

# **MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK**

## **Issues in Voter Participation: Do We Know What They Are? If We Know, What Can We Do About Them?**

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## **Introduction**

Choosing who governs us is the fundamental right and privilege of living in a democracy. Why citizens do or do not participate is not well understood, although many reasons are given by them – and by others – for their voting behavior. Is it possible to address these reasons successfully? Is there something that can be done that might encourage some of those who don't participate now to do so in the future and ensure that those who do vote will continue to do so?

Since this paper was commissioned by the Center for Government Services, the “something to be done” will focus on what might be accomplished at the state and federal level through laws, public administration and public funding. Complex issues of behavioral change, motivation, trust, and self-interest will be left to others to address, but those connected with government must be aware of their potential significance as efforts to strengthen our representative democracy are pursued.

### **I. THE VOTERS – Who are They and What Do They Do?**

**Turnout.** Before examining issues in voting participation, it is important to look at the numbers. The percentage of voters who participate in elections has been on a downward slope for decades. While the decline seems to be relentless, concern about it appears to be growing, and the search for measures to reverse the trend seem more pronounced today.

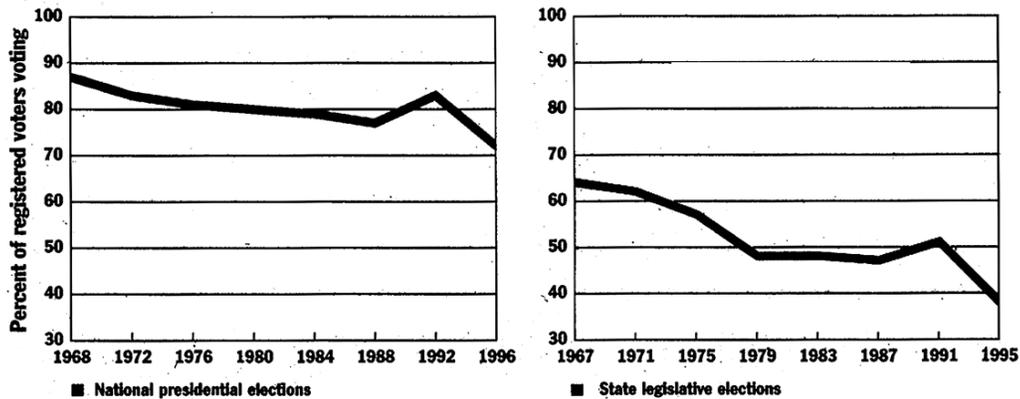
In 1999, the New Jersey Sustainable State Report, *Goals and Indicators for New Jersey's Quality of Life*,<sup>1</sup> selected voter turnout as one of 41 indicators grouped under eleven goals to be examined in achieving the goal of good government. The two charts used in the Report depict

nearly 30 years of voter turnout in New Jersey. (See Figure 1). The Report questions whether a decline in voting “May signal an ominous change in how invested we are as citizens in a common state or country....”

**Figure 1**

## Voter Turnout

Percent of registered voters casting ballots in New Jersey statewide general elections



Source: 1999 Sustainable State Project Report.

The two charts from the Sustainable State Report show turnout in the presidential election in New Jersey steadily declining from just under 90% in 1968 to a little more than 70% in 1996, with the exception of an up tick in 1992 to over 80%. While fewer voters participate in state legislative elections than in presidential elections, the Sustainable State Report shows a similar downward sloping line with over 60% turnout in 1967 falling to under 40% in 1995.

These two charts are a reminder that the context for elections clearly is important. Presidential elections, unlike state legislative contests, engage an extraordinary number of campaigners, receive extensive media coverage and generate considerable informal discussion among voters, thereby resulting in a more engaged electorate – although a shrinking one. In addition to greater awareness of a presidential election, voters may also have a better understanding of the importance of their vote than in elections that occur at other levels of

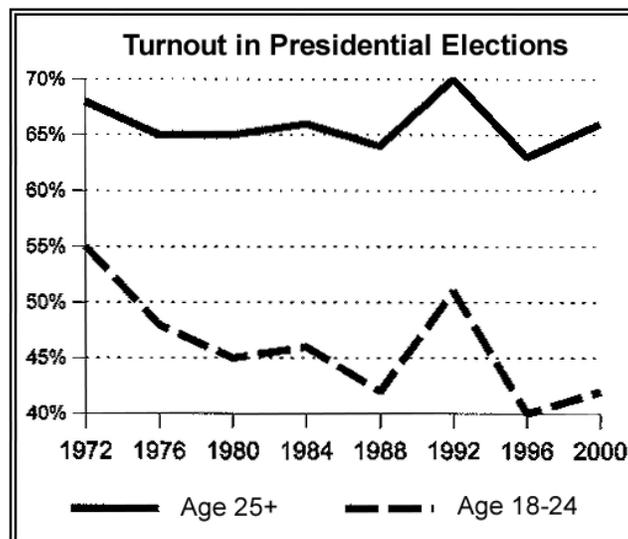
government where they do not know the candidates, their positions on issues or the responsibilities of the jobs they seek.

**Voter Behavior.** Turnout on election day is the end product of many factors that influence citizen decisions about participating as voters. The Eagleton Institute of Politics has made recent substantial contributions to the understanding of what is known about voter participation from recent data produced and collected by the staff. This paper draws on two reports.

A national perspective is presented in The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait, the National Civic Engagement Study, referred to in this paper as the NCE Study.<sup>2</sup> An in-depth survey of New Jersey voters is analyzed in the October 5, 2003 press release about The Star Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll, The Sorry State of Turnout in New Jersey Elections,<sup>3</sup> referred to as the SLERP report in this paper.

