



Proceedings

The 2008 Fifth Roundtable Conference
SU Paul Greenberg House
Washington, D.C.
April 23, 2008

Voter Participation—The Ultimate Civic Responsibility

AACR's Fifth Annual Roundtable Conference convened to discuss voter participation as the core issue of participatory democracy and to raise concern over national and global disinterest in the electoral process. Analysts from across the spectrum—academic, corporate, government and non-profit—debated to determine what is causing the decline in voter participation as well as what the United States and individual institutions could do to encourage citizens and employees to vote. After all, as a non-profit organization devoted to promoting institutional civic responsibility, how could AACR foster an understanding of the concept better than through voter activation?

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 23

8:30-9:00 AM

Registration and Continental Breakfast

AACR's Fifth Roundtable Conference convened with a complimentary breakfast on the second-floor of Syracuse University (SU)'s Paul Greenberg House, sporting an array of bright orange, SU paraphernalia, in Washington D.C.

Opening remarks were delivered by **Dr. Michael Schneider**, Director of the Maxwell—Washington International Relations Program and Chairman of the AACR's Advisory Board. During his welcome, he explained the history of the Paul Greenberg House, the context of the International Relations Program at SU, and the role of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. At the end, he introduced **Dr. Joy Cherian**, President of AACR, who followed by introducing the moderators for Panels I, II and III—**Chad Tragakis**, **Dr. Michael Schneider**, and **Joseph Meelookaran**, respectively.

Next, Mr. Tragakis explained that voting is truly a responsibility—perhaps the ultimate civic responsibility. Everything begins with voting—from volunteering for community activities to civic engagement—as he believed the panel discussions would conclude.

After a brief introduction of Panel I—*Institutional Roles and Responsibilities in Encouraging Voting*, Panel II—*Increasing Voter Participation: Lessons from Around the World*, Panel III—*Instilling the Notion of*

Participatory Democracy in America's Newest Voters: Young Voters and New Americans, and the Keynote Speaker, **Frank Mankiewicz**, it was time to delve into the first topic.

9:00-10:30 AM

Panel I

Institutional Roles and Responsibilities in Encouraging Voting



Chad Tragakis, Senior Vice President of Hill & Knowlton, Chairman of the AACR Committee on Institutional Civic Responsibility and Member of AACR's Advisory Board, opened the session by explaining the purpose of Panel I. As he postulated, should institutions reach out to employees, customers, or other member organizations to encourage voter participation? What should be the responsibility of academic institutions?

He noted a few examples of companies that already reach out to their employees and communities. For example, Costco Wholesale launched a campaign "Vote in Bulk;" Stonyfield Farm prints promotional messages on its yogurt lids to make "every vote cow'nt;" Jet Blue devised a mass absentee ballot campaign; and Match.com encourages every single citizen to vote for, after all, "Every 'Single' Vote Counts." After his brief commentary, he introduced the panelists.

Peter Levine, Director, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), was the first panelist to present. First, he mentioned that in the current primary, one-quarter of students in college vote, which, according to the news, is a good turn-out rate. In contrast, only one citizen not in college votes out of fourteen. He also stated that only one-third of students complete high-school and only half of students complete college. As a result, there is a visible gap in education that is evident in the polls.

Sadly, the gap has widened as a consequence of one's social class, quality of education, and college experiences. For example, he noted that most college students come from middle class families. Due to their middle class status, most college students are confident, responsive to politics, and have more resources (which give them means to become politically active and donate to campaigns).

Second, Mr. Levine commented that the educational institution or the quality of education determines which students are more likely to read a newspaper. Finally, he believes students' college experiences have widened the gap as well since college students used to be able to be part of the working class (as a factory worker) while studying in college. Now, however, college students usually work in services and receive help from their parents to pay for their education.

Another problem besides the widening educational gap that Mr. Levine noted was the structure of academic curriculum and activities. He says that K-12 instructors do teach civic engagement (such as by discussing current events) in schools, but activities (such as Mock Trial) are reserved for honor roll or advanced students who need exposure to civic engagement the least.

Mr. Levine concluded that citizens should hold candidates responsible either by drawing attention to the gap in education, mailing informational booklets about voting (which has been proven a success), or attributing an electoral win to citizens (not the actual candidate).

Stefanie Reeves, Director of Political Advocacy, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) commented how ASHA fosters voter participation. She mentioned that her organization has a webpage where anything on voting is at the user's finger tips. Although ASHA has a website, she noted that what an organization does before, on, and after election-day matters to sustain voter participation.

