As US voters cast ballots in the 2022 midterm elections last week, voters rated health equity matters highly among issues of concern, according to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in August 2022. Although voters also rate health care highly among issues that concern them, it is joined by other public policies that are just as linked to health, including gun safety (62%) and education (60%). In addition, in the current post-Dobbs world, reproductive care (56%) and even judicial appointments (58%) are linked to health. Given that several issues related to health and health care are of concern to voters, the topic of civic engagement is highly relevant for health professionals, researchers, policy makers, and everyday people.

Civic engagement includes efforts by individuals and groups to influence laws, policies, regulations, and governmental practices that relate to the public good, including health and health care. Such efforts include voting, volunteering, becoming members of community organizations, participating in community organizing, engaging in activism through faith-based or labor organizations, and more. Although several questions remain about the connections between civic engagement and health, substantial evidence indicates that when citizens participate as decision makers in community organizations, those entities provide more accessible services and are more effective.

In addition, neighborhoods with heightened civic participation have a greater sense of community, better leadership, lower rates of crime, and healthier and happier citizens. Similarly, states and countries with high levels of civic participation experience better physical health and mental health. The clear pattern from scholarship in this area indicates that individuals and their communities fare better when mass civic engagement is present.

Civic Engagement and Advancing Health Equity in the US

Advancing a health equity agenda requires changes at multiple levels of the US health care and political systems, including institutional practices and public policy. Both an inclusive democracy and health equity rely upon the same principle: a society in which all have the potential to benefit politically and economically, and everyone has the opportunity to achieve their optimal health.

In the current state of inequity in the US, who better to advocate for resolving disparities in health care than the members of underserved communities themselves? Their investment in their own communities' health outcomes creates a passion that, while supported by health professionals and advocates from other communities, cannot be replicated. These community members can speak firsthand about the dire consequences of prolonged inadequate care with conviction that they and their neighbors deserve better health.

How Health Equity Leaders Can Help to Promote Civic and Political Engagement

Health equity leaders can support affected communities in realizing these health equity goals in several ways. On the interpersonal level, they can develop and foster close working relationships with individuals in the community. Creating meaningful relationships with patients, research participants, coworkers, and other community residents is a first step to establishing trust and good will.

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embracing relationship-centered care, practitioners and researchers appreciate the importance of the relationships where all parties pursue the goals of self-awareness, effective communication, respect, understanding, and trust. Health professionals can incorporate the value of civic participation in these relationships by expressing concern about what is happening in the community. They can also advise those with whom they interact about the personal and social value of participating in interest groups, civic groups, and advocacy groups, and even running for political office.

On the organizational and community levels, creating networks and encouraging relationships within communities that enhance civic participation is also crucial. For example, the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Equity is an academic unit committed to reducing health disparities in racially and economically minoritized communities through research, education, and changes in practice and policy—all done in partnership with a 60-member community advisory board. The Center for Health Equity works closely with the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute, which facilitates community-academic partnerships, mobilizes support for efforts to improve conditions that advance health, and promotes dialogue in the Baltimore, Maryland, community in partnership with its Community University Coordinating Council.

The Urban Health Institute's 2022 Social Determinants of Health Conference, which had the theme, "Don't Talk About It, Be About It: How Civic Participation and Political Engagement Can Impact Health in Your Community," is an example of this work. Together, the Center for Health Equity and the Urban Health Institute are striving to uplift community voices, build trust between Johns Hopkins University and the community, and address shared concerns about health and well-being. Through these partnerships, clinical, research, and educational programs work collaboratively with community members to support their efforts to change public policy.

On the societal level, health professionals should build collaborations with other social justice professionals, such as lawyers, educators, social workers, and policy analysts, to identify joint opportunities to provide more holistic solutions to problems faced by the communities they serve. Many health equity researchers, working in partnership with communities, are at the forefront of changing how environments, opportunities, and life experiences affect the ability of socially marginalized groups to achieve optimal health.

Similarly, although in different contexts, other social justice workers promote agency and empowerment in their work with constituents. Through their knowledge of how laws and policies work and their advocacy for the rights of historically marginalized communities, these professionals have the skills to help people identify ways they can exercise their autonomy. The common goal these fields work toward is fostering the health and emotional well-being of communities. In working collaboratively, they can help ensure that people feel supported and enriched in all aspects of their lives. Groups throughout the country have already begun to augment civic engagement in the health equity agenda with initiatives such as VotER, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that has launched civic engagement tools (eg, QR codes worn on clinicians' lanyards that patients can scan with their cell phones for information about registering to vote) at more than 500 hospitals and clinics. VotER has also partnered with the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign to engage, educate, and register voters in school and practice settings.

The great social movements of the 20th century—the women's suffrage movement in the US, the global campaign against apartheid in South Africa, the US civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, and the World Health Organization's “Three by Five” HIV treatment campaign to provide antiretroviral treatment to 3 million people living with HIV in low- and middle-income countries by the end of 2005—were not led by a single entity or a finely tuned strategy with universal buy-in. They reflected the work and commitment of numerous individuals in nongovernmental organizations, community groups, faith-based organizations, and institutions who advocated, researched, prayed, and at times risked their lives to achieve a greater good.

Today, technological advances make collaboration more attainable in the increasingly diverse and connected global society. To help communities advance health equity, health care professionals...
and organizations should support approaches that address the behaviors of individuals as well as the policies and resources of governments, businesses, and organizations in other sectors. We can each play a role. On an individual level, we can be role models for the change we want to see in the world by being civically engaged ourselves.

REFERENCES