The NCE Study includes updated information on turnout in the 2000 presidential election and breaks it out by two age groups, those who are 18-to-24 years old and those who are over 25. (See Figure 2.) While the two lines have a similar slope, the percentage participating is dramatically different due mainly to the lower level of participation of the new generation of voters.

**Figure 2**



Source: National Civic Engagement Study, September, 2002. Page 4.

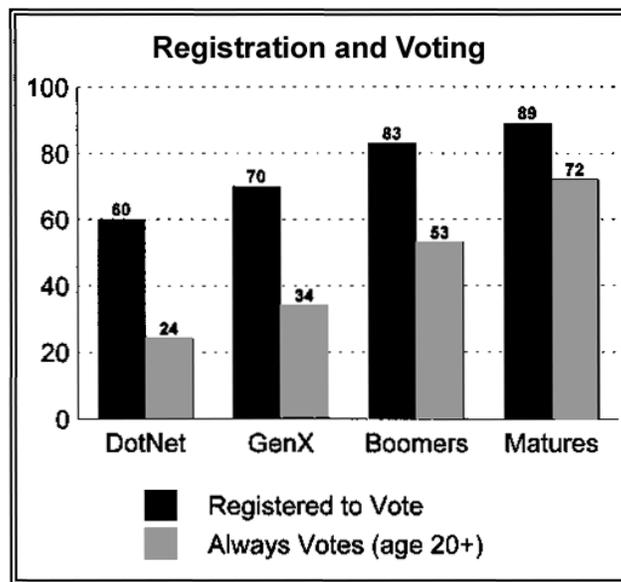
The NCE Study refines and describes voting groups by age and provides descriptions of each group's experiences (not presented here) in order to look more closely at voting behavior.

The groups are:

- Matures. Born before 1946 (49 million).
- Baby Boomers. Born between 1946-1964 (71 million).
- Generation X. Born between 1964-1976 (44 million).
- DotNet. Born after 1976 (40 million).

Figure 3 from the NCE Study uses these groupings to show variations in how many are registered and how many always vote. While there are significant gaps between the youngest and oldest groups, it is interesting to note that the gap between the number of DotNets and the Matures who are registered to vote is only about 30 percentage points, while the gap between these two groups who always vote is almost 50 percentage points. Is this gap alarming? Haven't young people always been less attentive to voting? The NCE Study acknowledges this fact, but points out that "there is evidence that younger people now are participating less than younger people used to in the past."

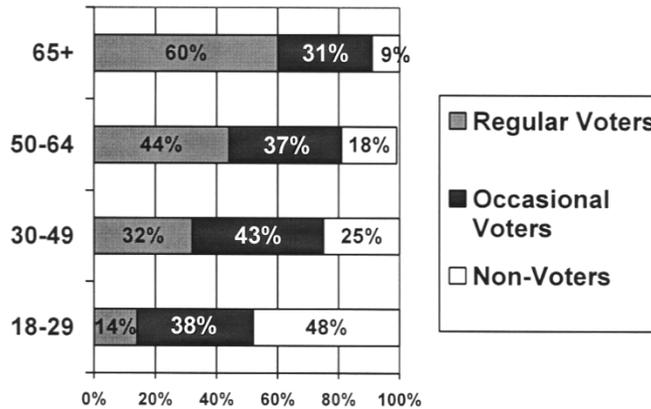
**Figure 3**



Source: National Civic Engagement Study, September 2002. Page 9.

Figure 4 provides more detail on voting behavior when the four groups are divided into categories by the frequency of their voting: regular voters, occasional voters and non-voters.

**Figure 4**  
**Type of Voter by Age**

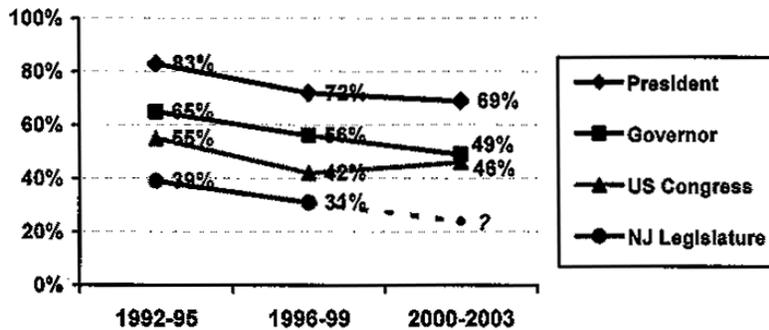


Source: SLERP Report, October, 2003. Page 7.

Understanding how these voting patterns exist is not easy, but the SLERP Report focusing on New Jersey voters provides some insights. Figure 5 shows New Jersey voting participation in the last three election cycles.

**Figure 5**

**Turnout among Registered Voters  
for the Last Three Election Cycles**



Source: SLERP Report, October, 2003. Page 2  
Note: 2003 was 30%.

The SLERP Report comments that the continuing downward trend is a “major problem” and asks whether fewer people voting compromises the representative character of our elections. In attempting to explain why turnout continues to decline, the report speculates about several influences based on responses to previous polls. They include cynicism about political officials (based on reports of unethical conduct) and the nasty and expensive nature of campaigns. But, it also points out that DotNets with their lower participation rate are replacing the GenXers and Matures in the voting population which depresses the overall turnout.

**Registered voters.** The SLERP Report examined in detail the composition of eligible registered voters in New Jersey. (See Figure 6.)

