Democracy Depends on Voter Participation

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An Issue Guide for Community Dialogue

The Center for Civic Engagement

ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY
NEW ENGLAND

About This Issue Guide

How do we address the serious problem of the lack of voter participation in our community?

The purpose of this issue guide is to help us talk productively about this issue of common importance in order to recognize its complexities and come to a shared understanding and potential actions.

Deliberation

It's not a debate. It's not a contest. It's not even about reaching agreement or seeing eye-to-eye. It's about looking for a shared direction guided by what we most value. It's about thinking together, examining the consequences of possible solutions to challenging problems.

A Framework

This issue guide provides a brief overview of the problem and outlines three options based on community interviews, each rooted in a shared concern. It weighs the advantages and drawbacks of different approaches to address this problem. We engage in deliberation by:

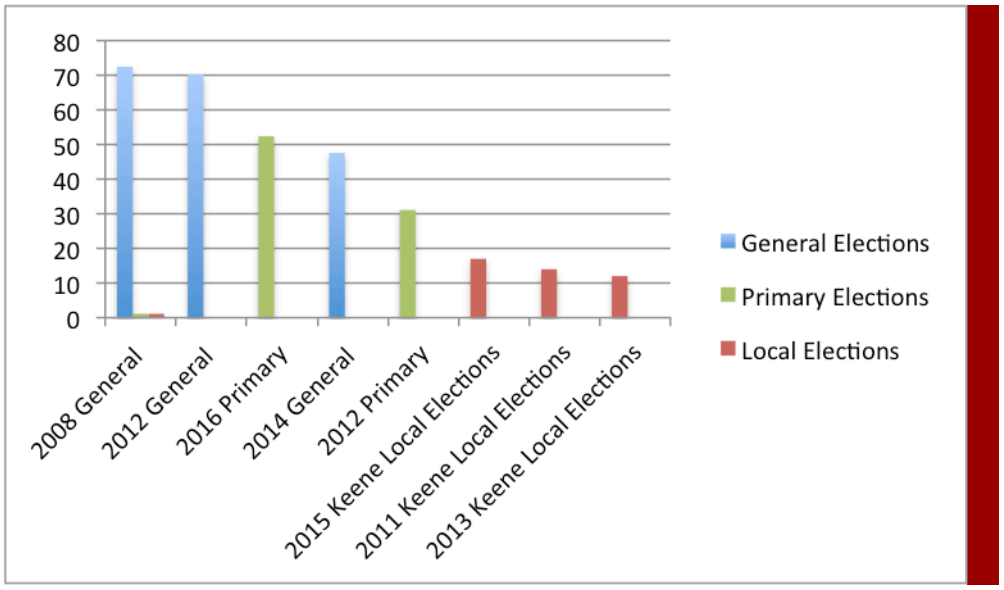
- getting beyond the initial positions we hold to our deeper motivations—that is, the things we most care about, such as safety, freedom, or fairness.
- carefully weighing the views of others and recognizing the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- working through the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what we—and others—consider valuable.

It is important to remember that, as a group, we are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as citizens who care about our community and nation rather than as liberals and conservatives.

Introduction

The decisions made by those in government who represent the people, and the laws and policies that dictate our lives, depend on the people who show up at the polls and vote. Despite our society's dependency on this process, we have a problem: Given the opportunity, most Americans do not vote. This is a constant source of concern in American politics, as many of us turn away from our civic duty and become spectators rather than participants in a democratic process weakening the relationship between government and citizens.

Active political participation and civic engagement are at the heart of a healthy democracy. The level of civic participation and engagement in a society are an effective gauge of social and political inclusion and an indicator of how well a democracy is performing in relation to the needs and priorities of the people. There are a variety of ways in which people participate in the political process, including non-formal mechanisms such as community organizations and social movements. There is growing evidence that these non-formal forms of participation reinforce formal participation such as registering in a political party and voting. Voting is the strongest voice that citizens have to ensure that government is "of the people."



Percent Turnout of Eligible Voters in New Hampshire

As you can see from the chart, local elections in our region have significantly lower voter turnout than national elections. Last November, only 17 percent of Keene's registered voters came out to the polls. Outside of presidential and midterm elections, it is typical to see voter turnout hovering in the teens for the region. These local elections matter because it is then that decisions are made about our schools, taxes, neighborhoods, and infrastructure, affecting our everyday life.

