

Grassroots Literate Activity Interview: Voting in the 2018 Illinois Midterms

Heather Sanford Interviews Drew Sanford

Introduction: Who Is Drew Sanford?

The 2018 Illinois Midterms were a struggle for me and my husband, Drew. We had only recently moved to the state, and our understanding of Illinois politics extended about as far as the tangent the guy from Xfinity went on as he installed our internet. If there was one thing we learned from that interaction, it was that the political climate in tiny, conservative Normal, IL, was going to be very different from what we experienced in the larger and much more liberal community of Kalamazoo, MI.

Did we feel a bit overwhelmed? Were we feeling smaller than ever in this brand-new place, with brand-new political representatives and candidates, and brand-new political tensions to wrap our minds around? Were we tempted to skip this election and hope we'd be better prepared for the next election? Absolutely! But we also understood that every vote matters in an election, and that it was our responsibility to our new community to become informed voters. In this interview, I ask Drew to consider how the voting ballot that he submitted at a voting booth in Normal, IL, fits into the larger activity system of the 2018 Illinois Midterm elections.

Going to the Polls

In this section, Heather asks questions for Drew to answer as they talk about his individual role in the voting process.

1. Considering the act of voting as a literate activity, how would you categorize the type of writing that was produced?

Formal, simple, and personal, from what you were describing. These were affecting me directly, or like things I care about. The text was through formal means, like with the ballot.

2. What genre, or genres, of writing did you produce during this voting process?

Argumentative, I guess. I'd call it basic since I can't clarify in any way that I'm voting for a politician or a circuit judge because of X or Y. It's an all-or-nothing sort of thing, right, unless you call and protest specific actions the politician makes afterwards.

3. Think of *genre* as the actual type of text that was produced. Did you have to produce any text during the process of voting?

Oh, right. I produced my ballot.

4. What were the tools you had to use to produce your ballot?

I used a pen to mark the ballot, and I used the ballot itself, of course. I guess the registry machine is also something. It's all involved in the process, but the ballot is the most important since it's what I communicate through.

5. What specific tool would you say was the most powerful in this activity? Why do you think so?

I would say my pen was most important in producing the final text. It was incomplete until I actually put my pen to it.

6. Did you do any research before heading to the voting booth?

I used the Internet to research candidates for deal breakers first, things I could not stand. Then researched those without deal breakers further for my favorites. I used a bunch of sites to figure out who I wanted, like <http://www.smartvoter.org/voter/judgecan.html>. I narrowed it a good bit by finding positions I couldn't support regardless of other positions. With that out of the way, I checked on the platforms of each candidate on their individual website, and any claims they made, I tried to find info on either <https://www.factcheck.org> (for higher profile claims) or local news. I find checking incumbent politicians' voting records through Congress.gov is pretty valuable, too.

7. Even though we have all these great resources available for researching candidates, were there any points at which your research was a bit of a struggle?

In some cases, when I *wanted* to produce my text with research behind it: judicial courts, for example, have a very limited amount of information readily available. I tried looking at VoteForJudges.org, for instance, but even though it sounded promising, I didn't find it very helpful.

8. Were there any other limitations in your part of producing this text? I'm thinking about time constraints, location, things like that.

It wasn't difficult for me, but I did have to be there on November 6th between probably 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. I also had to make it to my voting place, which was only about a mile away from my home, and luckily transportation wasn't an issue for me. I had to know my name, also not hard, and would need to produce ID if there was doubt (though I think that's illegal). I needed to be able to read and follow directions as written, which was not a personal limitation.

Preparing the Ballot

Here, Heather continues her interview with Drew as they consider everything that had to happen in order for Drew and his ballot to both make it to the voting booth.

9. Thinking about the production of the ballot outside of your specific interaction with it, how did the text actually come into being? Take your best guess.