**Figure 6**  
**New Jerseyans Who Say They are Registered**

	<u>Registered out of all eligible voters</u>
<b>Feb-Sept 2003</b>	<b>81%</b>
<u><i>Party Affiliation</i></u>	
--Democrat	84
--Independent	80
--Republican	87
<u><i>Age</i></u>	
-- 18-29	62
-- 30-49	79
-- 50-64	88
-- 65 and older	94
<u><i>Race/Ethnicity</i></u>	
-- White	82
-- Black	80
-- Hispanic	74
-- Asian	74
<u><i>Education</i></u>	
-- HS or less	77
-- Some College	80
-- College Graduate	89
<u><i>Gender</i></u>	
-- Male	80
-- Female	82
<u><i>Income</i></u>	
-- Under \$35K	75
-- \$35K to < 70K	80
-- \$70K +	84

Source: SLERP Report, October, 2003. Page 4.

Figure 6 shows the percentage of self-reported registered New Jersey voters in various categories. Note that in New Jersey a slightly larger percentage of young voters are registered than the number reported in the NCE Study – 62% to 60%. New Jersey’s Matures show a 94% rate of registration compared to the national figure of 89%. The figures that stand out are the lower registration rate for the 18-29 age group (62%) and slightly lower rate for the Hispanic voters (64%) and Asian (74%) groups than for white and black voters.

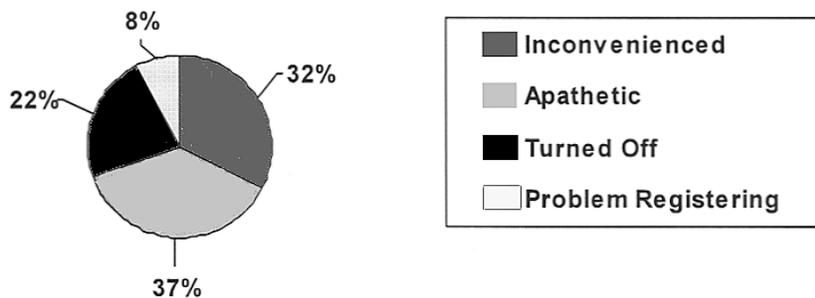
**Non-Registered Voters.** The SLERP report addressed the question of why people who say they are interested in politics don’t register and why. Also surveyed were those who register but don’t vote.

The responses to the question about why people aren’t registered (about 25% of those who are eligible) were put into the four categories shown in Figure 7:

- Inconvenienced. (32%) Those who had moved and not gotten around to re-registering.
- Apathetics. (37%) Those who say they don’t care and can’t give a reason for not registering.
- Turned Off. (22%) Those who reject politics, campaigns and government.
- Encountered Problems in Registering. (8%)

**Figure 7**

**Why People Aren't Registered**



Source: SLERP Report, October, 2003. Page 6.

It is reasonable to think that the reasons given by the “Inconvenienced” and “Those with Problems” might have a chance of being addressed by better administration of elections and better public information. However, it is not clear that some “Apathetics” also might fall into this category if their attention could be captured by better promotion of elections. One can imagine that the “Turned Off” and a good number of “Apathetics” are probably not susceptible to public sector initiatives, but maybe some of the “Inconvenienced” who say they don’t know how to re-register could be informed and turned into potential voters.

**Figure 8**

**ASKED OF UNREGISTERED RESIDENTS WHO ARE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE:**

“What is the main reason why you are not registered to vote?”

	<u>Just moved*</u>	<u>Apathy/ Not a priority**</u>	<u>Negative about politics†</u>	<u>No jury duty</u>	<u>Regi- stration is hard††</u>	<u>Newly eligible</u>	<u>No answer</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>(n)</u>
<b>Feb - Sept 2003</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(525)</b>
<u>Party Affiliation</u>									
-- Democrat	38	19	22	1	6	3	10	99	(161)
-- Independent	36	29	16	--	5	4	8	98	(146)
-- Republican	30	35	11	1	8	2	12	99	(84)
<u>Age</u>									
-- 18-29	25	36	12	1	8	7	11	100	(146)
-- 30-49	38	23	24	1	3	--	11	100	(240)
-- 50 and older	34	12	33	2	5	1	13	100	(122)
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>									
-- White	32	26	23	--	5	2	12	100	(367)
-- Black/Hispanic	32	23	23	2	7	5	8	100	(109)
<u>Education</u>									
-- HS or less	23	29	25	--	5	4	14	100	(195)
-- Some College	37	22	21	4	7	1	9	101	(169)
-- College Graduate	60	19	10	2	4	--	5	100	(156)
<u>Gender</u>									
-- Male	32	25	20	1	5	4	13	100	(246)
-- Female	32	26	23	1	6	2	10	100	(279)
<u>Region of the State</u>									
-- North	34	28	15	2	6	4	11	100	(235)
-- Central	30	29	21	1	5	2	13	101	(113)
-- South	33	20	30	1	5	1	10	101	(166)

\* Includes those who say they are registered at another address, old address or just moved.

\*\* Includes those who say they didn't get around to it, have other priorities or call themselves lazy.

† Includes those who say they don't want to vote, believe voting makes no difference or dislike politics and politicians.

†† Includes those who report problems with registration forms, don't know where to register or have no transportation available to them.

Source: SLERP Report, October, 2003. Page 13.

**Registered Non-voters.** Why registered voters don't vote is an even more intriguing question because these people have taken one step in the process and have thought about participating. The responses SLERP received to this question are shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9**

**ASKED OF REGISTERED VOTERS WHO DO NOT VOTE IN ALL ELECTIONS:**

"People don't vote for a lot of reasons. I'm going to read a short list of possible reasons and would like you to tell me if it is a major reason you didn't all the time, a minor reason, or not a reason.

