

Disappearing Democracy?

A Report on Political Participation in Onondaga County

Onondaga Citizens League
2004 Study Report
Report No. 25

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2003-2004**

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Preface

For over 25 years, the Onondaga Citizens League has represented an outstanding example of citizen participation in public affairs in Central New York. Founded in 1978 and incorporated in 1979, OCL is an independent not-for-profit organization that encourages citizen education and involvement in public issues. OCL's annual study on a topic of community-wide importance culminates in a report designed to help citizens comprehend the issue and its implications, and give decision-makers recommendations for action.

The Onondaga Citizens League is open to any resident, business or organization in Central New York. While some join to become involved in the study process, many become members to support the concept and practice of citizen involvement in the study and resolution of pressing community issues.

This year's study topic, "*Disappearing Democracy: A Report on Political Participation in Onondaga County*", grew out of a deep concern for the dual trends of precipitously declining voter turnout and fewer and fewer candidates challenging incumbents for elected office. The board knows that the problems are not unique to Onondaga County, but believes that a local view of the issues, and proposals for local, as well as state level solutions, are a necessary first step toward positive change.

Special thanks are extended to the individual and corporate members who support the work of the League through their membership dues and financial donations, and to University College of Syracuse University, which provides administrative support without which the Onondaga Citizens League, and the study, would not be possible.

Sandra Barrett
Executive Vice President

Acknowledgements

Much like the voter registration drives, voter education efforts and the political campaigns that were such an integral part of our focus this year, the completion of this study resulted from the conscientious and selfless work of many individuals and organizations. We are deeply indebted to the members of the 2004 study committee who labored this past year to understand more fully the nature and scope of declining voter participation as well as the contributing factors associated with it. The committee members also engaged numerous individuals in a variety of innovative forums to identify thoughtful approaches to help reverse these trends. I am deeply grateful for their generous contributions of time, ideas and hard work.

We also acknowledge the steady hand of Sandra Barrett, executive vice president of the Onondaga Citizens League, in thoughtfully guiding the research process, recruiting resource people and helping us maintain our schedule. Additionally, our writer, Carol Boll, brought enthusiasm, grace and clarity to our discussions and deliberations. The strength and clarity of her writing helped define the challenges to increased voter participation while simultaneously amplifying our recommendations.

One final acknowledgement goes to Ann C. Michel who, through her firm Knowledge Systems & Research, provided OCL with a professionally designed and implemented telephone survey of nonvoters in Onondaga County. The survey constituted a key dimension of our study, providing first-hand understanding of local reasons for voter nonparticipation, and greatly informed our findings and recommendations.

We are saddened to note the loss of Ann, who epitomized the caliber of civic participation that we hope our recommendations might foster. Long ago, Ann established her unwavering commitment to the Syracuse area through service in the public and nonprofit sectors. Blessed with an uncommon intellect, she used it in untiring service to our community, and we see the results all around us. Through her public service and civic leadership, our community has been considerably enriched.

Sadly, we also note the loss of another community leader, Helen Zych, a member of this year's study committee, whose long affiliation with the League of Women Voters and involvement in the community brought valuable insight to our deliberations and this study. Her service to OCL spanned more than two decades and included significant leadership roles, among them serving as co-chair of two previous OCL studies.

Both Helen and Ann leave exemplary legacies of civic engagement and community service and will be missed. If more of us were engaged at their level of commitment, we would likely find no need for a study on this topic. With heartfelt gratitude, therefore, we dedicate this study to their memory. Moreover, we seek to emulate their example as we move forward to implement these recommendations.

Steven W. Kulick
Study Chair

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Introduction

Last fall, when the Onondaga Citizens League decided to undertake this study of local political participation, we didn't know that in November 2003 voter turnout in Onondaga County would reach an all-time low, 13 of 19 legislators as well as the county executive would run for reelection unopposed, and several new campaigns for government reform would take hold across the state.

The downward trend in voter turnout began in 1960, with an accelerated rate of decline among younger voters. The pattern of gerrymandered legislative districts creating party-controlled strongholds was well entrenched. Primary and election campaign costs had soared. Civic life in general seemed to decline. And in New York, we had gone 19 years without an on-time state budget, just one symptom of our dysfunctional legislative process.

