

Opinion

Knocking Down the Wall: So All Voices Can Be Heard – Part 2

Two weeks ago, in So All Voices Can Be Heard – Part 1, the emphasis was on institutional and policy changes to affect and improve voter registration, turnout and engagement, including Congress' H.R. 1 and MA initiatives. Previous Engaged Citizen Corner articles have discussed ranked choice voting and open primaries as ways to improve voter interest and participation.

Most voters, or potential voters, start with self-interest: what is government doing for me, my family, and my community? What difference does my vote make? Trust is the key, harder if potential voters' experience with government policies and contacts has been negative.

So, who's voting, who's engaged, and why – and who isn't? And what are some on-the-ground strategies to increase voter registration, turnout and civic engagement?

In a recent webcast presented by the League of Women Voters of MA, Erin O'Brien, Associate Professor of Political Science at UMass Boston, presented research findings to answer some of these questions (see www.lwv/brookline.org). Recent examples illustrating her points are added here.

There is higher voter participation by the more affluent in the U.S., characterized by time (just one job, and not the late shift); resource availability, e.g. a car and access to the internet; plus civic skills.

Lower, or non-existent voter participation is linked to several realities. Currently 6.1 million people are ineligible to vote due to felony convictions - 1 in 40 people overall and 1 in 13 African Americans. (The recently approved ballot question in FL will allow over one million former felons to vote.) Combined with recent Supreme Court actions limiting the Voting Rights Act, even more African-Americans' opportunity to vote is curtailed or suppressed. The

November 2018 voting issues in the GA gubernatorial race illustrate this, as well as the NC Ninth Congressional District race, fraudulently won but exposed and consequently invalidated.

Research and experience has demonstrated several ways to increase voter participation:

Ease and convenience of registering to vote and actual voting; automatic voter registration; same day registration, making voting a one-step process; and early voting.

A single person-to-person contact, asking a person to vote, is one of the major influencers, especially neighbors, friends and family.

Targeting the increasingly younger and/or racially and culturally diverse populations who are eligible to vote. Specific events trigger engagement, e.g. student activism following the Parkland, FL massacre, encouraging young people to register, to vote, and to speak up. In person organizing, meetings, and social media are major strategies.

Research and experience have demonstrated several ways to discourage, limit or prohibit voter participation. Examples of racialized restrictive voter access are requirements for photo ID, curtailment of early voting, increased regulation of registration drives, and/or repeal of same day registration.

The ability to determine voting policies sits at the state level and local communities enact them. Going forward, the League will keep pushing to expand early voting and to implement Election Day registration, the reform that has been shown to have the greatest impact on voter participation.

Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline (LWVB). The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy. All articles can be found at <https://brookline.wickedlocal.com/search?text=Citizen%20Engagement%20Corner&start=1>.