Ms. Reeves noted that the perception of a PAC (predominantly negative) needs to be changed to encourage ASHA's members to become involved in politics beyond its PAC. For example, in the 2002 election year, ASHA targeted its members and staff by hosting a Guess the Election Contest and encouraging a student association to become involved. As a result, the exposure of ASHA's members and staff to the mock election reinforced the importance of voting. Of course, ASHA's ultimate goal is to develop members to be future candidates; or become involved in politics at the federal, state, and local levels at the very least.

Jack Markey, Chief Voting Action Officer, U.S. Department of State, shifted the conference's focus to the Federal Voting Assistance Program. In 2000, he said that the U.S. Department of State held a Watershed Election to demonstrate to civilians and military personnel overseas that their vote can make a difference. The main obstacle to voting overseas is registering citizens to vote and to obtain absentee ballots. Under the Program, personnel aim to reform and educate citizens worldwide about absentee ballots and how to register to vote under federal law in order to enhance the political process. Mr. Markey also noted that the U.S. Embassy has a website and email network as well as easy access to federal resources and public-private partnerships with overseas groups.

To share the government's best practices with other institutions, the Federal Voting Assistance Program organizes workshops, which are held at various venues (such as colleges and high schools); hosts Fourth of July Celebrations catered to encouraging voting; posts signs; establishes voting booths in the office; and sends email messages to reach citizens globally. It also posts messages on its website. The Program's most successful initiatives were internet-based, especially in the 2000 election for it made news available on CNN International and posted information on the State Department's website.

Another success was how the Program communicated with local officials to discover all the mitigating discrepancies and deadlines states uphold to submit an absentee ballot. Therefore, another challenge is poor mailing systems outside the United States where it takes at least thirty days (to never) to deliver mail. As a result, the State Department allows civilians to use its faxing services as well as reaches out to UPS, FedEx, etc. to expedite and ship voting materials free of charge. Another challenge the Program has to overcome, however, is what Mr. Markey calls the "big brother effect," or the reluctance of people to submit voting information in fear that the government is monitoring their actions.

Sara Raak, Manager of the Grassroots and Advocacy Programs (Vote for Business), U.S. Chamber of Commerce, described how the U.S. Chamber of Commerce fosters voting. According to Ms. Raak, the Chamber's program "Vote for Business" originally targeted small businesses on the federal level. Now, the program has grown to encompass big corporations. In order to reach out beyond corporations, however, she notes that institutions need to devise new tactics at the grassroots-advocacy level, such as an educational political advocacy group, that reaches out to state and local elections to educate citizens which candidates would be most effective for the Chamber's agenda.

For example, Vote for Business made the electoral process easy and possible to foster voter participation

through a website: voteforbusiness.com. On the website, the Chamber provided descriptions of candidates and voter registration information. In 2002, the Chamber enhanced its campaign and created 750 partner websites to replicate issues and to disseminate what the Chamber is advocating federally. In addition, the Chamber created posters, hand-outs, and payroll stuffers to educate employees. To expand their campaign, the Chamber sponsored a motorcade tour.



Despite the Chamber’s efforts, however, Ms. Raak noted that after election-day citizens lost interest in politics. To avoid launching their campaign from scratch year after year, the Chamber developed live news feeds to sustain interest. Similarly, the Chamber looked for ways to make the electoral race more competitive by reaching out to business-minded individuals and keeping politics local.

Discussion

Chad Tragakis then opened the panel to questions from the audience. He first asked Mr. Levine if he had any advice to institutions.

Peter Levine responded that how institutions can attract people to vote is by reiterating the importance of voting in K-12 curriculum beyond standard current event discussions. For example, teachers could quiz students’ knowledge of elections on tests; change the incentive structure; or, more importantly, discuss elections in class.

Chad Tragakis then asked Ms. Reeves and Ms. Raak how ASHA and the Chamber could reach out to its employees and members further.

Stefanie Reeves noted that the best way is to make information easy and accessible for people do not have time to do research themselves.

Similarly, **Sara Raak** believes the reason why the Chamber could reach out to large corporations is that surprisingly to her, large companies (such as McDonald’s and Toyota) did not have voting campaigns in place. If large organizations can adopt voting campaigns, she believes the effort will have a domino effect to encourage more employees to vote.

Chad Tragakis then asked Mr. Markey if the State Department tracked voting participation overseas.

Jack Markey responded that the State Department does not track participation in voting for it is done at the local and state level. What the Federal Voting Assistance Program, however, has made a priority is to encourage more voting in primary elections by making news available or by dispensing emails (especially during non-incumbent elections). Voting and disseminating voting information are the “grain works to defending what the United States is doing.”