We offer three proposed options that are provided to help frame our discussion. These are not choices for you to choose from, but rather initial ideas to start your conversation.

"After all, your democracy does not function without your active participation. At a bare minimum, that means voting, eagerly and often— Only you can make sure the democracy you inherit is as good as we know it can be. But it requires your dedicated, and informed, and engaged citizenship. And that citizenship is a harder, higher road to take, but it leads to a better place. It's how we built this country—together." —Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States

Option One

Create lifetime habits and a sense of civic duty.

From this perspective, we need to emphasize the importance of civic engagement to our societal well being, nurture public life, and provide every citizen with the means to actively engage in the public sphere including education on the political process. When we talk about living in a democracy, we frequently talk about our rights as citizens, but we rarely consider our obligations. By exercising this option, we will create lifetime habits of service and a sense of civic duty.

What can be done:

+ Create new opportunities for public deliberation on critical social issues such as public spaces in neighborhoods designed to make it easier for citizens to connect with one another or neighborhood associations.

+ Add service learning to improve high school civic courses.

+ Make time to participate in community organizations and collective problem solving.

+ Publicize, recognize, and/or reward businesses and non-profits that encourage employees to take part in community activities.

+ Create forums and public access programs for adult civics awareness and education.

Concerns for this option:

– Personal responsibility and an understanding of civics is not the main reason people do not vote. This option underestimates the serious problems that prevent many people from participating in civic life and especially voting.

– Spending more time in civic associations and public service is not practical in today's society in which both parents often work.

– It is more useful to try to reform government than to reform citizens.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the advantages and drawbacks of this option?

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2. What are some of the opportunities from this option in our community?

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"Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." — Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States

"No matter what name we give it or how we judge it, a candidate's character is central to political reporting because it is central to a citizen's decision in voting."
—Roger Mudd, American Broadcast Journalist

Option Two

Restore trust between voters and every level of government.

From this perspective, restoring integrity and trust in the political system is essential to engaging more citizens to vote. Initial discussions in our region reveal that there is a high distrust of politicians. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, "large majorities across partisan lines see elected officials as not careful with the government's money, influenced by special-interest money, overly concerned about their own careers, unwilling to compromise and out of touch with regular Americans." Our best hope to engage more citizens is to provide greater access to information, press for higher levels of transparency, and increase accountability and responsiveness of elected and appointed officials.

What can be done:

+ Require higher levels of transparency in government, including sources of campaign funding, public spending, government contractors, and easy to understand costs of community services.

+ Encourage more citizens from outside the established political system to run for public office, providing more choices in candidates.

+ Provide simple, easy to access information on what each candidate stands for, including televised public forums for candidates running for elected office.

+ Encourage media, news organizations, and individual citizens to pay attention to their representatives' positive accomplishments as well as any unethical or inappropriate behavior.

+ Hold voters responsible for personally accessing information about candidates and not rely only on social media and sound bites.

Concerns for this option:

– Democratic governance is messy and often involves give and take among competing interests. Tough measures aimed at enforcing ethical conduct and honesty may place an impossible burden on men and women in office.

– These changes will not change a political culture dominated by hyper partisanship, big money, and perpetual campaigns.

– Inexperienced lawmakers may be more susceptible than seasoned politicians to manipulation.

– This option may create an even more intensely partisan environment of "gotcha" politics and result in many false accusations.

– In today's fast paced world, voters do not have time to educate themselves about candidates and political issues; social media is the most efficient means of information.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the advantages and drawbacks of this option?

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2. What are some of the opportunities from this option in our community?

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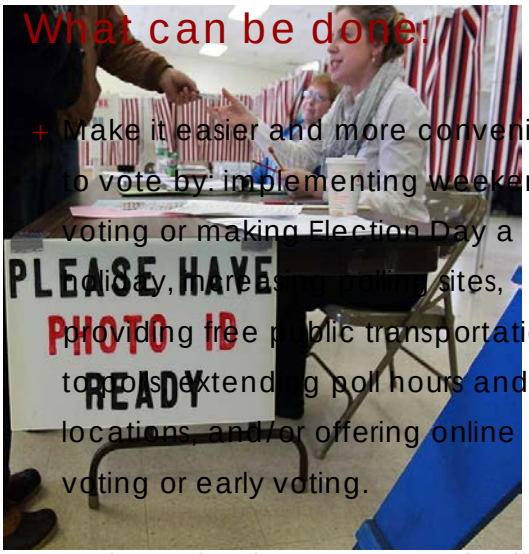
"A lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity."—Dalai Lama

What can be done:



+ Make it easier and more convenient to vote by: implementing weekend voting or making Election Day a holiday, increasing polling sites, providing free public transportation to polls, extending poll hours and poll locations, and/or offering online voting or early voting.
+ Make registering to vote easier (for example, automatic with receiving a drivers license).

