



Law Day is May 1. The 2024 Law Day theme — ***Voices of Democracy*** — encourages Americans to participate in the 2024 elections by deepening their understanding of the electoral process; discussing issues in honest and civil ways; turning out to vote; and, finally, helping to move the country forward after free and fair elections.

Every day for the next six days, we will highlight historic quotes from key individuals related to the right to vote and power of voting.

As you think about these quotes, reflect on the importance of a citizen's right to vote and the challenges we face in ensuring that all Americans can participate in our democracy. The right to vote is the very foundation of government by the people and arguably the basis for all other rights.

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“... A share in the sovereignty of the state, which is exercised by the citizens at large, in voting at elections is one of the most important rights ...”



Source: National Portrait Gallery

Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the Treasury under President George Washington, from a letter written in April 1784

The ideas of representative and self-government were so vital to our colonial forefathers that they helped fuel the American Revolution. However, once our independence was won, enfranchisement was not granted to all.

In establishing our democratic republic, Article I of the Constitution gave states the responsibility of overseeing state and federal elections. And at the time of its ratification, this meant that many people — including almost all women, African Americans, Native Americans and white men without property — could not vote.

Since that time, individuals and groups have spoken up, fought for and won their right to vote. In this way, we the people ensure that our government continues to become a more perfect union.

Hamilton wrote many pamphlets advocating for revolution and colonist’s rights.

Look through the news for modern examples of people speaking up for the rights, justice, and dignity of others. Are any in the form of a news editorial or a letter to the editor?

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“Is it a crime for a citizen of the United States to vote?”

Susan B. Anthony, American abolitionist and women’s rights activist, from her speech reported in the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, April 1873



Source: Library of Congress

The 15th Amendment, granting African American men the right to vote, was ratified in 1870.

Susan B. Anthony noticed that even with this amendment the U.S. Constitution did not specifically exclude women from voting. As a leader of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, she decided to test her rights. With 15 other women from Rochester, she registered and voted in the 1872 presidential election.

This quote is from a speech given after her arrest for voting illegally. Ultimately, she was tried, convicted and fined \$100 for her actions. Anthony never paid the fine.

Can you find current examples of people willing to risk arrest and imprisonment to either bring awareness of an injustice or to fight for their rights or the rights of others?

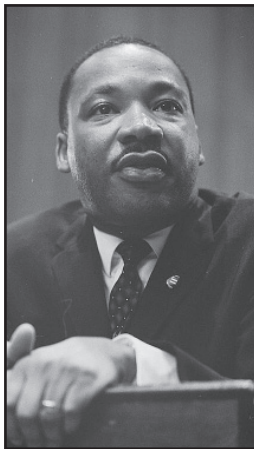
Are any fighting for equal access to participate in local or national elections?

Compare and contrast this group with the suffragists in the late 1800s.

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“... all types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic tradition.”



Source: Library of Congress

Martin Luther King Jr.,
a leader of the civil rights movement, from a
speech given on May 17, 1957

This quote, and several more about the importance of voting, were given by Martin Luther King Jr. during the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom demonstration. The event took place in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on May 17, 1957, to mark the third anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case, a landmark Supreme Court ruling that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

An estimated 25,000 people, Black and white, gathered to pray, listen to speeches, and voice their opinion about the ongoing struggle for racial equality and justice.

This event, and others like it, helped to galvanize support for subsequent actions and legislation, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Civil rights leaders exercised their First Amendment rights by peacefully assembling and speaking freely about changes to bring about equal rights. Can you find modern examples of people demonstrating or protesting to bring attention to a current injustice? What issue(s) are they concerned about? Do any involve voting?

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Source: Library of Congress

Convention in August 1964

In 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer worked for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee attempting to register Black voters. By 1964, she helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Representing this group, Hamer spoke during the Democratic National Convention about her experiences facing racism, voter suppression, and economic injustice.

During her testimony, Hamer described the brutal beating she endured at the hands of police officers for attempting to register to vote. Her speech called attention to the systemic racism and discrimination present in the South at that time. She criticized the all-white Mississippi delegation at the convention and challenged the legitimacy of their representation, advocating instead for the inclusion of the multi-racial MFDP members as the true voice of the state's disenfranchised Black population.

Hamer served as a member of Mississippi's first racially integrated delegation at the 1968 National Democratic Convention.

Look for modern examples of individuals addressing members of Congress or other legislative bodies to bring awareness about their cause. What topics are they concerned about? Select one. Research that topic and track how long people have been working to fight for change.

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Source: U.S. House of Representatives

“... your vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union.”

John R. Lewis, civil rights leader and Georgia congressman, quote from speech given during the Democratic

National Convention in Charlotte, N.C. in September 2012

During his speech at the convention, Congressman Lewis drew parallels between the civil rights movement of the 1960s, in which he played a prominent role, and the contemporary struggles for equality, urging Americans to stand up for justice and participate actively in the democratic process.

Lewis highlighted the importance of protecting voting rights and ensuring that all citizens have equal access to the ballot box and warned against efforts to disenfranchise voters. Throughout his speech, he invoked themes of hope, perseverance, and unity, asking Americans to come together to build a better future for all.

Lewis and others fought for change to obtain equal rights, including equal access to vote.

Can you find examples of people today speaking up and out about the importance of voting and/or about hope, perseverance, and unity to help build a better future for all?

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“As a citizen, you need to know how to be a part of it, how to express yourself — and not just by voting.”



Source: Library of Congress

Sandra Day O'Connor, Supreme Court associate justice, founder of iCivics, from an interview for *Parade* magazine in 2012

O'Connor, the high court's first female associate justice, dedicated herself to promoting civic education and participation. She emphasized the importance of voting and civic engagement, believing they are fundamental to the health of democracy. Through her initiatives, such as iCivics, O'Connor sought to empower students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become active and informed citizens. She recognized that a thriving democracy depends on an educated electorate capable of making informed decisions.

O'Connor's legacy lies in her tireless advocacy for civic education, aiming to cultivate a new generation of responsible and engaged citizens committed to shaping a better society.

After retiring from the Court, O'Connor devoted herself to improving civic education.

Look through the news, in print or online, for articles about people serving their communities by empowering others through education or civic participation at the local, state or national levels. What causes do these people support or oppose? Do any involve voting?

This concludes our Law Day series. If you'd like to explore more content focused on the law, go to <https://www.nynpa.com/nie/lawday.html> where you will find Law Day features for each year dating back to 2008.

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