Next, **Chad Tragakis** asked the panelists what respective groups are doing and what citizens could do to foster voting.

Frank Mankiewicz, Vice Chairman of Hill & Knowlton, former Pres Secretary to the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Presidential Campaign Director for Sen. George McGovern, questioned Mr. Markey about how Americans Abroad is considered one of the 52nd states of America.

Jack Markey commented that Democrats Abroad and Republicans Abroad are not part of the State Department, but PACs aimed to make primaries more open to their members. The State Department, on the other hand, is non-partisan. He notes that Democrats Abroad muddles the electoral process for although it holds a primary for citizens overseas, the PAC does not remind civilians that they still need to register with their states in order to vote in the actual election.

Dr. Jeffrey Biggs, Director of the Congressional Fellowship Program, American Political Science Association, pointed out that about 50 years ago, the understanding of civics only existed at the high school level. Similarly, he commented that voting is minimus engagement. The real goal is to foster motivated individuals to engage in politics. Although the Democratic primaries have attracted young voters at the university level, will the candidates be able to sustain their interest in the actual election?

Dr. Michael Schneider shared that he had printed-out a national turn-out summary, which showed that the general decline in voter participation is evident. He thinks it is unfortunate that it takes a crisis, such as the Vietnam War, to motivate Americans to vote. To Mr. Markey, he asked what the Department of Defense (DoD) does to foster voter participation.

Jack Markey responded that the DoD reaches out to military services, like the State Department, and to Voting Assistance Officers. He commented that redeployment is a problem since military personnel have to notify their state of a change in their absentee ballot addresses (which, during times of war, is low on their list to complete). Although getting mail and explaining procedures is a challenge, the military's participation in elections is high above the national standard.

Cesar Moreno, Associate Executive Director, United States Hispanic Leadership Institute (USHLI), asked how institutions should address the gap in education. He noted that about 50 percent of Latinos drop-out of high school (although they lose interest in the electoral process before dropping out). He believes that annual mock elections throughout high school would encourage Latinos to register to vote since the activity would foster a better understanding of the process and federal requirements.

Achaama Chandrasekaran, Heritage Translation and Publishing, noted that she agreed with Mr. Moreno. Voter education is imperative to foster knowledge as well as it makes a difference in the curriculum.

Next, **Chad Tragakis** asked Ms. Raak what the Chamber is doing the other 364 days of the year to encourage voting beyond election-day.

Sara Raak responded that the best way the Chamber has found to encourage people to vote is to make it *personal*. She notes, however, that the Chamber needs to maintain constant involvement in order to sustain the interest of citizens.

Stefanie Reeves agreed that a constant education effort is paramount. Like Ms. Raak, she found that voters lost interest after elections. As a result, continual effort and constant communication (such as in emails) is key. She then asked Mr. Levine if he saw significant differences in voting between students who had parents

who went to college and those who did not.

Peter Levine simplified his answer by stating that students who had parents who were involved in college *or* church (and were engaged themselves) were more likely to vote. He also said that if students' parents were connected to the civil rights movement, they were more likely to vote as well.

Dr. Sambhu Banik, Banik and Associates, Family Diagnostic and Therapeutic Center, asked Mr. Levine how should academic institutions enlist the non-college population.



Peter Levine commented that the more college education one has, the better off you are, and the more likely you are to vote. He believes citizens should pressure candidates to campaign for people to vote.

Dr. Sambhu Banik then asked if academic institutions could promote civic education like they teach sex education.

Peter Levine responded that academic institutions do promote civic education, but the quality and quantity of the information taught is not high enough or targeted at the right people.

Chad Tragakis concluded Panel I with the following thoughts:

- Every sector has a role to play;
- The importance of voting needs to be taught and encouraged at an early age;
- Voter participation must be sustained and made local, personal, and relevant;
- And reminders to vote are most pertinent and can be disseminated in a variety of methods.

10:45-12:00 PM

Panel II

Increasing Voter Participation: Lessons from Around the World

Dr. Michael Schneider opened Panel II by pointing out that there has been a large drop-out rate in education and that the purpose of this roundtable conference is to explore the procedural and attitudinal differences abroad and gather ideas as well as a sense of best practices in regard to voter activation. He noted that a study from the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) determined the different types of voter activation around the world. As a result, he posed to the panel: what lessons can the United States learn from other countries' electoral practices?

