

Trends in Civic Participation

Voter participation in Kentucky lags behind the national average in recent elections for several reasons, including income and education levels, lack of political competition and a political culture that tends to tolerate corrupt practices. The “motor voter” act has increased registration, and party competition is rising, but these trends may be negated by lack of citizen confidence in political actors and institutions. But voting is not the only means of participating in civic affairs. Many people donate time and money to charity, and they participate in school boards and other community organizations. Communities with such active, engaged citizens will enjoy a brighter future. As we look long term, one of the most important challenges we face is that of providing effective citizenship education.

By Paul Blanchard
Eastern Kentucky University

In *The Context of Change*, the authors noted that voter participation in Kentucky has lagged well behind the national average in recent elections.¹ This has been true of presidential elections as well as elections at other levels. For example, in the highly significant election of November 1994, when Kentucky Republicans captured two long-time Democratic congressional seats, only 39 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots.² In the May primary elections in both 1994 and 1995, voter turnout rates were even lower. And while voter turnout for the November 1995 gubernatorial election exceeded expectations,³ it was still far less than 50 percent.

What are some of the reasons for low voter turnout and declining citizen participation in Kentucky? My observations over the last 20 years lead me to conclude that, like citizens in other states, many Kentuckians have lost confidence in political leaders and political institutions. They react unfavorably to negative campaigning, and they view elected officials as being unable and/or unwilling to fulfill the promises they make to voters. These perceptions are often inaccurate. Much evidence indicates that most politicians represent their constituents effectively and, to a large extent, actually do what they have promised. But this does not diminish voter perceptions as disincentives to participation.

Other factors peculiar to Kentucky help explain our low levels of participation, especially in comparison to other states. As Jewell and Cunningham pointed out in their study of Kentucky politics in the late 1960s,⁴ voter turnout rates in our state have been below the national average since the 1930s. Much of this difference can be explained by Kentucky's relatively low income and education levels. We rank low in voter turnout, as do other poor states with high levels of high school dropouts.

But there are still other, more specific reasons why citizen participation in Kentucky has been so low. “Voter fatigue” is one problem. In Kentucky, we expect citizens to vote twice every year, often for dozens of candidates running for a large number of apparently meaningless offices at both the state and local levels. This situation tends to lower the interest level for any given election and depletes the “political energy” of average citizens who have limited time and resources to devote to researching candidates and issues. One encouraging development in Kentucky is that, beginning in 1997, we will have one year during a four-year

¹ Smith-Mello, M. and Schirmer, P. (1994). *The context of change*. Frankfort, KY: Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center.

² Smith-Mello, M. (1996). Community, trust key to our economic and social future. *Foresight* (Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center), 3, 2-3.

³ Smith-Mello, M. Community, trust key to our economic and social future.

⁴ Jewell, M. E., Cunningham, E. W. (1968). *Kentucky politics*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

cycle (1997, 2001, 2005, etc.) when no elections will be held. But this is only one small step in eliminating the problem of voter fatigue.

Another contribution to low voter turnout is the lack of political competition in Kentucky. Even though Republicans do well in some elections, mainly for seats in the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, Kentucky has been and continues to be a Democratic-dominated state in most respects, especially at the local level. And while most Kentucky counties are dominated by Democrats, a fairly substantial number are dominated by Republicans. Since local politics are so important to so many Kentuckians, lack of competition at this level is a significant deterrent to participation. Furthermore, one-party politics often means entrenched political organizations and issueless campaigns, which discourage participation even more.⁵

A specific way that voter participation is discouraged in Kentucky is the limited time the polls are open on election day—from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. This tends to create a hardship for those who work long hours or commute long distances to work. Given the economic situation at the end of the 20th century, the number of people in these categories is increasing.

Finally, Kentucky's political culture, which often tends to tolerate politically corrupt practices, from vote-buying to BOPTROT, leads to a pervasive sense of political cynicism in many citizens and discourages them from all types of political participation. The reaction of a Richmond, Kentucky, citizen, quoted in a recent *Courier-Journal* story on low turnout, is typical. Don Katzman said he hasn't voted in more than 30 years, primarily because the last time he went to the polls he left disgusted. "I saw votes being bought, and it just seemed to me that whoever had the money to do that was always going to win."⁶

Is Katzman's cynical attitude toward politics shared by others across the United States? Much has been written in recent years about the alienation and cynicism of Americans. In his well-known and important 1991 book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, journalist E.J. Dionne argued that politicians and political parties in the United States have often presented Americans with false choices, based on outdated issues. This has resulted in what Dionne saw as legitimate anger, especially among middle-class citizens.⁷

