

When voters get lazy, public officials aren't accountable

Election Day 2011 is 18 days away. I believe that's a valuable reminder, because in my mind Election Day is one of the most important days of the year. It presents an incredible opportunity, one that many other people around the world desperately want but never get—to have a hand in shaping our government.

With the mere act of casting your ballot, you accomplish so many things. You send a message to those seeking public office, a reminder that your approval is neither automatic nor to be taken for granted. They have to earn your vote with service, and that means acting in the best interest of their constituents. If they don't live up to your expectations, you will impose old-fashioned term limits on them—by voting them out of office next time around.

When you vote, you also give your opinion a voice. That's the central message of the "Vote. Be Heard" campaign, which the Rochester Business Alliance and the Rochester Faith Alliance launched in response to the upcoming city school board elections.

Yes, we recognize that the campaign came out after the Democratic primary, the results of which end up by default determining who gets board seats. But per-



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sistently low voter turnout in the primaries and the general elections got us concerned that those being elected may not actually represent the wishes of the majority. By not exercising their right—many see it as an obligation—to vote, so many citizens have forfeited their choice to a minority of people who do vote.

The powerful images of people with duct tape across their mouths send a message that by not voting, people are silencing themselves, not making their wishes heard. The campaign aims to increase voter registration within the city and encourages those registered to get out on Nov. 8 and cast ballots. While it may not affect who wins the school board seats this year, higher voter turnout will mean that "the people's choice" will be elected in the oth-

er important races on the ballot this year, including those for Monroe County executive, district attorney and county legislator.

But there's another important point to be made here. While voting is important, it's essential to respect the power of that vote by making an informed choice.

Democracy works best when voters are informed and engaged. It's important to understand the issues so you can take your own stance. Then you need to learn the positions the candidates take on the issues that matter to you, so that you can vote for the person you believe will best represent your interests.

There are many ways and many places to get this kind of information. Many organizations go through a process of endorsing candidates. Here at the RBA, our political action committee, the Committee for a Strong Economy, endorses candidates who PAC members believe best understand and represent the interests of area employers, who are the RBA's constituency.

To determine who will receive our endorsement, we use a process that includes interviews with each of the candidates, conducted by the 11 members of the PAC, all representatives from RBA member

companies. We ask questions on a variety of issues, depending on the races at hand. For instance, this year there are local races on the ballot, so we talked about the need for government efficiency and transparency, improving our regional economy and city schools. In last year's state races, we asked about ways to lower taxes and make the state more business-friendly.

After the interviews, the PAC members vote. In some cases, we opt to not make an endorsement because we don't feel we have enough information or, frankly, because none of the candidates in a particular race warranted our endorsement.

Our PAC endorsements offer insight on economic issues. Other organizations make their endorsements based on other issues that are important to them. Voters also can go on the candidates' websites and read their messages.

How you choose to get your information is up to you. It's just important that you get informed and use that information to decide how to cast your ballot. You've got 18 days left.

Sandy Parker is president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance and a founder of Unshackle Upstate.