Christian Hennemeyer, Director of Programs for Africa, IFES, began the panelist discussion. Founded in 1977, IFES is an independent and neutral non-governmental organization that focuses on democracy and how democracy works with other organizations. Its main donor is the U.S. government (which some may believe taints the organizations' endeavors as suspect).

Internationally, IFES works in over 40 developing countries whose challenges are not qualitatively different from developed countries. Although there are differences in degree among the countries, developing nations still have a lack of understanding of the voting system and poorly-trained and aging poll workers as well as continue to struggle with campaign finance reform.

Another issue that all nations face on election-day is voter registration; for, as Mr. Hennemeyer notes, “only amateurs steal elections on election day.” Countries also are bombarded with apathetic and politically disinterested citizens. Of course, if compulsory voting exists, citizens vote (such as in Belgium, Australia, and Argentina).

Eastern Europe is an interesting case for citizens show real enthusiasm for elections although most Europeans are apathetic. In the developing world, however, apathy is viewed as a sin for “checking the election box” is a way to rebel against the system. People in developing nations also register to vote in order to receive identification cards. Although there is a high registration rate in developing nations, turn-out rates for presidential elections are low (and decrease from state to local elections as well).

Mr. Hennemeyer pointed out that marginalization is also a problem in developing nations for the electoral process commonly excludes women and the disabled. In addition, countries, such as the Congo, have few paved roads.

In the past, IFES gave a small grant to Iran to encourage civic engagement. The organization also launched a website that provided information on leading candidates and verbal debates, which had thousands of hits throughout Iran since the website is in Farsei and politically neutral. Therefore, Mr. Hennemeyer concluded that the “rubric of civic education” that works best in developing countries is initiatives that can be done cheaply and easily by utilizing popular channels. For example, Burundi subliminally advocates voting in soap operas. Similarly, other countries could put voting advertisements in plays, theaters, or concerts.

Indirect ways to foster electoral interest include supporting good media reporting as well as campaign finance reform. He predicts that countries will initially see cynicism in voting behavior, but as citizens have more faith and ability to influence the political process, countries will witness a higher level of civic engagement and a more profound interest in politics in general.

Francis Skrobiszewski, Director of the U.S.-Polish Trade Council and former Senior Vice President of the Hungarian-American Enterprise Fund, began by outlining the history of the Polish people’s ability to elect their officials and by analyzing the statistics on voter participation in elections since 1989. In Poland, he noted that voter participation in Parliamentary elections had generally been less than 50 percent except in 1989 and 2007; whereas voter participation in Presidential elections generally exceeded 60 percent.

On reflection, according to Mr. Skrobiszewski, three situations seem to stimulate enhanced voter participation. One, when there is a perception that something critical is at stake. Second, periods of increased voter participation were driven by young people ages 18 to 28. Third, online communication played a major role in mobilizing the vote in Poland in 2007 as citizens gained electoral information apart from party newspapers.

Thus, in 1989, the Polish electorate had an opportunity to affect change due to the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a result, voter participation for Parliamentary elections was up to 63 percent. Similarly, in 2007, many Polish citizens’ felt their way of life was at stake on certain social issues. There was particularly strong dissatisfaction among Polish youth with the government’s performance. Therefore, voter participation was up

to 54 percent that year.

In the case of Hungary and Poland, Mr. Skrobiszewski noted the vagaries of Parliamentary approaches whereby parties that fail to achieve a fixed threshold are not seated. He cited examples in past elections, where the socialists won a relatively smaller percent of the popular vote, but obtained a large percentage of seats in Parliament. He raised the issue of whether citizens who voted for winning candidates from



unseated parties would become disenchanted with the electoral process when their candidates won, but were not seated. Similarly, he cited Russian elections, in which many in the electorate might fail to participate out of a feeling of concern over government domination of the process since it largely controls the media and, therefore, the message.

To apply policies abroad to U.S. electoral systems, Mr. Skrobiszewski believes the United States should simplify processes and focus on education to encourage citizens to vote rather than instate a compulsory voting system. To conclude, he posed a few questions to the audience. What are our assumptions about voter participation? What are the objectives that should be achieved? What focus should be on voter participation—quantity or quality? What are the drivers of any election and do they vary from election to election?

Discussion

Dr. Michael Schneider then opened up the panel to discussion by commenting how the United States does not make it easy for citizens to vote since election-day is always on a Tuesday.

Dr. Sambhu Banik asked Mr. Hennemeyer what IFES does specifically to monitor elections in Iran and Liberia.

Christian Hennemeyer responded that IFES does little monitoring of elections for the organization is part of the countries' electoral process. Primarily, IFES offers technical assistance to electoral commissioners, long-term development processes, and dispute resolutions.