I assume that the physical ballot was produced in a secure Secretary of State building, where the SOS employees took into account written records of what to include on the ballot. A printer was used to mass produce ballots based on these written records, which detailed those who were running and proposals to include on the ballot. Here's a link to the ACE Project Electoral Knowledge Network if you want to know more about the specifics of this process: http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/vo/voc/voc02/default/mobile_browsing/onePag

10. What people were involved in producing your ballot?

Myself, in being present and doing research. My family, and people across the nation, in a similar way.

11. You're referring to other people who had an influence on the way you voted?

No, I misunderstood. What I mean to say is I was influenced by a chain of biases. Since everyone has bias and trouble stating facts and ideas with genuine neutrality, you're bound to not have genuine fact. My sources of information could omit or misconstrue info (I'm sure by accident) and my vote could be affected.

12. Think about the people on the other side of this text being produced—who else had to be involved for that ballot to make it into your hands?

Of course, the Secretary of State, like I was saying. I think the candidates are a big part of it as well. Let's take someone running for governor, for example, like J.B. Pritzker—just voted in, right?—the governor needs to do a LOT of paperwork, including a petition to even apply for the position and a number of other things within 90 days of declaring. More information about the processes Pritzker had to follow to run for office can be found here: https://www.runforoffice.org/elected_offices/22242-governor-of-illinois

13. What kinds of writing or writing skills were necessary for the ballot to be produced?

I only needed to know how to read and fill in bubbles.

14. What about the person or people who actually had to write the content of the ballot? Do you think they needed to use any particular kinds of writing skills in order to do that?

I mean they had to know the rules of formatting per legal restrictions in the ballot. There's probably a lot there. You have to use this particular color here, this font, and this spacing. They had to follow a template exactly and work with the possibility that candidates might change last-second.

15. Earlier we talked about potential limitations and obstacles that you personally had to consider throughout the process of voting. What about struggles that might have had to be overcome by the folks who were in charge of the initial production of the ballot, before it even reached your hands? Take your best guess.

You could have a last-minute problem with ballots. I can just imagine the printers screwing up and deciding you're gonna have a bad time. There are gonna be more eggs in the basket too even after the printing is done—transporting and processing, for example. I'm sure that web link from the ACE Project Electoral Knowledge Network can provide more information on that.

Beyond the Booth

What are the more covert factors that can influence how a ballot is produced or the way a person chooses to vote? These are the ideas Heather and Drew explore in this section of the interview.

16. What does voting do in the world? Specifically, how did your vote in the 2018 Illinois Midterms affect various communities?

Going by those terms we were talking about, I'd say it's more community-related. I hear people talk about local elections like, "Oh that doesn't really affect me either way," which is obviously wrong. Look at Illinois. We had the chance to vote for someone whose promises ("promises") could make a dramatic change. Legalized recreational marijuana? Lighter gun control? Increasingly available low-cost healthcare? Those were some of the many things on the table between Pritzker, Rauner, and other possible governors. But it's more than just local, right? The 2018 election was also for state representatives. You know what they do, they keep the executive branch on its toes. Going back on topic, though, my communities have a lot riding on every election. The only people who won't be affected are those already in power. And they stay in power when people don't vote. Looking at the gubernatorial election, Rauner was governor for four years before Pritzker was elected, and Rauner could very well have been elected again if people hadn't moved to vote, and vice versa if you wanted Rauner to stay as an incumbent.

17. Who would you say had the most control over the way your ballot was ultimately produced?

I had minimal control over the activity. I would argue corporations had the greatest control because they chose who was on the final ballot. I could have filled in the other category in certain places but was ultimately discouraged in my research that write-ins are never elected. I mean, looking at even a Wikipedia article, there's a clear problem (here's the one I'm talking about: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Write-in_candidate). Sure, there are instances where write-ins have been a success, but it's actually just a drop in the ocean compared to how many elections have happened in the past eighty years. Look at the past couple decades, it's barely been a successful thing to do. It's worthwhile if you're passionate about it, certainly, but chances are just dismal.