As our study progressed, we felt Election 2004 was shaping up to be an exception to the rule - the heightened interest in the presidential election, the closeness of the 2000 vote, the numerous voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, and the seriousness of the issues at play, would, we and many others thought, result in a record turnout and particularly a surge in young voters.

In fact, voter turnout did rise sharply, reaching their highest levels since 1968, according to post-elections surveys by the Shorenstein Center at Harvard, and first-time voters fueled much of that increase. Election issues motivated the turnout increase this year among both first-time and repeat voters, and a majority of voters, especially first-time voters, told the surveyors they voted in part "because I really disliked one of the candidates." First time voters were also three times more likely to say the reason they voted was "my family or friends encouraged me to vote" (61 percent) or because "a group of organization helped me register to vote" (14 percent).

On the negative side, the Pew Research Center's quadrennial post-election survey found that voters believe this year's presidential campaign was much more negative than in previous elections; 72 percent said there was more mudslinging, compared to 34 percent who said that four years ago. The feeling was shared by Republicans and Democrats alike. At the same time, the Pew survey found more than eight in ten voters said they thought the information they received during the election campaign was informative. While only 4 percent of voters reported having a problem while voting, whether by mail or on Election Day, only 68 percent are very confident their vote was counted accurately and fewer than half are very confident that votes were counted accurately nationally. Regarding sources of campaign news nationally, the Pew survey found television a primary source for 76 percent of voters, and newspapers a primary source for 46 percent. The proportion citing the Internet as a campaign news source almost doubled, from 11 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2004, with 40 percent of those under-30 voters citing it as a main source.

In Onondaga County, the number of registered voters was at an all-time high of 306,860, up from total enrollment of 285,718 in 2003. Voter turnout in the county was 215,888, or 70.3% of all registered voters. The rate among the 278,579 voters considered 'active' was 77.5% - up a percent or two from 2000 and 1996, but still far below earlier presidential election years.

The problem, of course, is how to increase the upswing in voter turnout and build momentum in off-year and local elections. In New York State, the issue of dysfunctional, ineffective state government has captured the attention of many citizens, and many grassroots groups have formed to support candidates and challengers committed to reform, promote legislative reform and advocate for constitutional change. The Onondaga Citizens League is among those organizations and interest groups that have passed resolutions in support of the so-called Brennan Center reforms and has

vowed to keep pressure on the local state delegation to make the Legislature more transparent and accountable. This reform movement, along with the high profile gubernatorial and U.S Senate races in two years, has the potential to prompt record-breaking turnout.

While turnout was up in 2004, there is still a disturbingly high percentage of eligible voters who do not register, or did not vote in the elections. And locally, at the city and county, and town and village levels, it remains a major challenge to improve the dismal 2003 countywide turnout figure of 30 percent. Many structural as well as behavioral changes are required. Making legislators more accessible and responsive to their constituencies will help voters feel that politicians do listen and that there is a reason to vote. More awareness and knowledge of the issues, which requires the assistance of the media, goes a long way toward increasing political participation. While some citizens have virtually no interest in voting, surveys, as well as experience, show that changes in the registration system, and alternative voting methods, and more user-friendly voting places could increase voter participation significantly.

OCL believes that the democratic process is the heart of our civic life. Engagement in the political process can empower individuals and communities and make our governance structure more responsive to the people it serves. Let's take all possible steps to revitalize the political process in Onondaga County.

Disappearing Democracy?

A Report on Political Participation in Onondaga County

Onondaga Citizens League

Executive Summary

In America, the right to vote stands as a constitutional protection of our democracy. But with voter turnout in a steady decline over the past several decades, and a growing number of uncontested races due to a scarcity of challengers, the very authenticity of our representative form of government falls into question. If we are to ensure that our government leaders truly speak for the interests and ideals of those they were elected to represent, we as a society must take steps to reverse these alarming trends.

