



Local Focus

Political Participation, or the Lack Thereof, in Local Politics

Low voter turnout is a perennial concern in American politics. The presidency is typically decided by roughly 55 percent of eligible voters, and that tends to be a national high-water mark in terms of political participation. In mid-term elections, turnout drops off sharply—in those years, only about 40 percent of eligible voters decide who controls Congress. This helps explain why a president can easily take the White House even though more than half the voting-eligible population either did not vote for him (they didn't bother to show up) or actively voted against him.

While the turnout numbers at the national level are the cause of considerable hand-wringing after every election, from the perspective of turnout in local elections, those numbers look more like a reason for celebration than worry. Take Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti, who was elected in 2013. Only 23 percent of eligible Angelenos showed up to the polls in the 2013 municipal election. So while Garcetti took a healthy 54 percent of votes cast, he swept into the most powerful elective office in the city with only 12 percent of eligible voters actually casting a ballot in his favor.

If you can get elected as mayor of the nation's second-largest city with the active support of only 12 percent of registered voters, imagine what proportion of the electorate you need to cruise to victory in a low-profile school board election (hint: not much). The bottom line is that a small minority of citizens—those who actually participate—have a massively disproportionate say in who runs local governments.

This is not just because of low voter turnout. Nationwide citizen participation in local government more generally is abysmally low. A study by the National Research Center, a firm that conducts citizen surveys for more than 200 communities, found that less than 1 in 5 citizens had contacted a local elected official in the previous 12 months, and only 1 in 4 had bothered to attend a public meeting.

As a large majority of citizens have basically checked out of local government, it means that in many city halls

the extremists on any given issue dominate debate and deliberation. Those who do show up to sparsely attended meetings tend to be the same cast of characters week after week. It is this vocal and engaged minority that local governments are disproportionately likely to respond to, because, well, they actually show up and speak out.

Who are these people? The National Research Center's data suggest that they are far from a representative group. For one thing, those who participate in local government are not young. Roughly three quarters of the people who report contacting local elected officials are over 55. Nearly half are over 65. Roughly a quarter to a third of those over 55 report attending a public meeting. For the under-25 crowd, the number was about 10 percent. Those who participate are also more likely to be longer-term residents and better off financially.

Is there anything that can be done to improve participation in local politics? Some localities are experimenting with unconventional approaches to increasing citizen engagement. For example, when the city of Rancho Cordova, California, debated permitting more residents to raise chickens on their properties, it launched an open town hall. More than 500 residents joined in the interactive forum to make or review public statements. "It is noisy and smelly enough with pigeons, turkeys, feral cats, and untended dogs without adding chickens to the mix," wrote one resident. The city drafted an ordinance that incorporated this sort of input and e-mailed it to all the forum's subscribers for review.

Other communities are also trying to creatively piggyback on the ease and convenience of communicating through social media as a means to get citizens civically involved. While there are success stories here and there, it is not clear that these efforts are having much of an impact in terms of engaging big numbers of residents who would not normally participate. Most citizens might say they like and trust local government—at least to a greater extent than they do state and federal governments—but apparently not enough to actually get involved.