<b>May 2003</b>	<b><u>Major Reason</u></b>	<b><u>Minor Reason</u></b>	<b><u>Not a Reason</u></b>	<b><u>Don't Know</u></b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>(n)</b>
I only vote when something important to me is on the ballot	23%	24%	52%	1%	100%	(403)
It's too hard to get information about who to vote for	16%	32%	51%	1%	100%	(403)
There's no difference between the two parties	16%	27%	54%	2%	99%	(403)
I'm not interested in politics	16%	25%	57%	1%	99%	(403)
I really dislike politics and government	16%	25%	57%	2%	100%	(403)
My vote wouldn't make any difference in what happens in my life	16%	22%	61%	1%	100%	(403)
I only vote when something is wrong in government or politics—if things are OK there's no real reason to vote	11%	21%	68%	1%	101%	(403)
Voting is too much trouble	8%	25%	66%	1%	100%	(403)

Source: SLERP Report, October, 2003. Page 16.

The list of six reasons, as with the reasons for not registering, could be placed into two categories – those related to attitudes that are difficult to change (such as “I'm not interested in politics”) and those responses that might be shifted by changing policies and programs (such as “It is too hard to get information about who to vote for.”) While both sets of reasons deserve attention from policy makers and public administrators, it is likely that the latter may be more successfully addressed by strategies developed by government actions. The former, in all

likelihood, involves changing the nature of campaigns and elections, specifically the candidates and media, and even more broadly, the manner in which elected officials fulfill their responsibilities.

**Immigrant Voters.** The two studies referenced in this paper do not isolate and discuss immigrant-citizens, a growing and increasingly important segment of the electorate. This is especially true in New Jersey where the state's increase in population between 1990 and 2000 is largely the result of immigration. Two counties in New Jersey – Hudson and Passaic – would have had a significant decrease in population but, due to foreign immigration, saw an increase in population of about 10%. The 2003 Center for Government Services Legislative Data Book<sup>4</sup> shows that 17.6% of New Jersey's population is foreign born, a statistic that was not included in earlier annual versions reporting on the 1990 census.

A picture of immigrant-citizen voting issues relevant to New Jersey can be taken from material assembled in September 2003 by the New York Immigrant Coalition (NYIC)<sup>5</sup> located in New York City and discussed at a Century Foundation seminar on January 15, 2004. New York City has more than a million immigrant-citizen registered voters. Around 60% registered to vote at the time of their naturalization, a process that typically takes about 10 years from the time of arrival in this country.

According to exit polls conducted in recent elections, two-thirds of first-time voters are immigrant-citizens. The turnout rate of these voters in the 2000 presidential elections was about 5% higher than the native-born voters. NYIC notes that language proficiency plays a major role in electoral participation and, therefore, it places emphasis on advocating for translated election materials and multi-lingual volunteers at the polls. The immigrant-citizen voters tend to care about the issues and are not committed to a party, a factor the NYIC contends creates difficulties for them in making inroads in local political activities. The ballot box becomes important in demonstrating the attitudes of the immigrant communities.

The experiences in New York City support similar conclusions outlined in academic studies recently presented at a conference on minority participation in voting held at the Eagleton Institute.<sup>6</sup> Professor Kristi Anderson of Syracuse University noted <sup>7</sup> that political parties no longer serve an important role in naturalizing immigrants and including new citizens in political activities. Party leaders, according to Anderson, reported that they are uncertain of the results of registering and encouraging immigrant citizens so they concentrate on who they know and the voters who have consistently voted in previous elections. As noted in other parts of this paper, these voters are likely to be a declining percentage of the voter pool. Civic organizations, churches, and neighborhood groups are currently the vehicle for encouraging immigrants to participate in voting and political activities.

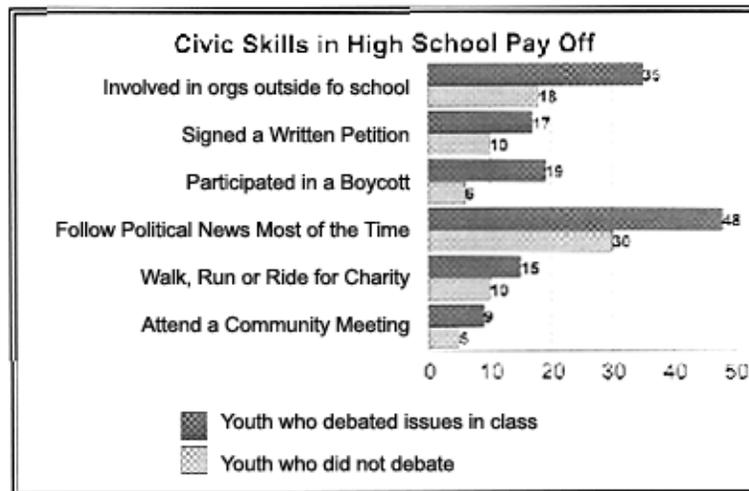
**Civic Education and Voting.** Schools are assumed to play a role in preparing young people for their roles as citizens. However, reports of the low level of knowledge about government and politics as well as the low level of voter participation by young people have renewed interest in civic education. The National Alliance for Civic Education (NACE)<sup>8</sup> begun in 2000 has the lofty goal of “advancing civic knowledge and engagement ...to ensure that the next generation of citizens understands and values democracy and participates in the on-going work of building democracy in America.” While countless projects exist in schools and organizations such as Boy Scouts and Girls Clubs teach concepts of government, encourage participation in public service activities and develop skills in political practice, NACE reports that there is great variation in what states require, how standards are applied and the content of programs.

New Jersey has an active and diverse collection of programs within its schools but variations are similar to those found on the national level. In the late 1990's, the Eagleton Institute of Politics formed the Civic Engagement and Political Participation Program which supports a state-wide consortium of educators, non-profit organization leaders and government officials advocating for civic education. A member of the consortium, Freedom's Answer, has put New

Jersey in the forefront of an innovative project to train high school students to work as poll workers, giving them first-hand experience with voting.