The problem of low voter turnout is not unique to Onondaga County; voting rates have been in a decline locally and nationally since the 1960s. Odd-year elections, with no presidential or gubernatorial race to spark interest, suffer the most. Turnout in the local 2003 elections reached just 30 percent; in 2001 it was 38 percent. Demographically, young voters are among the least likely to vote; in 2003, only 6.8 percent of registered voters ages 18 to 24 bothered to vote in Onondaga County. In addition to young voters, research indicates that individuals from lower income and educational levels also are significantly less likely to vote.

For its 2004 study project, the Onondaga Citizens League decided to examine the issue of declining political participation, including voter turnout and the related issue of candidate recruitment, with two major objectives in mind: first, to determine the causes of low voter turnout and the difficulty of recruiting individuals to run for public office; and second, to propose a series of recommendations designed to address those problems on both the local and statewide levels.

Our information-gathering methods included: town hall sessions held throughout the county; presentations at several Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today (TNT) meetings; talks by various local experts; media and candidate panel discussions; and a telephone survey of 357 registered Onondaga County voters who had not participated in recent elections. Because the voting rates of young people are among the lowest, we also held discussions with high school government classes and met with student focus groups from Syracuse University and Onondaga Community College. We also conducted background research on national and local voting trends and examined local media coverage during the fall 2003 election cycle.

Our findings, not surprisingly, revealed that the issue of low voter turnout is a very complex problem with no easy solutions. A number of factors contribute to the decline: public detachment from the political process; citizens' inability to see connections between their lives and the issues; busy lifestyles that leave no time for voting; and frustration over negative campaigns and campaign coverage. In addition, those from lower-income groups, in particular, also face logistical difficulties (for instance, transportation or child-care issues) that discourage them from voting; they also share in the broader frustration among voters that their vote just won't make a difference.

In our telephone survey, the number-one reason people across all age groups cited for not voting in local elections in 2003 was "Politicians don't listen." People also said they were too busy to vote, or they felt they didn't know enough about the election.

The survey results also point out that convenience (or inconvenience) of voting is particularly critical to older (over age 60) voters, with nearly 25 percent of them citing “unable to get to the polls” as a primary reason for not voting.

Other research indicates younger voters have their own reasons for not voting. In addition to the same concern that politicians just don’t listen, they cite a lack of information on candidates and campaign issues; the sense that they are being ignored by the political parties and candidates; general skepticism toward candidates and the media; and a lack of information about registration procedures and polling sites. In addition, nearly 28 percent of 18- to 30-year-olds in our survey said they were out of town on Election Day; the obstacles and confusion among college students concerning voting procedures undoubtedly also contribute to their low turnout rates.

Another factor that exacerbates the problem of low voter turnout overall is the high number of uncontested races on the local, county and state level. When voters are not presented with a choice at the ballot box, they see little point in voting on Election Day. But challengers are scarce when incumbents hold significant advantages in terms of money, staff and name recognition. The process of redistricting, where boundaries are crafted in such a way as to give an overwhelming edge to the party in power, is another significant problem that needs to be addressed. Other difficulties cited by former candidates include the prohibitive time commitment required for mounting a campaign; lack of funds and party support; and a reluctance to expose themselves and their family to negative campaign tactics.

Our findings spread the responsibility for reversing the trend of declining voter participation among several societal institutions: the political parties and candidates themselves; the media; the schools; boards of elections; and state and local governing bodies. **Our recommendations, outlined below, have three objectives: make registration and voting more convenient; give voters more useful information on issues and candidates; and level the playing field for candidates to political office.**

Short-term Initiatives:

- The State Legislature should institute same-day registration so that voters may register through Election Day.
- The Board of Elections should provide an absentee ballot to anybody who wants one, regardless of need.
- The media must focus on responsible, informative news coverage rather than on sensational tidbits or “horse-race” coverage of campaign strategies. It also must expand coverage of local races and issues leading up to the elections.
- Civic or other interested groups should develop an “I voted” lapel sticker to distribute at all polling sites.
- The Board of Elections should increase its efforts to keep citizens informed by: sponsoring a voter information page in the telephone book; expanding pre-Election Day mailers to include such information as polling sites and hours, and candidate information; and sponsoring “How To Vote” infomercials.
- The Board of Elections must ensure that all poll workers are friendly and helpful, particularly to those who may be unfamiliar with procedures. They should take the initiative in offering to provide first-time or infrequent voters with a short tutorial on the mechanics of voting.
- Civic groups and political parties must organize and promote more candidate forums.

