

Voting Is My Obligation

Sheila Mailman

BEFORE YOU READ: What does “obligation” mean? Try using it in several sentences. What obligations do you have?

I Want to Make a Difference

It wasn't until 1954 that Native Americans in the state of Maine were allowed to vote in federal elections. As a full-blooded Native American (Cheyenne, Maliseet, and Penobscot) woman, I see voting as an obligation both to my ancestors and to generations to come.

I want to make a difference by exercising my right to vote and helping others do the same. In my neighborhood, I volunteer to help those who can't read that well, so that they too have the opportunity to vote. I help shut-ins get their absentee ballots, and I campaign for my choices for Congress and governor. I also met our State House representative at the soup kitchen last fall.

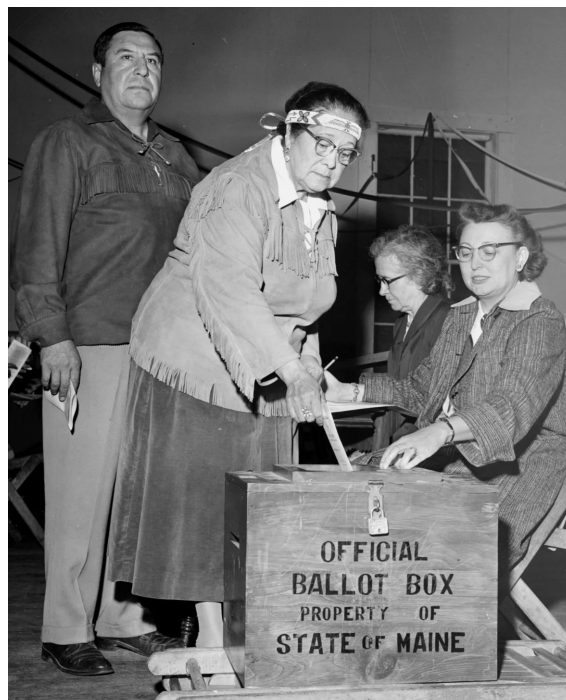
My ABE Class Got Involved

My first voting experience was a result of a group effort in our ABE class. We decided to become active participants in the voting process. In class, we talked with some of the candidates. All of the students in the class voted except for one who is not a U.S. citizen yet.

For some students, their votes were the first in the history of their families. Some of them have lived for two or three generations here in Aroostook County. These students have broken the non-voting trend for themselves and their families.

I Am a Proud Voter

I love to vote. I like the excitement, the rush of people entering and exiting booths, and friends coming and going. It is times like these that I look back and see how far our nation has come.



A member of the Penobscot Indian Tribe votes in 1955. Photo by Danny Maher, Bangor Daily News.

Gender, race, nation of origin, and financial status no longer can be used to determine who can vote. For me, “To vote or not to vote,” is not even a question. It is my obligation to the past, present, and future generations — and I do it proudly.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. How does the author get involved in elections? Be specific. Cite evidence from the text.
2. What are some ways you could get your class or program involved in the election? For ideas, see <https://nelrc.org/vera/>.

This article was reprinted from the “Democracy in Action” issue of *The Change Agent*, March 2008. Sheila Mailman was a student at Caribou Adult Education in Caribou, Maine. Her Native name is Sleeping Bear.

