

“If you don’t go to church you can’t complain.”

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

October 17, 2014

As I drove home from breakfast with a church member recently, I caught the last 15 minutes of [The Diane Rehm show](#) on NPR. She and her panel were discussing the upcoming midterm elections. One of them shared a recent poll, in which only 15 percent of respondents said they were “closely following” the midterm elections. Among voters ages 18-29, that number is 5 percent.

The topic turned to voter turnout, especially among young people. *How can we get young people to register and vote?* Diane asked, and enlisted each panelist to make his or her best pitch for voting.

Now, I’m not a young adult. (As my friend [Jarrett](#) put it, “If you’re happy Apple put the U2 album on your phone, you’re not a young adult anymore.”) And I’m a committed voter. But as I listened to the panelists’ responses, I thought to myself, “There’s no way young adults who aren’t voting will be convinced by these reasons.”

And—of course—I was struck by how similar their reasons were to those reasons we give why young people should be in church:

- **It connects you to a larger community.** Guess what? There are many ways to connect with community. Young adults go to work or school, they pay their taxes, many of them volunteer, and many seek to live ethically in how they spend their money and their time. They don’t feel they need to vote/to attend church in order to make a contribution; there are other avenues.
- **It allows you to be “part of the solution.”** Don’t like what church has to offer? Get involved. Don’t like your options for governor? If you get involved in the process, and bring your peers along, the candidates will start to respond to issues you care about. But young adults are involved in all sorts of community service and activism. They see themselves as able to make change. They just do it differently than pulling a lever or showing up on Sunday morning.
- And they ended with the old saw, **“If you don’t vote, you can’t complain.”**
Eh, I don’t know about that. First of all, because for better or worse, we

Americans (and others) see complaining as a birthright. That's why #firstworldproblems is a thing! But also because millennials' lack of participation is a statement, if we bother to listen. Their silence in our churches and at the polling places is not apathy. It's a clear message: "This has no relevance for my life whatsoever." Our job isn't to convince them otherwise. Our job is to ask, "What if they're right?"

I'm not telling people not to vote. I mean, come on. It's a small expenditure of time to do basic research and get yourself to a polling place (though one party wants to make the voter registration process harder, through a variety of tactics designed to alleviate the non-epidemic of "voter fraud").

There are people out there who will say that both parties are corrupt, and they aren't that different, so why bother. I am not one of those people. Yes, I've never seen such a bunch of do-nothing, gridlocked dysfunction as I do in our nation's capital, and the day *Citizens United* was decided was a dark day in our democracy. Still, I vote. In a fallen world, the lesser of two evils is a choice we need to make.

Similarly, I think Christian community provides something distinctive that you don't get other places. (Other religious communities provide their own distinctives.)

But I can't exactly fault young people for not being jazzed about deciding there are better uses of their time than choosing between Corporate Candidate Chet and SuperPAC Steve at the ballot box. And let's not dump on them for not jumping on board with church, when what "church" often means is "the way we've always done it . . . until you're around long enough for us to trust you to suggest ways we can change."

The whole Diane Rehm discussion—and the discussion so many churches have—is backward. The question isn't how to convince young people to show up and vote, or to go to church. The question is, what is it about the "product" that they find utterly un-worth their time?

Why do we frame this as a problem with the millennials and not with ourselves?

Originally posted at [The Blue Room](#)