Youth-based Initiatives:

- Schools are urged to include voter registration information and an absentee ballot (for college-bound seniors) along with every high school diploma.
- Parties must engage youth, perhaps by recruiting them as poll workers or as registration volunteers.
- The Board of Elections and all colleges and universities should provide information, via their Web site, specific to the concerns of voting-age college students, including where they can legally vote, how they can register, etc.
- Schools are encouraged to nurture good citizenship habits among children from an early age with initiatives such as mock elections, visits from candidates or officeholders, and dedicating a bulletin board to community issues.

Candidate Recruitment Initiatives:

- Through legislative action, the state must shift the power of redistricting from politicians to a nonpartisan commission in order to reduce the power of incumbency and party affiliation that almost guarantees uncontested races.
- Political parties or citizens' advocacy groups should develop candidate preparation and training programs to encourage potential candidates to seek public office and to provide critical training for those already involved in a campaign.
- The county must set up an effective ethics commission to deter negative and misleading campaign activities.
- Our lawmakers must change campaign finance laws to require candidates for countywide office and some local offices (those raising more than \$1,000, for instance) to file electronic campaign finance statements.

Long-term Initiatives:

- Our Board of Elections must develop a method for fully utilizing the resources of the Internet to encourage and facilitate voter registration procedures.
- Lawmakers should explore the possibilities for implementing a computerized program by which voters can access their local ballot from any polling site in the state simply by swiping a personal identification card.
- Our legislative bodies must establish public financing for all statewide and, eventually, local races to level the playing field between highly funded incumbents and under-funded challengers.
- Lawmakers at all levels must reform campaign finance law to require incumbents to dispose of any remaining funds in their war chest at the completion of each campaign.

Conclusion

Given the long-term ramifications of low voter turnout and the sad reality that our elected officials are chosen by an increasingly smaller percentage of the electorate, we believe that our political, societal and cultural institutions all bear some responsibility for reversing this alarming trend toward political disengagement.

Our political parties must work toward engaging voters, particularly young and lower-income voters. Our media must re-examine its definitions of “newsworthy” material and ensure that its campaign content focuses more on substantive coverage of issues and less on titillating – but largely useless – information on strategies or personal tidbits. Our schools must nurture good citizenship habits in our children and youth from an early age. And, finally, our elected representatives must put their own self interest aside and seriously address the ramifications of a system that so overwhelmingly favors incumbency.

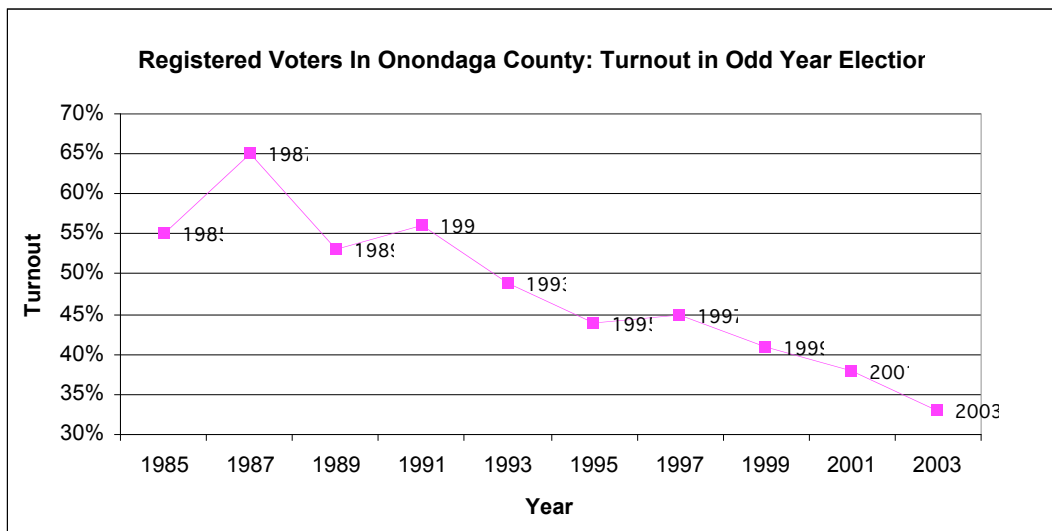
Some of our recommended steps – a friendly polling place, for instance – are quite small; others, like redistricting, are far-reaching and unlikely to be accomplished quickly or easily. But they’re all designed to start the process of changing attitudes, fostering habits of good citizenship, and reaching out to and engaging an increasingly disengaged electorate. We hold out hope that with enough imagination, cooperation and determination, we can effect the kind of change that, with time, will bring our electoral system back in line with what our forefathers had intended. If we are to protect and preserve the democratic ideals upon which our government was founded, we have no other choice.