Frank Mankiewicz asked the panelists the meaning of “compulsory voting” and where it is effective.

Christian Hennemeyer answered that compulsory voting works where countries have well-managed databases. For example, Belgium arrests people for not voting. In other cases, countries establish car stops and check papers for a special stamp of voting. If the citizen was missing the special stamp, the police had the authority to imprison the individual or issue him or her a ticket.

Kena Vasquez commented that in Peru, citizens have to pay up to a fine of \$50 for not voting. To reinforce the fine, the Peruvian government will not renew a citizen's driver license without a receipt of the fine or a stamp that he or she has voted in the last election. Since having an ID is paramount in Peru, withholding a citizen's driver license is an effective motivator to pay voting fines.

Chad Tragakis then asked the panelists how culture is relevant and affects electoral strategies as well as how different cultural practices could be applied to the United States.

Peter Levine asked if Zimbabwe could realistically afford a recount of presidential ballots due to its hyperinflationary economy. Similar to the United States, where is the funding to recount ballots in Florida or Michigan?

Dr. Michael Schneider added if income tax should be voluntary or if campaign finance reform is likely.

Dr. Jeffrey Biggs pointed out that the United States is not going to see campaign finance reform until the Supreme Court changes its constitutional ruling.

Next, **Paul Mathew**, Chairman and CEO, EPMG Consulting, LLC, commented that in reality India is the largest and oldest democracy, but it is restricted. A serious handicap he sees in U.S. elections is that citizens select who will be the candidates for a political party versus India where political parties choose their own candidates. Since U.S. citizens choose the candidates, people need to have more education about the issues of the election.

Dr. Michael Schneider concluded Panel II with the following thoughts:

- Since a majority of the developing world is under the age of 25, developing countries are faced with a huge electoral challenge. Similarly, the U.S. boomlet (or the offspring of the baby boomer generation) has caused the population of youth as well as the number of youth in college to increase.
- Multimedia communication can be a challenge and an asset in political campaigns, particularly because such communication can be so rapid and flexible, and spread messages—whether valid and true or not—widely.
- There needs to be civic education outside the school system (K-12).
- Tough questions for thought:
 - What are the means to promote compulsory voting?
 - How can countries make voting easier?
 - How can the United States adapt practices that work for other cultures or its peers?

12:15-1:15 PM

Keynote Speaker
Frank Mankiewicz

Chad Tragakis began the luncheon session by introducing **Pavlina Majorosova** from The New School for Social Research.

Pavlina Majorosova then introduced **Bill Beaman**, Editor-in-Chief, Politics Magazine, and **Frank Mankiewicz**.

Frank Mankiewicz began his speech by postulating if not voting is actually a way to vote, which appears to be the mindset of current voters. He noted that the Vietnam War increased voter awareness and participation since the conflict was unpopular. He also said that the significance of the G.I. Bill cannot be ignored for it greatly impacted the 1950s and 1960s.

He then pointed out that there is not only an increase in young voters (due to Obama) in this election year, but an increase in the numbers of Catholics, the elderly, women, non-college graduates, and lunch-bucket democrats (or the working-class) who are voting as well. He believes that the increase in young registrants will not last through the primaries.

Mr. Mankiewicz also commented that voter education and registration is important. He, however, noted that the younger generation is reading less hard news and tuning into more soft news retrieved from cable, the Daily Show, or in conversation. He believes several Americans do not vote for they feel they are voting the whole time due to their interaction with television. Despite their constant interaction with news programs, however, Americans are still disenchanted from government and the political process.

When he was a campaign director, he noted that it did not take much to stay on message compared to today, which has five or six main news programs all competing to captivate the audience's attention. He also believes that since elections are so "frequent, constant, tumultuous, and repetitive" that Americans have no time to think or to know the choices that are offered. People today think that elections will solve healthcare or the mortgage crisis, but people who have witnessed politics in the last fifty years know differently.

Another trend he noticed in today's politics is that Independents are increasing in the United States and becoming the main determinants of elections.

Bill Beaman then opened the floor to questions from the audience. He commented that the most dangerous threat is people not reading actual news, but mostly commentaries. He finds it sad that today there are no ground reporters and that new technologies are more amenable to commentary.

Alicia Menendez, Political Outreach Manager, Rock the Vote, commented that there are old political problems, but no new solutions. According to Ms. Menendez, the government should mandate news facts from blogs to avoid confusion.

Frank Mankiewicz disagreed that the government should mandate fact.

