

Elections as a wake up call: Politicians must put people first

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The record low election turnout in Vermont's 2014 general election should be a huge wake up call to Gov. Peter Shumlin and other Vermont political leaders. The fact that the majority of people stayed home is a referendum against the status quo. It shows that people have lost faith in the political process and its relevance to their lives. Over 60,000 Democratic voters who voted in 2010 did not participate in 2014. In 2010, anyone affected by the health care crisis had an extremely compelling reason to come out to vote. Politicians had laid out a vision for universal health care and promised to follow through with it. Yet by 2014, the change many people hoped for had not materialized. Very little had been done to make universal health care a reality, and the lives of working families had not improved. Earlier this year, the best minimum wage increase bill politicians could come up with was offered by a Republican, not by the legislative leadership in the statehouse or the governor.

In a state where Bernie Sanders has been getting elected with overwhelming majorities for years, it seems obvious that working people want to see leaders who challenge the status quo and actively fight for people's rights, dignity and equality. But once again we see that sitting back and hoping politicians will do the right thing does not work. It is clear that unless thousands of us speak up and demand action, we will get another two years of lip service, excuses and more of the status quo. It is necessary for the people to come together and expand what is politically possible, rather than wait for politicians. If Green Mountain Care is going to be the kind of universal health care system our communities want and need, then we the people have to take action to make it happen.

This is not going to be easy. The scary price tag touted by opponents, the debacle of the Vermont Health Connect website, and the stigma attached to new taxes has led to a sense of wariness and disillusionment. It has not been easy for people to expect that much can be done about high premiums, rising deductibles, and continued lack of access to needed care. In fact, hundreds of us working on the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign have been going door-to-door since this summer, hearing stories of exorbitant premiums and deductibles, of forgone doctor visits to put food on the table, of untreated abscessed teeth and medication skipped due to unaffordable co-pays. There is no question — Vermont can do better than this.

It is time to raise our expectations and hold politicians' feet to the fire. Business as usual is no longer an option.

We expect Governor Shumlin and our legislators to try harder and show that they can do better, too. Vermont is at a crossroads, and politicians have a clear choice. They can muddle through with half-hearted reform measures that don't do anything to improve people's lives. Or they can lead the way toward a health care system that puts our health care dollars toward providing care for all people as a public good, rather than private profits for a few. This is what Act 48, the health care law passed by the legislature and signed by the Governor, requires. And they can adopt a budget that meets people's needs through making taxes more equitable and ensuring the health of critical programs and services, thereby avoiding scarcity narratives which pit health care against education.

Now is the time for Governor Shumlin and leaders of the Vermont Legislature to show courage and lead the way. Only by adopting policies that put people first and address the everyday struggles our families face can politicians regain our trust. They must stand up for a health care system that truly works for the people, that is designed and planned with the people, and that makes it easier for low and middle income families to meet their needs. They must support livable wages, fund public services in our communities and protect

our right to a healthy environment. This election serves as their wake up call. But for any politician tempted to hit the snooze button, we will get their attention by organizing on an unprecedented scale to bring forward a broad people's movement that holds elected officials accountable to putting people and the planet first.

James Haslam is executive director of the Vermont Workers' Center, which coordinates the Healthcare Is A Human Right Campaign and is a grassroots organization advancing workers' rights and human rights in communities across the state. More information at workerscenter.org.