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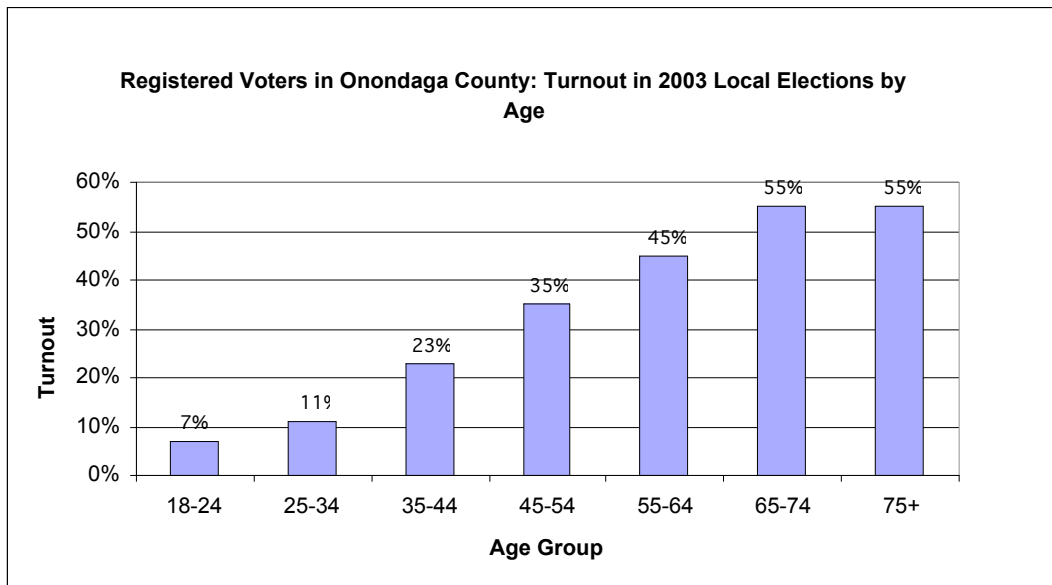
Overview

As Americans, we are taught to value and cherish one simple ideal that lies at the heart of our freedom: One person, one vote. The validity of our democratic form of government rests on the foundation that those who govern truly represent the choices of the American electorate. That foundation, however, is growing increasingly shaky as the number of eligible voters who actually exercise their most basic of civic responsibilities – voting in local, state and national elections – continues to shrink and, in fact, already has reached alarmingly low levels among our youngest voters.

The voting rate has been declining since the '60s, both nationally and locally – in spite of higher education levels of voters today, greater numbers of African-American and female voters, and registration initiatives such as the 1993 Motor Voter Act. In 1960, for instance, 63 percent of eligible Americans – which includes registered *and* nonregistered – voted. In 1996, turnout fell to a new (presidential-year) low of 49 percent, meaning more Americans stayed home than voted for president. The historical trend is apparent locally even when we limit data to those who are already registered to vote: In 1960, turnout among active registered voters in Onondaga County was 92 percent; in 2000, it was 77 percent. If we consider all *eligible* voters in Onondaga County – again, registered and nonregistered – only 60 percent cast ballots in the 2000 election. Odd-year, local elections (with no presidential or gubernatorial contests to spark widespread interest) particularly suffer from apathy among the electorate, with turnout under 50 percent during the past 10 years. In 2003, turnout among registered voters in Onondaga County dipped to 33 percent.



