

# Jaevion Nelson | Get off your backside and vote

jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20180825/jaevion-nelson-get-your-backside-and-vote

August 25, 2018



## Rudolph Brown

An elderly voter arrives at the Adastra Gordon Basic School polling station to vote in the Norman Gardens division by-election in East Kingston on March 5, 2018. File

Jamaica is in a serious predicament. We talk about politics and the work being done by elected representatives every day but hardly want to vote in an election.

Most of us resign in hopelessness about elections and the 'system' rather than committing to take more responsibility for our future. Will there be a time when we do more than vent about issues on our verandas, social media, in barber shops and salons, on buses and taxis, talk shows and other current affairs programmes?

Fewer than half of eligible voters (i.e., those people 18 years and older who are enumerated) decided who would form the government in the 2016 general election. In the last two general elections, voter turnout was 53.17 per cent and 47.72 per cent in 2011 and 2016, respectively. At 47.72 per cent, this was the lowest voter turnout in our history (since Independence), save for 1983 when the People's National Party (PNP) boycotted the election.

Quite frankly, we allow politicians to be too comfortable about the state of affairs in our country because for the most part, everything is a nine-day wonder. And by the time the election comes around, we forget about wrongdoings, infractions, and inaction of those who seek to be (re-)elected. And that's if we decide to vote.

One wonders if political representatives would take their jobs (yes, jobs) more seriously if more of us voted, voiced our concerns, and took action during a party's term in office to hold them accountable to their obligations to we, the people.

Elections, for what they are worth, allow "citizens [to] legitimate electoral democracy by trusting in elections as a mechanism to elect leaders and by participating in elections" (2016/2017 LAPOP Study). Sadly, but not surprisingly, only 31.8 per cent of citizens polled in the most recent Americas Barometer trust elections (down from 43.6 per cent in 2012). Interestingly, the so-called future of the country - young people 18-25 years - indicate the least trust at 23.9 per cent, compared to 47.9 per cent of Jamaicans 66 years or older.

It's rather worrying to know that fewer than half of voters determined who would represent constituencies and lead the legislative and other decisions of the country in the last election. No wonder politicians continue to abdicate their responsibilities and pussyfoot with their roles as representatives of the people. They know that only a handful of people will exercise their franchise.

I note from the Americas Barometer that more educated Jamaicans are less likely to vote. Can you imagine the political power/agency we would have as a people if more of us participated in elections?

More (formally) educated Jamaicans cannot be so lackadaisical about their responsibilities as citizens. They cannot continue to sit on their rump waiting until school fee increases or in the departure lounge to escape instead of taking action.

## SPARK CHANGE

---

I reckon this is an opportunity to catalyse change through the many tertiary institutions scattered across the country. Vote Jamaica tried but did not have the resources or political clout to do much. Perhaps the youth arms of the political parties could work with the student bodies at the colleges and universities to encourage greater democratic participation rather than simply to get their own elected to offices.

Imagine if these bodies impressed upon students the importance of voting in an election, assisting them to be enumerated, hosting robust political discussions (that are in no way partisan), raising awareness about good governance and other issues, helping to understand the challenges we grapple with as a society, and encouraging innovation around same.

It's about time those of us who attend tertiary institutions - UTech and UWI, in particular (since we benefit the most from taxpayers investment in education) - play a greater and more effective role in the society. Become the change you want to see and are so fascinated by in other places.

- Jaevion Nelson is a human rights, social and economic justice advocate. Email feedback to [columns@gleanerjm.com](mailto:columns@gleanerjm.com) and [jaevion@gmail.com](mailto:jaevion@gmail.com) or tweet @jaevionn.

