

## Guest commentary: Federal Glover: Stop watching from the sidelines, get into the game

By Supervisor Federal D. Glover For the Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

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Antioch's recent July Fourth parade and fireworks reminded me how proud I am to be an American and to be part of the political system that is at the core of what makes us American. At the same time, despite the thousands of people who took time to celebrate America, too many people have yielded to the growing feeling of helplessness and apathy among our citizens is detrimental to the future of our great country.

One of the messages I continually stress is that democracy -- as it is practiced in the United States -- is not a spectator sport. For our government to work, it demands the participation of our citizens.

In turn, the citizens are responsible for being informed about the issues of the day and decisions that are being made on their behalf. Weeding through the lies and half-truths that pass for political discourse these days can be a task in itself. It is our responsibility, however, to distinguish between the truths and the falsehoods.

It used to be that if you read it in print, you could assume it had been vetted and therefore the truth. The media, which includes the Internet, is partly responsible for not editing the news by separating the chaff from the wheat.

That is not always the case. In the name of fairness, some news outlets will give the same credence and same status to an opposing view, even if that view is totally inaccurate. The poor reader, therefore, must do his or her own fact-finding. We are aided today by numerous web sources that help us determine the accuracy of a statement or a claim.

Few things bother me more than the dismal voting turnout in American elections. In the June elections, only about 37 percent of the eligible voters bothered to express their preferences. In pure numbers, only 192,761 Contra Costans cast their ballots out of 510,098 registered voters. That means, 192,761 people made decisions for the 1,049,025 residents of Contra Costa County.

Therefore, about one-fifth of the county's residents spoke for the other four-fifths of the county. Another way of looking at it is that in some of the contests where only a simple majority was needed to win in the countywide issues, that means one-tenth of the people decided for the other nine-tenths.

Votes don't matter? Tell that to the supporters of the Antioch school measure that lost by a couple dozen votes this last June.

Poor voting turnout is not the only result of today's voter apathy. I realize that people are too busy to take time to take part in activities outside of their immediate family. That's why we have poor turnout in back-to-school nights and small (if any) attendance at some city council meetings.

A lot of the apathy, I am sad to say, is also generated by a feeling of helplessness: that the vote doesn't matter, that a parent isn't smart enough or an ordinary citizen can't fight city hall. Sometimes, that sentiment turns into a simmering anger but most times, it simply leads to apathy.

Nevertheless, I am a believer in the political process, imperfect as it might be. I always encourage people to take part in the decision-making process of government beyond casting ballots. I am not talking about the street protests or demonstrations for or against a particular cause, even though those tactics are legitimate means of getting your opinion aired and guaranteed by the Constitution.

There is a way you can affect change by being part of the decision-making process. There are numerous opportunities for your voice to be heard. Oftentimes, policies and rules that govern our lives get their first airing in the advisory bodies that are appointed by the Board of Supervisors. These commissions are voluntary and usually meet only once a month.

Visit <http://www.cccounty.us/index.aspx?NID=3418> for a complete list of the advisory agencies. They range from the aging advisory board to the municipal advisory councils; from mental health to fire commissions.

From time to time, vacancies will occur for these commissions, and I have to appoint new advisers. Watch for the announcements in your local newspapers or other media. Every appointment is important and vital to keeping our democratic principles and process alive. I urge you to take advantage of being part of the county's decision-making by keeping yourself informed, attending public meetings, casting a vote, volunteering for an advisory body or, even running for office.

To keep democracy alive, stop watching from the sidelines and get into the game.

Supervisor Glover represents District 5 on the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors.