

# Voters' Litany

## Lisa Bielawa

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### Note

Premiere: March 22, 2020, Washington National Cathedral. Commissioned by the Cathedral Choral Society. Made possible by the William Remsen Strickland Endowment Fund “to remember the concerts of the Cathedral Choral Society during World War II.”

Duration: 10’

Instrumentation: Mixed chorus; 2\*2\*23; 4231; timp+1; organ; strings (87663)

While it has been 100 years since women in the United States got the vote with the historic passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920, Voters’ Rights is still a vital issue in our country today. The diversity of American citizenry is storied, issuing out of complexity and struggle as well as freedom and opportunity. No one I know has captured the breadth of American voices better than artist Sheryl Oring, whose ongoing project *I Wish to Say* consists of performances in which she and sometimes a pool of typists, dressed in 1960s clothing and working on vintage manual typewriters, set up stands in well-trafficked public areas where people can walk up and dictate their messages to the current President, or – in election years – to the next President. Launched in 2004, the project has now garnered over 3500 postcards to the President, which I combed through to select the excerpts that comprise the text for *Voters’ Litany*.

The piece unfolds in five sections: Salutations; Petitions (statements starting with the word “Please”); Exhortations (requests and demands without the word “Please”); Questions; and a Benediction, which is a single quatrain formed from four different sources, each powerfully distilled in its message. What emerged from my immersion in the texts that Sheryl has collected is a sense of how vulnerable people feel in their relationship to the leaders who govern them. The piece does not focus on the qualities or identities of the Presidents and candidates addressed (these encompass all sitting Presidents and Presidential candidates in primary and general elections since 2004), but on the emotional reality of American people in relation to their elected leaders. In German when one votes, one “gives one’s voice” (“I voted” = “Ich habe gestimmt” [I gave my voice]). *Voters’ Litany* is dedicated to all of those who give their voices, through singing and by voting.

– Lisa Bielawa

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# Text

Excerpts from Sheryl Oring's project *i wish to say*  
Various American passersby, 2004-2019

## I. Salutations

Dear President,  
Dear Mr. President,  
To the President, be he a he or a she,  
Hello Mr. President,  
Dear Mr. President-Elect,  
To the Politician-in-Chief,  
Dear Potus,  
Dear whoever you are,  
Dear Comrade President,  
Dear Mister Power,  
Not so Dear President,  
Hello,  
Sir,  
President, or so-called,  
To our new President,  
Dear Next President,  
Dear White House Occupants,  
Dear Mister Dear Leader,  
Dear future President,  
Dear Mr. or Mrs. President,  
To the person holding the position of  
President,

## II. Petitions

Please inspire us.  
Please lead us.  
Please take care of us.  
Please do your best.  
Please send us more books.  
Please keep your word.  
Please seek help.  
Please wake up.  
Please fix the world.  
Please use wisdom.  
Please be kind.  
Please take my advice.  
Please be one of us.  
Please don't let us down.  
Please take a moment.  
Please resign.  
Please spread peace.  
Please consider us.

Please do it.  
Please leave us alone.  
Please support women.  
Please do a good job.  
Please get to work.  
  
Please prove me wrong.  
Please be the man you are elected to be.  
Please protect our rights and our lives.  
Please think it over again.  
Please remember me.  
Please take care of our country.  
Please take care of our land.  
Please remember the least among us.  
Please make my future a great future.  
Please continue to uphold your dream. It is our  
dream too.

Please focus on ideas.  
Please appeal to our better side.  
Please take some science courses.  
Please call me.  
Please focus on high-speed rail.  
Please make your mother proud.  
Please send me \$50.  
Please don't close Route 78.  
Please fix the potholes on our street.  
Please check out the bible.

Please find something better to do.  
Please go away as soon as possible.  
Please start reading the newspaper.  
Please start doing your job.  
Please vacate your office and apologize to the  
American people.  
Please remember the women and the girls.  
Please try to imagine a world without yourself.  
Please smash the patriarchy.  
Please step down with dignity.  
Please feel free not to show up for work  
tomorrow.  
Please read the constitution.  
Please consider the vote of women.

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### III. Exhortations

Stop.  
Stop the wars.  
Stop signing things you don't read.  
Look before you leap.  
Try and get some sleep.  
Tell the truth.  
Make us proud.  
Start making sacrifices for the people you lead.  
Start packing.  
Walk away.  
Be more honest with us.  
Just go.  
Be safe.  
Get over yourself.  
Defend the weak.  
Stay the course.  
Keep fighting.

### IV. Questions

Why?  
Why do you put us in danger?  
Why won't you support me?  
Isn't there a better way?  
  
What's wrong with you?  
What country do you think we are living in?  
What were you thinking?  
What can I do to help?  
Are you okay?  
What do you think is happening?  
What does my future hold?  
What would you do if you could go back to the beginning?

### V. Benediction

Be the change you said you would be.  
I need my family here with me.  
Leave our basic freedoms alone.  
Bring my soldier home.