Option Three

Remove the barriers to voting such as voter ID requirements.

+ Turn redistricting over to independent citizen committees or juries.
+ Reduce the length of political campaigns and their cost and/or revise campaign finance rules.

Concerns for this option:

"Among all important areas of public policy, elec administration is probably the most prosodic and to the problem of short attention spans. What wo world be like if we only gave intense attention to education, corrections, transportation and public problems for a one-week period every four years —Charles Stewart III, Political Scientist, Massachus Institute of Technology

– Relaxing election rules and making it easier for citizens to vote will increase the number of poorly informed voters.
– Online voting will lead to increased voter fraud.
– Changing our Election Day historic traditions may diminish the value of 'election day' and possibly decrease voter participation.
– Money is a part of politics. Trying to control it in the political process will take away one way competing interests make their voices heard in a democratic society.
– Expanding voting hours and providing transportation are expensive and are too big a burden on small towns.

Improve mechanisms of the voting process.

From this perspective, engaging more voters requires correcting the deep structural problems in our election process that stand in the way of efficiency, fairness, responsiveness, and accountability. Voting rules and requirements vary from place to place, are confusing, and are often based more on perceived political advantage than fairness. There are more and more states bringing forth legislation bas on real or perceived questic voter fraud, and creating ne laws that effect the process voting. Voters feel intimidat with the Election Day proce and mistrust the protection their privacy. We need to m forward with reforms to the mechanisms that control the we elect our leaders.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the advantages and drawbacks of this option?

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2. What are some of the opportunities from this option in our community?

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"Democracy is not just a question of having a vote. It consists of strengthening each citizen's possibility and capacity to participate in the deliberations involved in life in society." —Fernando Cardoso, 34th President of Brazil

Option One

Create lifetime habits and a sense of civic duty

Those in favor of this option believe in strengthening each individual's capacity to participate in civic life.

They believe we can:

+ Create new opportunities for public deliberation on critical social issues.
+ Add service learning to improve high school civic courses.
+ Make time to participate in community organizations and collective problem solving.
+ Publicize, recognize, and/or reward businesses and non-profits that encourage employees to take part in community activities.
+ Create forums and public access programs for adult civics awareness and education.

– But some people are concerned that this option underestimates the serious problems that prevent many people from participating in civic life and asks too much time out of our busy lives.

Option Two

Restore trust between voters and every level of gov't

Those in favor of this option believe in restoring integrity and trust in the political system.

They believe we can:

+ Require higher levels of transparency in government.
+ Encourage more citizens from outside the established political system to run for public office.
+ Provide simple, easy to access information on what each candidate stands for.
+ Encourage media, news organizations, and individual citizens to pay attention to their representatives.
+ Hold voters responsible for personally accessing information about candidates.

– But some people are concerned that this option will place an undue burden on those in office and eliminate good candidates.

Option Three

Improve mechanisms of the voting process

Those in favor of this option believe in correcting the deep structural problems in our election process.

They believe we can:

+ Make it easier and more convenient to vote
+ Make registering to vote easier (for example, automatic with receiving a drivers license)
+ Remove the barriers of voting such as voter ID requirements
+ Turn redistricting over to independent citizen committees or juries
+ Reduce the length of political campaigns and their cost and/or revise campaign finance rules

– But some people are concerned that relaxing rules for elections will increase fraud and uneducated voters, and will be too costly for local governments.

"For this nation to remain true to its principles, we cannot allow any American's vote to be denied, diluted or defiled. The right to vote is the crown jewel of American liberties, and we will not see its luster diminished."

—Ronald Reagan, 40th President of the United States

Information in this guide is based on the Kettering Foundation guidelines for deliberate dialog. It contains ideas and information excerpted and adapted from other Issue Guides:
Democracy's Challenge: Reclaiming the Public's Role
Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?
Political Fix: How Do We Get American Politics Back on Track?