The NCE study looked at the connections between school and other organized activities on young people's participation in civic affairs, including voting. Seventy percent of the respondents to the NCE survey had two years of high school civic courses. About half said that the courses increased their interest in government and politics, while slightly less than half said they had no impact. However, Figure 10 shows that open discussion of public issues in the school courses did have an impact on students' behavior.

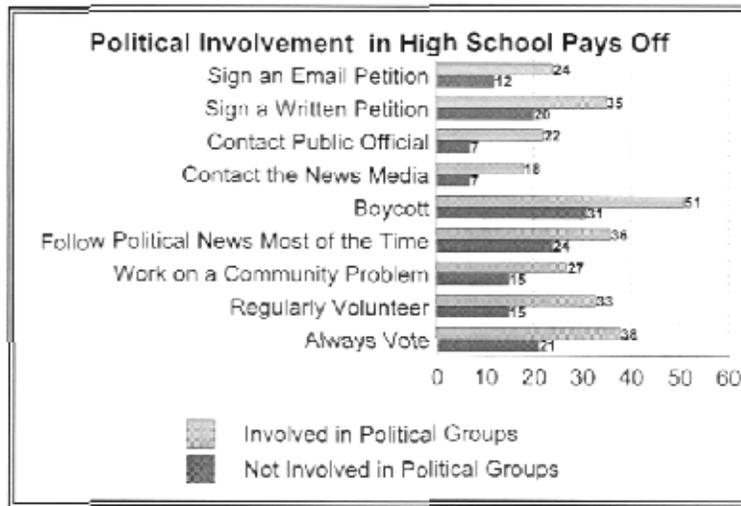
**Figure 10**



Source: National Civic Education Study, September 2002. Page 31.

The NCE study also found that when students are involved outside the classroom and participate in extra-curricular activities (such as clubs and political organizations), the impact on involvement after graduation is much greater for those who are involved than those who are not. (See Figure 11)

**Figure 11**



Source: National Civic Education Study, September, 2002. Page 33.

It should be noted that the NCE study points out that the percentage of students who are involved in political organizations is low in comparison with those who participate in sports or religious organizations, therefore the impact on voter participation of engagement in political activities may not be great.

## **II. THE VOTERS - What Can Be Done to Serve Them?**

Because the factors underlying voting behavior are so complex, any one change in public sector actions is not likely to have a dramatic impact. However, introducing a variety of measures to shape the political environment and election administration could contribute to increasing the rate of voter participation. The options for initiatives that might be undertaken to influence greater participation – or to mitigate deterrents to voting – are explored in the following section.

The decline in voter participation has recently received attention, directly and indirectly, by newly enacted public policies. For example, the federal response to the problems with the administration of the 2000 election in Florida, as well as elections in other states, resulted in the Federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA).<sup>9</sup> It is specifically designed to improve the management of elections as well as ensure increased participation.

The new federal law addressing campaign finance, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA), focuses on the need to restore trust in government and elected officials by changing campaign funding practices.<sup>10</sup> The sponsors, Senators McCain and Feingold, have readied next steps in campaign reform that includes requirements for television stations to provide air time for candidates to communicate with the voters, thus reducing the need for campaign contributions, increasing competition among candidates and providing information to the voters.

Indirectly, the public outcry and the congressional response to recent FCC rules permitting television stations to expand the number and reach of their holdings came about because it was seen as undermining the variety of programming citizens receive, including information about campaigns and elections.

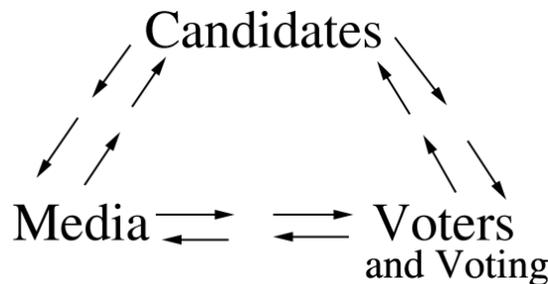
In most states, before and after HAVA, various measures have been put in place that provide more options and greater flexibility for citizens to decide when and where to vote. Also, new state-coordinated public communications efforts, emulating private sector marketing promotions, were designed to introduce new voting systems and inform citizenry more generally about elections. Using the Internet, many states and counties provide information on their web

sites about how to cast a vote, train poll workers, locate polling places, and learn about candidates running for office.

Skeptics say administrative changes do not and will not make a difference in voter turnout. This view is most loudly and consistently presented by the venerable Curtis Gans of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate<sup>11</sup>, who says the only way turnout will increase is if voter attitudes are changed; that is, people have to care. Nothing else matters.

Clearly, there is no magic bullet to improve voter participation. Attitude is the mystery component, but it does make sense to explore the myriad of ways public sector responses have addressed the complex issues in declining voter participation and how they might in the future – especially since non-voters and voters describe reasons for not participating – be addressed by public measures.

In elections, the complex interaction among the media, candidates and voters can be illustrated with a simple triangle.



The three points – candidates, media and voters/voting – are inter-related, sometimes randomly and sometimes in organized fashion. The interaction can be used to attempt to understand the outcome of elections as well as the level of participation.

**Candidates – and political parties.** What candidates and parties do, as well as how they do it, influences the attitudes of voters. Given our nation’s strong commitment to the principle of free speech, regulating candidates’ activity must be done in the context of this basic right. The debate over freedom of speech and its application to the issues related to raising and spending funds illustrate that it is not always simple to interpret how this freedom is applied.

However, candidates are required to inform voters about who provides support for their campaign materials, information that is not always helpful to voters. For example, Eagleton's research on the 2002 congressional campaigns in New Jersey showed that about 75% of campaign materials said "Paid for by the Campaign to Elect (fill in the name) or a campaign group," certainly information not very useful to voters without further explanation.