Just how angry Americans are in 1996, and how that anger affects their willingness to vote, as well as to participate in other civic activities, is currently the subject of some disagreement among scholars and journalists. In an influential 1996 book by Susan J. Tolchin, *The Angry American: How Voter Rage is Changing the Nation*, the author discusses how economic changes, particularly those related to globalization, have ". . . engendered a new form of anger that relates to the public's feelings of injustice, betrayal and blame."⁸ But presidential candidates Bob Dole and Ross Perot, who should have been able to take advantage of voter anger this intense, have been generally unsuccessful. When asked what happened to all the anger, one of Perot's pollsters responded, "Down about 20 points." Asked why, he responded, "The anger's been absorbed by an unrelentingly favorable economy." A Republican pollster, Frank Luntz, saw it slightly differently: "They're still angry but not spitting mad anymore. They're just not very interested. They got sick of politics a year ago, during the budget battle, and tuned out."⁹

Results from the 1996 elections in Kentucky reflect this rather ambivalent attitude toward political participation on the part of Kentuckians. The low voter turnout (58 percent of registered voters; 47 percent of voting age population—both lower than in 1992) can be interpreted in a number of ways. If Kentuckians were angry, their anger was not directed toward the president, who carried the state, albeit by a narrow margin. Nor was it directed toward incumbent members of Congress (except for the defeat of incumbent Democrat Mike

⁵ Several of these issues are discussed in Blanchard, P. (1984). Political parties and elections. In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Kentucky government and politics* (Chapter 7). Bloomington: College Town Press. See esp. pp. 149-166.

⁶ Wilson, R. (1995, May 26). Reasons for low turnout went beyond apathy. *The Courier-Journal*, p. B1.

⁷ Dionne, E.J. (1991). *Why Americans hate politics*. City: Publisher.

⁸ This quote is an excerpt of Tolchin's book published in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, October 20, 1996.

⁹ The statements of both pollsters were discussed in Klein, J. (1996, November 4). Where the anger went. *Newsweek*.

Ward, who barely won in 1992), or Republicans. We cannot even conclude that the substantial numbers of Kentuckians who chose not to vote have withdrawn from other forms of civic participation. After all, one of the few studies of Kentucky non-voters described these individuals as active members of their communities:

. . . they tend to be involved in the communities and activities closest to their lives—church groups, school committees, even community organizations. . . When they invest time, money, and energy in organizations and activities closest to their everyday lives, they feel the returns are palpable and sense that they can concretely affect the course of actions that shape those policies and distributethose rewards.¹⁰

We will return to this discussion of the relationship between voting and other forms of political participation later in this essay.

Given Kentucky's rather dismal track record of citizen participation, especially in terms of voting behavior, what can we project regarding future trends in this area? Are they likely to be positive, with increasing and more meaningful citizen participation, or negative, with "more of the same" or even declining, in terms of citizen involvement? As is so often the case, the answer includes both good news and bad news.

Much of the good news can be summarized in two words: "motor voter." Kentucky is one of the first states to have implemented the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA), sponsored by Kentucky Senator Wendell Ford. NVRA is often referred to as the motor voter law because it allows citizens to register to vote (almost automatically) when they renew their driver's licenses. However, citizens can also register easily at convenient locations when attending to other routine governmental matters, such as applying for AFDC, food stamps, or Medicaid.

NVRA has contributed significantly to a hefty increase in the number of registered voters in Kentucky. More people registered to vote in 1995 (nearly 200,000) than ever before, and Kentucky set a record in November 1995, with nearly 2.25 million registered voters.¹¹ In terms of enhancing citizen participation, this increase is encouraging and significant, since failure to register is almost always one of the main reasons non-voters give for their decision not to vote. If current trends continue, and we expect they will, almost all Kentuckians will be registered to vote within just a few years.

Unfortunately, there are discouraging trends which result from examining the voter turnout among motor voter registrants. During the May 1995 primary, only 7 percent of them voted! This rate improved to about 18 percent in the general elections, but this was far below the statewide turnout of 44 percent. Further, turnout rates among certain categories of motor voter registrants were even lower, for example, 9 percent among AFDC clients, 10 percent for food stamp recipients, and 10 percent for Medicaid applicants.¹² Clearly, overcoming the registration barrier is much easier than getting people to actually vote.

Another positive trend affecting citizen participation is the increasing level of party competition in Kentucky which has been generated by a stronger and more competitive Republican party. Examples of this include the 1st and 2nd Congressional District victories, mentioned earlier, more Republicans in the General Assembly, especially the State Senate, the very narrow loss by Republican Larry Forgy in the 1995 gubernatorial election, and several local Republican victories across the state in traditionally strong Democratic areas. Political science research strongly suggests that there is a high correlation between party competition and voter turnout. Kentucky's recent past, most notably the turnout in November 1995, supports such conclusions.

