwell as ruler of England.

But no matter.

We don't need these kinds of urban legends to establish the importance of voting.

We have our very own true example from just four years ago.

We all know the story of the 2000 presidential election.

That election was ultimately decided by the United States Supreme Court.

I don't think anyone wants to see a presidential election decided by the ruling of any court.

Yet in Florida, if just one more person in each of the voting precincts in the Miami-Dade County area had voted for either of the two presidential candidates,

the election most likely would not have gone to the Supreme Court.

In Florida in 2000 – after all the counting and recounting was done – the final vote count for the state was determined to be 2 million, 912 thousands, 790 votes for George Bush and 2 million, 912 thousand, 253 votes for Al Gore.

That's a difference of 537 votes across the entire state.

Miami-Dade County alone has 940 voting precincts. If just one additional person in each of those precincts had voted for Al Gore, he would be president today.

How do you think the supporters of Al Gore who live in Miami-Dade who did not vote feel today?

Almost four years ago they may not have felt that their failure to vote, and the results that followed, made much of a difference.

But I bet you they feel differently now.

That goes the same for the supporters of President Bush who did not vote.

They must certainly realize that their participation could have avoided a Supreme Court ruling that, depending on circumstances, could have gone the other way.

Pennsylvanians, especially young people, would do well to heed the lesson of Florida in 2000.

This state's vote count certainly has the potential to be one of the closest in the nation come November 2nd.

No, your single vote is not going to determine the national popular vote count, or even the vote count in Pennsylvania.

But a few hundred people's votes did determine the vote count in Florida in 2000, and that count did determine the Electoral College makeup in 2000, and that, in turn, determined who the President of the United States would be from 2001 to 2004.

But the argument: "My vote is just one vote, it doesn't make that much difference" becomes even more silly when we look at it from another perspective.

In fact, taken to its logical conclusion, it is absurd.

What if everyone wakes up on Election Day, November 2nd, and decides “My vote is just one vote, it doesn’t make that much difference anyway.”

If you think the 2000 presidential election was a mess, imagine what trying to determine who should be our next president would be like if the election were to end zero to zero.

Of course, there are reasons to vote other than the fact that -- in the grand scheme of things -- your vote “counts.”

One of them is that your vote counts to you personally, as well.

It seems to me that of all the age groups in the United States, yours has the most to gain or lose – or if you don’t want to use those value-laden terms

– will be the most affected by who becomes our next president.

Yours is the generation poised to embark on your careers, start families and impact the future of your communities.

And don't forget, yours is the generation that fights our wars.

Yet yours is the generation that continually shows up in the fewest numbers to vote in our national, state and local elections.

After the 1998 election, a survey of 18- to 24-year-olds conducted by the National Association of Secretaries of State concluded that the United States may be witnessing the emergence of a permanent class of non-voters, and most of those non-voters are young adults.

The federal and state governments have done all we can to help change this trend:

Motor Voter means you can't very well fall over anymore without hitting your head on a display containing voter registration applications – whether at the DVM, the library or the town hall.

And I'm willing to bet if you walked up and down this campus during the past several months, you probably had a hard time avoiding all the voter registration tables.

And we've all read the news stories about how hundreds of thousands of young people are registering to vote for the first time across the nation.

Yet, as in past years, I am doubtful that many, if not most, of those newly registered voters will actually show up to vote.

That has been the trend in the past.

Believe me, both major political parties undertake a comprehensive effort every election year, at the federal, state and local level, do make sure the people who are registered to vote get to the polls and vote.

But every election, a good many of the people who register stay home.

And do you know what: many, if not most, of those people look like you.

I'm sure you've all heard the stories of people in their 90s who have voted in every presidential election – every election in fact – since they were eligible, or of elderly citizens trudging to the polls in all kinds of weather to cast their vote, or arriving at the polls in their wheelchairs.

As a frequent visitor to polling places on Election Day I can assure you these stories are true.