BCRA, the new federal reform act, requires additional information to be presented about the source of funds, but more important is a new BCRA rule designed to address a common criticism of voters that "negative" campaigning turns them off – keeps them from paying attention to candidates and elections more broadly.<sup>12</sup> In an attempt to counter this criticism, BCRA requires campaign ads to include a "Stand By Your Ad" statement and show "an unobscured full screen view of the candidate stating the candidate has approved the communication." The question will certainly arise about whether this practice should be extended to elections at the state and local level.

Citizens deserve to hear from candidates not just in their ads but in public forums as well. However, candidates often are reluctant, particularly incumbents, to participate in debates, speak in "issue spots" and answer questionnaires. When campaigns are supported by public funds, debates are required, as is the case in New Jersey's public support for gubernatorial campaigns. Presidential debates are well-known for their role in giving voters an opportunity to assess the candidates. One reason these debates are useful to voters is that they are well publicized, well covered by the media, broadcast in evening hours and carried simultaneously on several networks. These characteristics simply do not apply to the rare debates that take place at the state and local level.

The lack of competitiveness in congressional and/or legislative races is an issue that has recently received attention for its relevance to the level of voter interest. Designing districts to reduce or eliminate competitiveness between the parties minimizes or eliminates active campaigns and thereby depresses voter awareness and interest. In the 2002 election, 98% of the

congressional districts were considered non-competitive. In New Jersey, roughly 90% of legislative districts are non-competitive. When districts are not competitive, voters have little opportunity to know who the candidates are and what they stand for. Campaign literature is limited. Media do not cover the races. Candidates do not debate. There are good reasons for “Occasional” voters to think it doesn’t make a difference if they vote.

Does lack of competitiveness influence turnout? The Eagleton study of the 1998 congressional races<sup>13</sup> addressed this question. Districts were ranked by their competitiveness as described by the political analysts in major New Jersey newspapers. Turnout in 1998 was compared to turnout in 1994 when the congressional races were also “at the top of the ticket” with no presidential or U.S. Senate race on the ballot. (See Figure 12)

**Figure 12**

**Ranking of Districts by Percentage of Voter Turnout**

District	1994	1998		District	1994	1998	
<b><u>Competitive</u></b>				<b><u>Non-competitive</u></b>			
6	10	9	↑	1	8	11	↓
8	11	6	↑	2	7	8	↓
9	4	3	↑	3	3	5	↓
12	5	2		5	1	1	-
<b><u>Somewhat competitive</u></b>				10	12	12	-
4	9	7	↑	11	2	10	↓
7	6	4	↑	13	13	13	-

Up arrow indicates voter turnout went up. Down arrow indicates turnout went down.

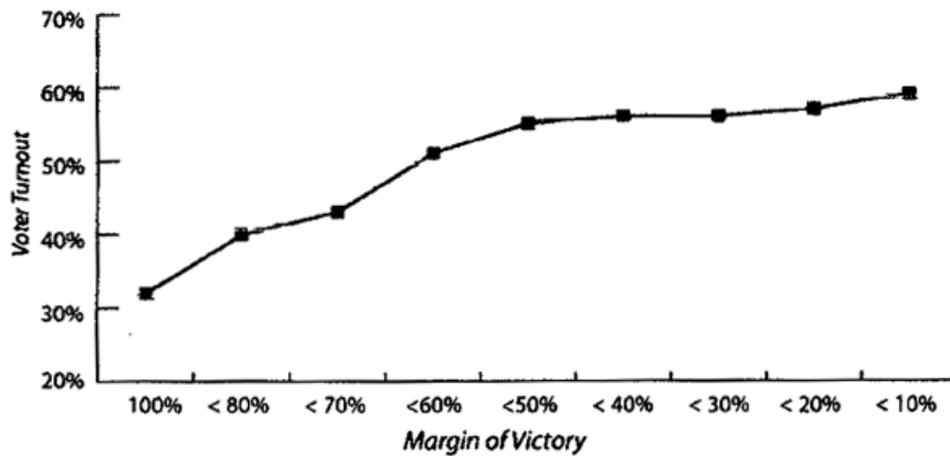
Source: N.J. Congressional Campaigns in 1998: Not Bad but Not Enough, Eagleton New Jersey Project study. Page 14

In comparing turnout between the two elections, the study shows that turnout increased if the district was considered competitive in 1998. In less competitive districts, voter turnout went down or remained the same. Admittedly, this was a primitive exercise. It is one that unfortunately cannot be duplicated in the near future because redistricting has made every

Congressional district in New Jersey less competitive after redistricting in wake of the 2000 census.

Another view of the impact of relative competitiveness can be seen in a study by the Center for Voting and Democracy.<sup>14</sup> Figure 13 shows the results of their analysis of the 2000 Congressional races. The Center found that the more competitive the race as determined by the margin of victory, the higher the voter turnout.

**Figure 13**



Source: "Creating a Competition of Ideas, Not Money," Alliance for Better Campaigns. **Page 2**

There seems to be growing agreement among civic groups and newspaper editors – even some party leaders – that lack of competitiveness resulting from the manner in which districts are drawn is a problem for our democracy. However, proposals for specific policies that address competitiveness which might influence redistricting after the 2010 census are currently not on the public agenda.

*Conclusion:* In general, influencing the nature of campaigns through public policies has addressed some problems voters say they care about – and might ultimately influence their participation. Achieving a more comprehensive agenda to assure that campaigns serve the voters

will require more specific proposals and concerted efforts on the part of organizations who represent the interests of voters.

**Media – newspapers and television.** What the media does – and what it doesn't do – plays an important role in engaging voters. Public policy issues related to the media and elections today focus on television not newspapers. Criticism of television and demands for broadcasters to play a more responsible role in elections are directly related to government's role in awarding the use of the public air ways to the broadcasters.