George Sigalos stated that journalists do not aim to be objective, but to create a story.

Frank Mankiewicz responded that people tend to misjudge the role of television. According to Mr. Mankiewicz, the purpose of television is not to educate or entertain the masses, but to deliver all the possible options of an advertiser.

Jane Hall, Associate Professor, American University, noted that her students often lack an understanding of history and barely, if ever, read hard copy news. According to her, however, students have a mindset that if an issue is important, they will hear about it eventually and that reading newspapers online is like reading an actual paper. She thinks that social networking sites, such as facebook and myspace, have not been fully explored. She will not be surprised if Americans are voting online in fifty years. In addition, she commented that it is unfair to pressure the media.

Bill Beaman believes that people will not be assailed with an array of news sources. His worry, however, is that people will be able to stay isolated in their communities of thought for they will be able to pick and choose their sources of news.

Francis Skrobiszewski replied that people can become knowledgeable of certain subjects, but still be unaware of what else is happening in the world.

Dr. Sambhu Banik commented that governments cannot make voting mandatory for there are no incentives for motivation.

Francis Skrobiszewski again emphasized whether states are aiming for the quality or quantity of votes cast.

Laureen Laglagaron, Policy Analyst at the National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, Migration Policy Institute, asked how institutions, governments, or citizens can instill critical community skills. She noted that youth today is a master of multi-tasking (which blackberries symbolize). She postulates that perhaps the problem is the way people were raised, not necessarily an “American” problem.

Dr. Michael Schneider commented that party affiliation has diluted in the United States. Now, one-third of the vote is independent. As a result, people are required to “think critically without anchors.” Today, information is disseminated from the bottom-up rather than the top-down.

Frank Mankiewicz stated that the United States has the opposite problems of parliamentary forms of government. In other countries, most citizens know the candidates, but are not aware when election-day will be. In the United States, citizens are aware of election-day, but are not knowledgeable of the candidates or issues.

Cesar Moreno questioned how institutions or the government can capitalize voters’ attention. He postulated that perhaps some form of text-messaging could be used.

Jane Hall believes that students *are* concerned about world affairs and the reputation of the United States in international politics. She also notes that celebrity culture is a huge influence on young people not in school.

Francis Skrobiszewski noted that when he was growing up, there were only three news channels to watch. As a result, he acquired news about current events predominantly from those channels or other events. Today, he believes everything has been leveled due to the limited availability of time, so there is little depth.

Frank Mankiewicz shared a story from his book Remote Control. In a study of newborns, researchers set up televisions in hospital maternity wards. Every time that the researchers turned on the television (which was just a snowy screen), every three-day year old head on the ward turned to watch the television screen.

(Presentation of awards by Dr. Joy Cherian to Dr. Michael Schneider, Chad Tragakis, and Pavlina Majorosova for their service to AACR)

1:30-3:00 PM

Panel III

Instilling the Notion of Participatory Democracy in America’s Newest Voters: Young Voters and New Americans

To begin Panel III, **Chad Tragakis** introduced the moderator, **Joseph Meelookaran**, Treasurer of World Affairs Council of America, President of JMA Chartered and Member of AACR’s Advisory Board.

Joseph Meelookaran then introduced the panelists and noted that for the first time in awhile, there has been

a record high of naturalization in the United States.

Alicia Menendez presented first. She commented that today, the United States is the most diverse in history in terms of political attitudes and race. According to Ms. Menendez, youth is bigger than the baby boomer generation. The numbers of youth who voted jumped in the 2004 election, which is significant. Similarly, the numbers of youth who voted for Obama, Clinton, and McCain in the primaries have increased (and are expected to increase in general).

In reality, “youth” is not that young (ages 18 to 29). They commonly rate their top three issues as the economy, healthcare, and the war in Iraq.

She notes that 15,000 young Latinos become eligible to vote per month. The states with the most Latino populations are California, Texas, North Carolina, and Georgia. For example, she claimed that young Latinos chose the governor in California and Texas.

She concluded that young people respond best to peer to peer education, whether it is voting or academics. Similarly, she believes that there would be a higher turn-out rate of young voters if they were simply reminded.

Jane Hall proposed the idea of creating a network in the media targeted at youth in college initially and then expanded to all 18 to 29 year olds. She believes the most important issue that affects youth today is the Iraq War. According to her students, the top-three issues that most concern them are the economy (67 percent), Iraq (64 percent), and healthcare (46 percent). She notes that like adults, youth are concerned about being uninsured, the cost of healthcare, and being in debt (due to student loans).

