A grey mist hangs over Providence, coating everything in an early morning clamminess that seems to seep through even the most protective outerwear. The chilly air clings to anything warm, including the roughly fifty people lined up outside the doors of the Hope High School cafeteria. Despite the weather, dedicated citizens have arrived a dutiful five minutes before the polls open to vote in the 2018 midterm elections. Some of them chatter amongst themselves, but many stand solemnly in silence, likely pondering the decision they are about to make: who they want to run their government for the next two years.
This year’s midterm elections are some of the most hotly contested races in United States history. Across the country, there is talk of new candidates dethroning incumbents, typically conservative areas flipping towards liberal candidates (or vice versa), record numbers of women running for office, and other extraordinary occurrences. Many commentators are calling this election a referendum on Trump’s presidency and that intent certainly shows when talking to voters.

“It’s 2018. Make a presidential statement,” said one citizen, an older man with thinning hair and a navy fisherman’s jacket. This sentiment reflects what 37% of those surveyed expressed: they want their voices heard in order to impact the composition of the government. Some voters mentioned specific offices that they had particularly strong feelings about, most notably the gubernatorial race between incumbent and Democrat Gina Raimondo, Republican Allan Fung, and Independent Joe Trillo.

“I think this is one of the most important elections ever,” mentioned a tall man in a heavy tan coat. “A lot of the elections are kind of close, like for governor and mayor.” The importance of voting seemed to be impressed on all constituents, as more than a third of them explicitly cited “civic duty” as their motivation for coming to the polls, especially on such a gloomy day.

“I feel it’s my honor and responsibility [to vote],” said a curly haired woman with a grey cowl-neck sweater at the Salvation Army polling station on Pitman Street. “You know, my kids were asking me this morning, ‘do you have to vote?’ and I gave them a bit of a history lesson. As much as I know. It’s my responsibility.” Passing on the sense of obligation to vote to future generations was important to multiple people, as well as how voting would impact the image of the United States across the world for generations to come.
“I think it’s important to vote because America has a lot of power and, because of that, a lot of responsibility,” explained a petite blond woman, who had just finished taking a selfie with her teenage daughter and their “I voted!” stickers. “No matter what your views, I think engagement is the most important thing.” On the domestic front, a few voters were adamant about the desperate situation they feel the country has entered.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt the same sense of self-preservation [in an election],” confessed an upbeat man with thin wire spectacles. “This is survival.” With all the voter registration campaigns and talk of social and political change, voting certainly appears to be a life-or-death-level issue in the eyes of many Americans, particularly in the ways they express themselves on social media.

“Your life depends on it. Is that the hashtag now?” said a woman with a long, high ponytail and black athletic gear. And although voting may seem like a heavy burden to bear, or simply a chore on a dark, cloudy day, the incredible opportunity to have a direct say in the government was perhaps best expressed by a small girl with blue crocs being towed along by her parents.

“Woah, you voted!”