On the other hand, newspapers are private entities and not tied to public resources for their operations. Today, they also are perceived to be less influential in reaching voters, especially the "Occasional" voters or "Persuadables" as some campaigns describe them. Newspaper readership continues to decline, even in New Jersey with six daily papers covering state political issues, readership is only slightly higher than the national average. According to the New Jersey Press Association, 77% of New Jerseyans read a newspaper in an average week compared to 73% nationally; on an average Sunday, 73% of New Jerseyans read newspapers compared to 64% nationally.<sup>15</sup>

Extensive coverage of state politics does not mean that newspapers cover campaigns well. Eagleton's study of legislative races shows a consistent pattern of stories focused only on competitive races that are placed on inside pages of the paper, without action photos ("yearbook-type" photos are most common). Few feature stories are done about candidates and campaigns, a sharp contrast with articles found in news magazines and in other sections of newspapers such as food, entertainment and sports that use color, short items in boxes, and interesting captions to attract reader attention.

The role of television stations in elections is well documented by academic institutions and national organizations involved in campaign reform.<sup>16</sup> Their studies consistently show that television coverage of election campaigns has been declining in the past twenty years. The amount of time devoted to political stories, the number of stories and the amount of time given to

a candidate to speak are on a downward slope. This is in contrast to the number of ads, and the funds spent to purchase them, which escalates upward every year.

For example, according to the Alliance for Better Campaigns, today 40% of the population watches nightly network news shows. Thirty years ago, the number was 80%. Today, a candidate sound bite is 8 seconds. Thirty years ago it was 42 seconds.

While viewership of network news has declined, it is still where most viewers get their news, and New Jerseyans are among them. Even though cable television is making inroads nationally and in New Jersey, the network programs remain dominant. The New York and Philadelphia affiliate stations which serve New Jersey viewers (in each media market, New Jerseyans are a little more than a third of the viewers) are respectively the first and fourth most expensive in the nation.

Eagleton's study conducted with the Alliance for Better Campaigns looked at how New York City network affiliates covered the 2001 New Jersey gubernatorial race in their news programs thirty days before the election.<sup>17</sup> All political campaigns in the region received minimal coverage, including the New York City mayor's race. However, New Jersey received 17% of the coverage – a total of 30 minutes of political stories that focused on the candidates. In contrast, New Jersey candidates purchased 44% of the political ads shown during the news programs. The imbalance between news and ads means that voters have little opportunity to get to know the candidates on television and make a comparison with what they learn from their ads.

*Conclusion:* Newspapers and television are limited in how helpful they are to voters in making decisions about going to the polls. For the “Occasional” voters who say they don't have enough information to make a decision, this imbalance does not satisfy their stated need for information or their ability to get a sense of the candidates. Overall, coverage of politics is unimaginative with little attention to attracting the interest of voters. Newspapers appear to make efforts to consider citizen needs through experiments such as public journalism designed to cover campaigns from the point of view of the voter. Television, on the other hand, has lobbied heavily

not to be held responsible for better coverage and for innovative approaches that give voters the opportunity to hear and see all candidates – not just the well-financed who can purchase ads.

**Voters – and Voting.** Voter behavior is often explained by looking at campaigns that focus on the undecided and likely voter, and by studying the media that cover only the most competitive races, and by analyzing how voters react to campaign messages. Unexamined is the process of casting a ballot as a key component in voter behavior.

The research and analysis that followed the 2000 election in Florida revealed not only problems with the mechanics of voting but also with the administration of elections and communication with the voters. This work dramatically made the connection for the public and for policy makers between voting participation and the administration of elections.

The actual administration of elections is a responsibility of the states delegated to the counties. However, the laws governing elections are state laws. Until the enactment of HAVA, federal laws dealt mainly with protecting voting rights. The new federal role in administration of elections gives a major role to the states in managing all aspects of the administration of elections. For example, New Jersey's State Plan for complying with HAVA commits the state to the broad goal of improving all aspects of voting, including communicating with voters and would-be voters.<sup>18</sup>

For a voter (or someone who wants to be one), simply finding out about elections is not easy. Some states, such as Michigan and California, have systems for communicating with voters that provide models for other states. In New Jersey, there is no state-wide effort for publicizing registration and absentee ballots rules. There also is no publicly funded brochure or web site about candidates and how to contact them. No statewide training manual is available for poll workers with information about how voting systems work.

Since the Internet is now a routine source of information, the lack of web sites devoted to providing information to voters at the state level (as well as at the county level) is a major

deficiency in meeting the needs of voters. It should be pointed out that New Jersey voters are served well by mandated sample ballots, but they vary from county to county and have not evolved to meet modern design standards.

Voters do not get sympathy when they expect to find information easily or receive attractive reminders about deadlines. A common response when these communication shortcomings have been described to individuals with responsibility for election policy is that if people really want to know, they can find out. It is interesting to speculate about what the “Inconvenienced” non-registered people or the “Occasional” voters would say.

Successful modern communication practice includes several key ingredients. It requires repetition of the message – at least five times – as well as some of the following: use of various media such as radio, TV, print, billboards, bus and train signs, “free” radio and TV; photos of smiling faces, preferable people who are recognizable and attract attention; a conversational text; interesting graphics; and, inclusion of a web site address.

Communication about voting usually has none of these features. This raises the question of why people pay attention to “information” about voting when it is unlike public advertising, including communications they receive about government such as “New Jersey and You, Perfect Together” tourist promotions. The lack of a lively voting message may be particularly problematic for attracting the younger cohorts of voters, The DotNet and GenXers, who have only been exposed to modern, well designed communications.

