

Plant trees for a better democracy

By **Dana R. Fisher**

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As the dust settles on the 2014 mid-term election and the parties analyze why more Americans didn't come out to vote, it's time to recognize that political involvement does not come with an on/off switch. There are lessons to be learned from the example of thousands of citizens in Baltimore and around the country who participate in community-sponsored initiatives to plant trees.

Yes, trees.

Citizens join these efforts to make their communities greener and more resilient to floods, but it turns out digging in the dirt can be a viable way of getting people involved in the practice of democracy. Literally putting roots in the ground gets people more involved in other aspects of community life.

In Charm City, TreeBaltimore combines local government and private organizations in an effort to reach a 40 percent tree canopy by 2030. In New York City, the MillionTreesNYC initiative has planted over 900,000 trees since 2007 with the help of thousands of volunteers. Planting trees for these types of initiatives can be a relatively low-cost way to give back to the city.

Let's use New York as a case study. Most volunteers there get involved by spending a day putting trees in pre-dug holes and drinking coffee and eating muffins or bagels. Interestingly, this shared experience is also having an effect on the ways the volunteers participate as active citizens in our democratic process.

Statistically, the people who come out to plant trees are significantly more likely than the American population (or their fellow New Yorkers) to engage in other types of civic and political activities, such as: participating in a protest; signing a petition; attending a public, town, community board or school meeting; or engaging in political discussion on the Internet. Moreover, these volunteers represent New Yorkers from across the political spectrum. They are also, as you might expect, whiter, more highly educated and more female than the general NYC population.

By following up with the volunteer stewards a year later, my colleagues and I were able to discover whether this group was merely a more civically engaged portion of the population, or if planting trees played a role in getting them more involved as citizens. We discovered that environmental stewardship and civic engagement were deeply intertwined for these New Yorkers, acting as a kind of gateway. They reported that environmental participation was their most common first step to civic engagement. Driven by the desire to give something back to the city and to pass on an environmental ethic to the next generation, participating in environmental stewardship was a kind of civic engagement, not a separate act of environmentalism.

When we think about the ways Americans participate in democracy, we pay too much attention to groups that only ask members to donate money and, maybe, to send an email every once in a while. By the time an election rolls around, it takes political pyrotechnics to reel in potential voters. Often, we overlook how more shared, social and substantive activities may actually matter to democracy. Working side-by-side with representatives of civic and environmental groups exposes volunteers to networks of opportunity. Conversations that take place over root balls and shovels lead to connections that open channels for further participation. These citizens are not "bowling

alone," they are digging together, investing in the future of their community.

It is not too soon to do the spade work that could improve voter turnout in communities across the country, including Baltimore, in the next election cycle. For the sake of a more vibrant democracy, perhaps voters shouldn't leave the mudslinging to the candidates.

Dana R. Fisher is professor of sociology and director of the Program for Society and the Environment at the University of Maryland. She is the author (with Erika Svendsen and James Connolly) of Urban Environmental Stewardship and Civic Engagement: How Planting Trees Strengthens the Roots of Democracy, which will be published by Routledge Press in early 2015. Her email is drfisher@umd.edu.

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