¹⁰ Yanarella, E. (1992). *None of the above: Alienated citizens talk back*. Lexington, KY: CIVIC of Central Kentucky.

¹¹ Statements based on information compiled by George Russell, Executive Director of the Kentucky Board of Elections and other staff in the Secretary of State's office.

¹² *Ibid.* Comparable data for 1996 were not available as this essay was drafted.

Potentially, the most discouraging trend in the area of civic participation is the increasing lack of citizen confidence in political actors and institutions. How we deal with this problem will be critical to a healthy polity in the 21st century. Many of the suggestions for addressing this problem have revolved around attempts to “reconnect” citizens to their governments and to their communities. A national effort in this direction was spearheaded by a group known as Project Democracy, the National Commission for the Renewal of American Democracy. This group, made up largely of secretaries of state from around the country, worked for about four years (1992-1995). Their work culminated in September 1995, when their final report, accompanied by a workbook and an “idea book,” were released nationally at a Citizens Participation Conference held at Eastern Kentucky University. Both the workbook and the idea book contain a wealth of ideas and strategies for more fully engaging citizens in the political process. Unfortunately, few individuals or groups have emerged to lead in the attempt to implement these ideas. One notable exception is the League of Women Voters of Kentucky.

During the September 1995 Citizens Participation Conference at EKV, conference participants (nearly 150) were given opportunities to suggest ways to engage citizens more effectively in their communities and in the political process. While hundreds of thoughtful and innovative ideas were suggested, those which seemed to be most meaningful and to have the greatest potential for success were in the area of citizenship education. As Michal Smith-Mello (the conference keynote speaker) has written recently:

Voter education is also key. The interest of everyday citizens in the details of policy options, budgets, and program outcomes has historically been underestimated. People are hungry for information and part of the challenge government faces is to make it broadly accessible in a range of formats, from town meetings to the Internet. Indeed, gathering and disseminating the information citizens need to make informed and thoughtful decisions is becoming a key government role.¹³

Conference participants pointed out that while citizenship education is an important responsibility of elementary and secondary schools, this process is lifelong, and communities and community organizations must share in the responsibility for providing it.

Thus, one of the most important questions as we look at trends in civic participation in Kentucky at the end of the 20th century is: How effectively are schools and communities in Kentucky providing the kind of citizenship education that will produce active and engaged citizens? While the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) seems to place a high priority on outcomes and activities that relate to “citizenship education,” even the most informed Kentuckians are confused about what our schools are doing in this area. Greater discussion among educators, political leaders, parents, and other citizens is urgently needed to provide more information and clarity about what our schools are doing to produce more knowledgeable and effective citizens.

One organization that is addressing both of these concerns—citizenship education and declining confidence in the political process—is Kids Voting Kentucky. This program, which provides curriculum activities for students at all grade levels, has as a culminating activity the opportunity for students to vote on election day (on unofficial ballots) at the same voting precincts as their parents. Impressive results have been achieved, not only in increasing enthusiasm among school children but also in providing motivation for parents to participate. An encouraging trend in Kentucky is that Kids Voting, which began in Fayette County, is expanding in 1996 into five other counties—Bourbon, Clark, Harrison, Jefferson, and Woodford.¹⁴

¹³ Smith-Mello, M. Community, trust key to our economic and social future.

¹⁴ Information about Kids Voting Kentucky is available from its Executive Director, Marilyn Carter, at PO Box 1108, Lexington, KY 40589-1108.

As noted earlier, the topic of civic participation involves more than just voting. The two are not synonymous. We know that some citizens who choose not to vote do engage in other meaningful civic activities. What can we say about trends in these other forms of participation? At the national level, there is substantial disagreement about whether levels of civic and community engagement, often referred to as “social capital,” are rising or falling. Harvard professor Robert Putnam, author of a very influential book on this topic, *Making Democracy Work*,¹⁵ has cited substantial evidence to suggest that social capital in America is declining. He has pointed to decreasing numbers of Americans who attend meetings on civic matters, who work for a political party, who serve on a committee of a local organization, or who attend political rallies:

*By almost every measure, Americans’ direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education—the best individual-level predictor of political participation—have risen sharply throughout this period. Every year over the last decade or two, millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities*¹⁶

Putnam’s pessimistic conclusions have been challenged, most notably by Everett C. Ladd, long-time director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut. The Roper Center devoted 35 pages of its June/July 1996 magazine, *The Public Perspective*, to the topic: “A Vast Empirical Record Refutes the Idea of Civic Decline.” In response to the Putnam quote cited above, Ladd wrote: “The data just don’t show erosion of America’s ‘social capital.’” Data are cited to show that Americans are volunteering more time and money to worthy causes, are more likely than earlier to contact local officials, and are making campaign contributions in increasing numbers. In addition, increases were reported in Americans who have written to their member of Congress, who work with others on community needs, and who formed groups to help solve local problems.