How messages about elections are presented may give signals about how this activity is valued, and not just provide information about it. If elections are not depicted in the way other common endeavors are conveyed, the subtle message is that they are less important. Cynical observers say that the status quo is just fine with those who have the responsibility to decide how the election process is organized and managed. Others have said that improvement in communications will not make a difference in turnout because voters simply do not care and are impervious to the message no matter how it is delivered. This is a conclusion that needs to be tested.

Better and more convenient administration of elections that are organized with the voters in mind demands more than modernizing communication about them. The HAVA requirement that calls for instituting state-wide voter registration list for the 2006 election will permit additional innovations and efficiencies using information technology to assist voters. For example, the “Inconvenienced” who responded that re-registering after moving was a problem will find that changing an address on a car registration simultaneously changes it for re-registering to vote.

The use of new technology and state-management initiatives makes it possible to consider other measures that increase flexibility and convenience for voters. Measures such as same-day registration, now practiced in seven states, is often cited as an effective way to improve voter turnout. Voting over a longer period than a day, now common in other states, and voting in public places such as libraries and shopping centers would assist voters who have demanding work and family obligations. Permitting the use of absentee ballots without stringent excuse requirements also gives voters flexibility. All of these measures have been implemented to some degree at the state level in many states with more advanced election management than New Jersey’s.<sup>19</sup>

On the national level, the frequent suggestion for either a national holiday for voting or holding elections on the weekend as is done in many countries has not won acceptance in the United States. This reform proposal was debated at the time HAVA was crafted and failed to win support in Congress.

*Conclusion:* The impetus of HAVA and the funding it provides creates a strong possibility that communications and management initiatives making voting more accessible to citizens will address some impediments that stand in their way. However, measures that give citizens more flexibility in registering and voting require changes in state election law. For example, if New Jersey tries to expand the number of days over which voting takes place, a change in the state’s constitution would be required.

So far, neither the Governor nor the Legislature has shown interest in seriously and systematically taking the state in the direction of modernizing voting and meeting the needs of the voters.

### **Final Thought**

The question remains: Is it possible to change the interaction among candidates and the parties, the media, and citizens within the context of laws and public administration to involve more of the electorate in making decisions about who governs – and thereby strengthen our democracy? This question won't be answered until new and imaginative efforts are proposed, implemented and evaluated.

For those who point out that voter turnout could rebound at least to the higher levels of the post-war period if the youngest group of citizens eligible to vote could be persuaded to take an interest in voting, the question still remains about whether it is possible to engage more of them by changing public policies and practices, or is their participation totally determined by their values and interests? Do we know enough about how attitudes toward voting are shaped to reject attempting new and reform measures that may influence participation of younger voters and possibly older ones as well? We won't know if we don't try!

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## End Notes

1. The New Jersey Sustainable State Report, *Goals and Indicators for New Jersey's Quality of Life*, was issued in 1999 as a joint project of the administration of Governor Christine Todd Whitman and New Jersey Future.
2. The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait, Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina and Krista Jenkins is a National Civic Engagement Study funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. It was issued in September 2002 and is posted on the web site of The Center of Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). See [www.puaf.umd.edu/CIRCLE](http://www.puaf.umd.edu/CIRCLE).
3. The Star Ledger Eagleton Rutgers polls (SLERP) are posted on the web site of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at [www.eagleton.rutgers.edu](http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu).
4. The New Jersey Legislative District Data Book is an annual publication of Rutgers Center for Government Services. It includes extensive data about each of New Jersey's legislative districts, congressional districts and local governments as well as the state as a whole. Call 732-932-3640 for more information.
5. The New York Immigration Coalition is made up of 150 groups in New York State that work with immigrants and refugees.
6. Professor of Political Science Jane Junn who is a faculty associate of the Eagleton Institute of Politics organized a conference on minority voting in the 2004 election at the Eagleton Institute on February 13, 2004. Papers prepared for the conference are posted on [www.eagleton.rutgers.edu](http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu)
7. Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University Kristi Anderson prepared a paper for the conference described in Note 6 on "Immigrant Groups, Parties and Political Change: 2004."
8. Information about the National Alliance for Civic Education can found at [www.cived.net](http://www.cived.net).
9. The implementation of the Help America Vote Act is the responsibility of the recently organized U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Its web site, [www.eac.org](http://www.eac.org), provides information about the Act and how it is being implemented.
10. The Campaign Legal Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating candidates and the public on campaign finance and media law. It has been monitoring the implementation of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA).
11. Curtis Gans directs the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, a non-profit organization that studies citizen engagement in politics. Its web site is [www.gspm.org/csae](http://www.gspm.org/csae).

12. The Alliance for Better Campaigns is the major source of studies, public education and advocacy for candidate-centered television coverage of campaigns. Its web site, [www.bettercampaigns.org](http://www.bettercampaigns.org), includes their studies and back issues of their newsletters.
13. The Eagleton New Jersey Project studies and papers are found on the The Eagleton Institute web site, [www.eagleton.rutgers.edu](http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu).
14. Center for Voting and Democracy is a non-profit organization dedicated to fair elections where all voters have an opportunity to be heard. Their work on redistricting and instant runoff voting is widely quoted. See [www.fairvote.org](http://www.fairvote.org).
15. New Jersey Press Association, "Media Use and Shopping Behavior in New Jersey." Page 10.
16. See note 12 for Alliance for Better Campaigns contact information.
17. See note 13 for access to Eagleton New Jersey Project studies.
18. The New Jersey State Plan for the implementation of HAVA prepared by the New Jersey Attorney General, the State's chief election official, provides a useful review of HAVA and its implications for states. See [www.njelections.org](http://www.njelections.org).
19. [Electionline.org](http://Electionline.org) provides comprehensive information about election issues as well as studies that compare state election policies and programs.