Ms. Hall stated that students do not believe government surveillance of social networking sites, such as facebook and myspace, is an intrusion or violation of privacy. She also commented that abortion could be an issue in the upcoming election. Although Obama won due to the votes of young men and women, several students admit they like McCain due to his narratives and stories. Although they like Hillary too, they are more likely to vote for McCain.

Parag Mehta, Director of Training, Democratic National Committee (DNC), believes the extended primary season is good for the Democratic Party. For example, Texas felt they held more sway in the democratic primary due to the extension of the primary season.

He also noted that there is a high interest in politics in school. In addition, students tend to train their parents from what they retrieve from school.

During the 2004 election year, 54 percent of youth voted for Democrats. In 2006, two million youths returned to vote in the mid-election (62 percent of youth voted for Democrats). He explained that the party that youth registers for initially is likely to be their party for life.

In 2006, there was a 65 percent voter turn-out rate, which is the highest voter turn-out has been since the Vietnam War. In contrast, India had an 85 percent turn-out rate during that year, which it considered a failure of democracy. Therefore, Mr. Mehta explains that perhaps the United States needs to change its standards before it can address the low voter turn-out rate.

Mr. Mehta concluded that the DNC has created online web tools catered to constituents’ neighborhoods to encourage citizens to talk to locals on a list that the DNC generates.

Rich Beeson, Political Director, Republican National Committee (RNC), commented next. According to Mr. Beeson, text-messaging and the blogosphere could be good resources to encourage youth to vote. In 2006, he noted that youth comprised 12 percent of the electorate. He believes that McCain will appeal to youth due to his unscripted town hall meetings and neighbor-to-neighbor campaign tactics.

Laureen Laglagaron was the next presenter. According to Ms. Laglagaron, there has been an incredible growth in immigration, especially in Chicago suburbs (an area unused to immigrants). Therefore, she believes MPI needs to devise how to reach out to these New American voters.

Out of the total number of people who have immigrated to the United States, 20 million have become naturalized citizens who have integrated at a faster rate today than expected. Subsequently, one out five Americans is foreign born.

There are barriers to achieving naturalization and the right to vote. For example, she explains that the naturalization wait period has increased from 6 months to 17 months. Therefore, although candidates' campaigns are encouraging immigrants to naturalize, immigrants who wish to vote in this year's election will not be eligible to vote.

In addition, due to immigration reform, legal immigrants feel isolated and galvanized in the political process. Other barriers to voting include a naturalization test, which will become more difficult in October 2008. As a result, immigrants are further restricted from their right to vote. Finally, another barrier to voting is the absence of role models. She explained that if New Americans' parents do not vote, New Americans have less incentive to vote as well.

Cesar Moreno presented next. Founded in 1982, the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute (USHLI) aims to encourage Hispanics to participate in the political process. Due to the huge growth of the Hispanic population, the Hispanic vote is important in the voter participation debate.

His main point was how to capitalize the attention of young voters, specifically the Hispanic vote. He mentioned the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project that promotes "Su Voto Es Su Voz." He believes schools should teach about candidates and electoral issues in class for the students can then educate their parents. He also noted that USHLI has a Grassroots Leadership Development Program, which trains individuals to become federal, state, and local heads of state. The program was also adapted for college students, dubbed the Collegiate Leadership Development Program.

Dr. Piyush Agrawal, National Coordinator, Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) was the final panelist to present. He commented that in the 1972 U.S. election, the Indian vote was practically non-existent. He explained that Indian Americans had a cultural shock due to the United States' insistence of disclosing their party affiliation since party identification remains confidential in India. In 2000, he noted that 2 million Indian Americans started to participate in the U.S. electoral process.

He believes Indians are more issue-oriented than Americans who are more party-oriented. GOPIO was shocked when former President Bill Clinton did not declare an ambassador for India until after two years in office. Finally, he thought it was absurd that the United States will not let highly educated Indians with legal visas to remain in the United States to help the economy grow once their visas expire due to a crackdown on illegal immigration.

Discussion

Joseph Melookaran then opened the panel to questions from the audience.

Alicia Menendez commented that she believes there is a disconnection between transferring human capital to political capital. As a result, since Latinos are multiracial and bilingual, it is difficult to court the vote to the Latino demographic. In addition, since most in Latino and African communities do not have land lines, over-the-phone political surveys and campaigning over the phone do not reach these people.

Chad Tragakis then asked Mr. Beeson and Mr. Mehta about the most effective tactics the RNC and DNC are using to reach out to potential voters.