What trends do we see in Kentucky relative to this academic debate about whether social capital is rising or falling? The little evidence that is available supports a fairly positive perspective. For example, the results of a recent statewide survey suggest that Kentuckians are more trusting and more engaged in the life of their communities than most Americans. Social capital cannot develop without high levels of trust, and a higher level of trust seems to exist among Kentuckians than among their counterparts in other states. The survey also revealed that, compared to other Americans, more Kentuckians participate in civic, community, charitable, or church-related activities.¹⁷

In commenting on these findings and their relationship to the national debate about social capital, Michael Childress, Executive Director of the Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center, made this observation:

*The high levels of trust these survey results show are undoubtedly related to our strong sense of neighborliness in Kentucky. Today, research has offered us plentiful and convincing empirical evidence to demonstrate both a decline and an increase in social capital in the United States. What we’re interested in learning about at the Center is the more important question of how social capital is formed and how it contributes to the development of communities!*¹⁸

¹⁵ Putnam, R.D. (1993). *Making democracy work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ Putnam, R. D. (1995, January). Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 67.

¹⁷ The survey was commissioned by the Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center (KLTPRC) and conducted by the University of Kentucky Survey Research Center. The findings are reported in a KLTPRC news release dated August 1, 1996.

¹⁸ KLTPRC news release cited above.

In seeking answers to this “more important question,” an excellent place to begin is in Owsley County, where a citizens’ group, the Owsley County Action Team, was formed in 1992. Its mission is “to provide leadership to enable citizens to achieve self-empowerment, sustainable community development, and an enriched quality of life.” The Owsley County Action Team is working with the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) of Berea and its Sustainable Communities Initiative. According to Jeanne Gage, Director of the Sustainable Communities Initiative, a “sustainable community” is:

*. . . a thriving community, one which will prosper over the long term. Sustainable communities have developed the basic relationships necessary to bring individuals and organizations together to understand and respond to challenges and explore possibilities.*¹⁹

Several of the principles upon which the Sustainable Communities Initiative is based are applicable to the development of social capital and the encouragement of greater citizen participation.

Gage has written that sustainable communities share these characteristics:

- *They build relationships among people, organizations, and institutions.* To develop trust, respect and networks for ideas, there must be strong relationships among people, organizations and institutions. These relationships cannot be bought or recruited from the outside; they are created through involvement in local government and community and civic groups.
- *They cooperate for the common good.* The ability and willingness of a group of people to come together to solve public problems is key to building sustainable communities. Communities must learn to use information networks, relationships, trust and skills to achieve what is best for the whole community.
- *They create opportunities for community learning.* Public spaces such as community centers, libraries, schools, farmers’ markets, general stores, coffee shops, and parks are necessary to encourage the regular coming together of citizens and organizations to discuss public issues, learn, share concerns, make plans and have fun. Computer networks and local newspapers can serve as public spaces to encourage community conversations on issues.²⁰

Early results from Owsley County are encouraging. When asked about why an Owsley County Action Team was formed in the first place, Jeanette Rogers, Director of Community Development for the group, said, “We got tired of being helped and decided it was time to help ourselves.”

And help themselves they have. Over the past four years, the Owsley County group started a Goat Producers Association, a Vegetable Producers Association, and an education foundation called the Owsley County Fund for Excellence. It has also revived the Booneville/Owsley County Industrial Authority, assisted in funding a downtown development office which is currently establishing a Chamber of Commerce, and is working on establishing a Business Mentoring Network.

These accomplishments are impressive and suggest that Owsley Countians have found a successful approach to developing civic capital and more involved citizens. If this trend of “sustainable communities” catches on in cities and towns across our state, the future of civic participation in Kentucky will be bright indeed.

¹⁹ This and other information about the Owsley County Action Team was provided to the writer by Jeanne Gage. Similar material about sustainable communities and MACED’s Sustainable Communities Initiative is reported in Gage J. (1996, August/September). Building sustainable communities requires planning, cooperation, citizen participation *Kentucky Journal*, 10-11.

²⁰ Adapted from Gage, J. Building sustainable communities requires planning, cooperation, citizen participation