I can also tell you there are very few similar stories about young people.

That's a shame because it means your voice, to some extent, gets left out.

The reality is: that's the way our system works.

And that means our system works the best for the people who do vote.

Senior citizen issues are very important, don't get me wrong, but I don't believe they are any more important – in an objective sense – than the issues you care about.

But let me tell you, senior citizen issues, veterans issues, business issues – they are all more important in Harrisburg and Washington right now because the voices representing them are the loudest and the strongest.

And I'm not talking in terms lobbying and TV ads and political donations.

I'm talking about the fact that the people who are members of these groups – who are represented by these groups – vote!

Democracy is much like a free-market economy – it works based on supply and demand, and on the principle that the combination of people's individual self interest – with some appropriate checks and balances – usually ends up being what's best for the entire country.

That's why it's so important that everyone who has a voice exercise that voice.

Not so much because your one voice is important to the success or failure of an individual candidate or policy, but because your voice is part of the national voice, and government cannot respond to the needs of the nation – as a whole – if the needs of the nation are not accurately reflected in its communication with government.

I'm always amazed and amused when I find out that someone who is complaining to me about the direction our state is moving, or about the influence of money in politics, or even about the pothole on the road in front of their house, ends up being someone who is not registered to vote, or someone who hasn't voted for years.

Not to be overly simplistic about things, but I promise you, THE MOST IMPORTANT VOICE I hear every two years is delivered on Election Day, not by lobbyists in the halls of the Capitol in Harrisburg, not by people, businesses or organizations that write me letters or call me on the phone, but by the people who walk into that voting booth and either vote for me or for my opponent.

You can waive all the signs you want, write all the opinion pieces you want, attend all the demonstrations you want, but if you don't vote,

candidates for public office DO NOT hear your voice.

Finally, there is, in my mind, one more reason to vote.

It is perhaps a bit more esoteric than the others, and it one not usually discussed, but it is one that I believe is perhaps most important.

You know, if you think about it, this nation of ours doesn't really ask much of its citizens.

In some countries, like Israel, military service is mandatory for all citizens.

In others, a loyalty oath is required.

In some countries, all people must volunteer to help their fellow citizens, or for work for a government agency for some time.

All we really have to do in the United States to enjoy all the rights and privileges of being a United States

citizen is (1) be born here or (2) become naturalized.

After that, you don't really ever have to think twice about it.

But I always thought that was kind of selfish and irresponsible.

For a country that gives so much to its citizens and asks for so little in return, it doesn't seem that expecting them to do the one thing that keeps the democracy strong and healthy – voting – is that much of a chore, particularly when we are only asked to do it for a few minutes twice a year.

Your vote is important because it is your duty.

Not your required duty, but I believe a duty nonetheless.

It is what defines the very government you live under.

If no one voted, democracy would quite simply die.

If you do not vote, a little bit of our democracy dies, and our government and nation work a little less effectively.

Young people today like to portray themselves as doers, and to a large extent, that is true.

According to surveys, your generation is less pessimistic than their elders, cares about many of the same issues as the rest of the nation, and sees itself as having tons of energy and potential.

Yet despite all this, many of our young people are still just along for the ride when it comes to voting and participating in our democracy.

Talk about wasted potential, wasted energy and wasted talent.

I think it's shame and you should too.

If you are skeptical about whether your vote can make a difference, think about this:

No matter where you land on the political spectrum, or what candidate you agree with or support, if you do indeed care about things like education and jobs; the makeup of the Supreme Court; individual rights; crime and public safety; foreign policy; social justice; welfare reform; religion; guns; the national debt; and your future, you owe it to YOURSELF, if not to the rest of us, to vote.

I urge everyone who is able to vote November 2nd to exercise that right to vote on November 2nd.

Remember, the greatest impact on the future of this nation will be delivered not by those for whom we vote, but by those who do the voting.

Thank you very much, and I will be happy to take some of your questions.