Rich Beeson replied that Europe has the same problem with land lines as the United States. To address this issue, Mr. Beeson noted that the RNC is trying to reach out to voters by text messaging and SMS through cell phones (similar to Obama's tactics during the primaries). He believes that the young does have a high level of interest in politics. The RNC just needs to learn how to harness this interest.

Parag Mehta mentioned that the DNC used to have different, independent desks that controlled certain demographics of the Democrat vote. He noted that this was a problem for the desks often became the "gatekeepers to communities." As a result, Mr. Mehta explained that when Governor Dean became the head of DNC, he changed the desks into Senior Level positions in an effort to include all constituencies concerned about an array of issues. Before, he noted the division of every constituent by sect did not cover all the DNC's issues effectively.

Mr. Mehta explained that the DNC also organizes faith-based outreach for he noted that Democrats' stances on issues are similar to American values. He also claimed that what moves most people to vote are people on the ballot who are most like themselves.

Zinelle October, Policy Analyst, National Association of Latino-Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), asked the panelists how they think the United States can engage drop-outs, or people in general, to become part of the electoral process.

Alicia Menendez noted that Rock the Vote had great success reaching to young people at social outlets (such as bars), media outlets, parenting sites, and single sites. She made the distinction that "youth outreach" is not always synonymous with "college outreach."

Similarly, **Parag Mehta** said that Young Voter Alliance targeted sporting events, bars, etc. in 2004 to encourage youth to vote. In 2006, he noticed there was a dramatic difference in the amount of youth who voted in the election most likely due to dissatisfaction with college tuition bills.

Rich Beeson mentioned that the RNC targets potential young voters at social outlets, such as WWE Raw. The RNC especially tries to target specific districts.

Alicia Menendez believes McCain successfully attracts young voters for he does not try to be "hip." She claims that a "performance piece does not fly" to mobilize the young to vote for a candidate that appears fake.

George Sigalos commented that McCain's ability to conduct town hall meetings and reach out to millions is unprecedented. It shows the GOP's "brilliance to maneuver these individuals."

Parag Mehta thinks institutions should promote voter protection from voter-caging techniques to encourage more youth to vote.

Cesar Moreno replied that institutions and governments “need to go back to the basics” to mobilize the young and new Americans to vote. For example, it is commonly held that immigration is the number one issue for Hispanics, but this is not always the case.

Dr. Joy Cherian commented that both the DNC and RNC tried to reach out to Asian-Americans in 1983. They are still in the process of attracting the Asian-American vote today.

Dr. Piyush Agrawal stated that perhaps there should be a separate conference about Project “Get Out the Vote” versus what theoretically affects voter participation.

Dr. Michael Schneider asked Ms. Laglagaron if she believes there will be a demographic change in the future.

Laureen Laglagaron replied that there is a zero-based analysis. According to her, the immigration system needs to be rethought (away from a point system). She believes the legalization of immigrants will not happen until the inauguration of a new administration.

Dr. Michael Schneider then posed the question if there was a significant difference in voting patterns between first, second, and third generations of new Americans.

Alicia Menendez reiterated that the Hispanic demographic is the fastest growing portion of the vote. She shared that when her father was trying to mobilize Hispanics to vote in the New Jersey caucus, several Hispanics thought he was doing something illegal by encouraging them to vote.

Laureen Laglagaron responded that MPI saw a big jump in voter participation between first-generations and second-generations of new Americans. She stated that another problem new Americans face that complicates their participation in the electoral process is not being able to speak the English language for “how can you encourage voting if they can’t speak English?”

Parag Mehta commented that the key to increasing voter participation is outreach in all fifty states. He noted that Obama changed the map for DNC due to his campaign tactics. As a result, he claimed that the DNC (and other institutions) need to talk to voters year round to sustain voting behavior. He stated there should be year-round voter-contact organizations, but the best way to keep voter interest is for candidates to deliver their promises.

Jane Hall reiterated that a problem with youth today is that they do not know American history or how the American government functions.

Joseph Meelookaran concluded Panel III with two final thoughts. One, institutions should focus on mobilizing citizens to vote in local elections to stimulate more voting in state and federal elections. Finally, he noted that there are twenty-two countries where non-citizens are allowed to participate in state and local elections. One locale in the United States is Tacoma Park, MD.

AACR’s Fifth Annual Roundtable Conference ended with awareness of the circumstances that affect voter participation as well as inspiration to encourage citizens to not only vote in elections, but to engage in the political process as part of their civic responsibility to America.

This report was prepared by Sarah Brigham, Hill & Knowlton, D.C.