18. That's interesting. Can you dig into that a bit more?

I hold the contentious belief that we are no longer a true democracy, but rather more like a plutocracy, where the wealthy are able to choose which candidates come into power and who ends up on the sidelines. One recent example is that the Democratic National Committee chose to support Hillary Clinton as their final candidate despite Bernie Sanders's vast support. I agree the system was "rigged" to support Hillary Clinton because she has proven that she has her Political Action Committees' (PACs) interests at heart and they didn't want a wild card to face the Republican candidate. Even when

I cast my vote and establish my written text therein, I am doing so at the behest of the wealthy.

19. What about the democratic process? Do you think that was upheld through the activity of voting?

As I said, I don't think we have a true democracy. Nonetheless, as much as what I did resembles democracy, I think the system as it is remains in place thanks to me taking part in it.

20. Would you say that's a good thing or a bad thing?

I would say, for the most part, that it's a good thing. Even though the process is corrupt in a lot of ways, this is the system that we have, and exercising the voice I have in that system is important. If I don't use my voice, if I don't use the power that the system grants me, then I am forfeiting some of my ability to shape our system and advocate for myself and my communities.

Pro-Tips for First-Time Voters

In this final section, Drew reflects on the overall experience of voting in the 2018 Illinois Midterms and provides some helpful insight for first-time voters.

21. Did you learn anything from the process of voting?

I learned how my ballot was interpreted by whether or not my candidates were elected, or if the policies I voted for were taken into effect.

22. What about the election results? What can be learned from those, beyond just who was elected and who wasn't?

It's difficult to say. I can say that I know my vote might have been of significant consequence, because more than one person I voted for came into office. We can learn that, at least at face value, the people of Illinois believe in unions, the legalization of recreational marijuana, and socialist healthcare. However, speaking directly of the elected governor, people might also just see him as the lesser of two evils.

23. What are some things that first-time voters might need to know before heading to the polls?

I would tell a first-time voter: you have to do your research as early as you can. You can't just start digging in a couple weeks before the election and expect you'll be well informed. First thing you gotta do though is know your voter rights, federal and stateside. Some places that do that are <https://>

ballotpedia.org/Voting_in_Illinois and https://ballotpedia.org/Voting_policies_in_the_United_States. Make sure you're registered at least a month before Election Day, and check again a week before. It sucks, but you really don't want to find that you're in danger of being unable to vote because someone screwed up. Really, really, though, make sure you have all the information you can get. Most politicians have something they don't want you to know, and you can't rely on mudslinging commercials or conspiracy theories to get to the truth (usually).

24. Are there any obstacles that first-time voters, or voters in general, should be aware of when it comes to the voting process?

It's always been a problem, but more so recently, that voter suppression has come into play. People should be aware of their rights, federal and local, when it comes to voting. I know through Facebook of some places, such as in Prairie View, Texas, where people with "different" (read "likely to be PoC") names were given difficulties, having their names registered incorrectly or put into question to keep them from voting. It's especially dangerous if you're Indigenous. Just look at the underhanded stuff North Dakota is trying to pull, requiring an accurate address for identification in voting, when many folks living on reservations don't have such a thing: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45986329>

25. Was there any knowledge or were there any skills that you gained through the process of voting in the 2018 Illinois Midterms that could be useful in the future?

I learned more about actual candidates' policies, like J.B. Pritzker. His promises against Rauner's for "universal healthcare" and job creation projects, and my district (District 18) helped me understand the situation in this state. You learn a lot about the people around you when the winners' names get announced; you get an idea of what matters to them and what concerns them.

26. How about the democratic process? Do you feel like you gain anything by participating in it?

I could drone on: "It's your civic duty to vote whenever able!" And sure, that's true. But it's not really my motivation, not what I get out of it, you know. Honestly, I mostly appreciate that—and it happens every time I take part in the process—I learn the lies. Politicians are well-versed in blowing smoke, like it's their art. But every time I do the research, I learn a little more. Every time I see how the politician actually acts when elected, I learn some more. And I think the same can . . . generally . . . be said about voters as a whole. We are slowly learning each time we participate: informed is better, and we're learning exactly what informed means to us.



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