Turnout among younger voters always has been lower than among older voters, but the trend is intensifying. In the 1972 presidential election, for instance, turnout among voters under age 30 was at 50 percent; in 2000, it was barely 30 percent. In the 2003 local elections, the turnout rate for registered voters ages 18 to 24 was a dismal 6.8 percent. For those between the ages of 25 and 34, it was just under 11 percent.



Studies show that those most likely to vote include senior citizens and those with higher income and educational levels. Least likely are young people, Hispanics, and those with lower incomes and less formal education.

While some might argue that low voter turnout is not necessarily a bad thing – that it even could be construed as an indication of voter satisfaction with the status quo – research supports a bleaker reality: that many voters feel increasingly alienated by the political process; disaffected by the issues; too busy or logistically unable to vote; or simply frustrated over their own ability (or inability) to make a difference. **Disinterest clearly is not a factor. In a telephone survey of 357 local registered voters who have chosen not to participate in recent elections, 77 percent consider themselves somewhat or very interested in community government and politics. Nevertheless, for various reasons they have chosen to opt out of the electoral process in recent years.**

Research shows that logistical issues (transportation or child care concerns, for instance), lack of registration information, and a belief that their vote just won't make a difference anyway are three of the primary factors behind the low turnout rates of those from lower socioeconomic levels. Transportation issues and the convenience (or inconvenience) of voting also is a significant issue among senior citizens.

Young people bring their own unique set of factors to the table. In many cases, the low turnout rate among young voters reflects their disenchantment with candidates and the political process; frustration over the lack of useful information on candidates and issues; confusion (particularly among college students) over registration procedures and location of polling sites; and an inability to identify with parties or candidates, among other factors.

Members of Generation Y (generally defined as those born between 1979 and 1994) tend to exhibit low levels of political engagement in general, a characteristic attributed by some to the fact that they have not been tested by catastrophic economic hardship, such as the Depression of their grandparents' generation, or had to deal with a military draft, as many of their parents did during the Vietnam era. And while President John F. Kennedy more than four decades ago rallied young people to civic service, political leaders and parties today too often overlook the potential they embody. Young people, in turn, often fail to see the relevance of politics to their lives. In a sobering report issued this summer by the Leon and Sylvia Panetta Institute, a public-policy think tank based at

California State University, only 19 percent of college students surveyed believe that politics is “very relevant” to their lives; 43 percent believe it has little or no relevance. Perhaps one factor in this perspective is the reality that many young people are at a point in their lives where they have not yet established ties to a particular community and therefore feel less connected to issues, particularly in local elections.

Clearly, the growing problem of citizen apathy is a complex issue, with myriad contributing factors – and no easy solutions. While ultimate responsibility for voting obviously rests with voters (or, more precisely, nonvoters) themselves, if we are to protect the authenticity of our representative form of government, then our political, societal and cultural institutions also must bear some responsibility in reversing this disturbing trend.

Influencing factors – The family unquestionably plays an important part in fostering good voting habits, with parents serving as vital role models for civic engagement. Unfortunately, the busy pace of family life today and the fact that many adults feel politically disaffected, or simply don’t have time to vote, can have a long-term impact on the attitudes of their children. While this clearly is a fundamental piece of the problem, for the purposes of this study we focus on institutional issues that can be addressed on the local or statewide level, among them:

- **Political Parties** – Research shows that individuals who are loyal to a political party are more likely to vote than those who are uncommitted. But how actively do parties reach out to voters? Are they doing enough to foster civic engagement among voters? For example: Studies show that parties typically ignore young people because they don’t vote; young people, in turn, don’t vote because they feel neglected and left out. We also explore possible roles parties can play in generating public interest in candidates, and in recruiting and training individuals to run for office.
- **Media** – In today’s fast-paced, round-the-clock, highly competitive world of news, the business of covering elections has changed. Traditional media outlets face increased competition from alternative news sources, most significantly the Internet, and that fact colors their own decisions toward coverage. Representatives of the media cite the need to hold readers’ or viewers’ interest with offbeat, often sensationalized content; voters cite their frustration with the media’s preoccupation with the trivial, and a tone of cynicism and negativity that dates back to the mid-’70s. How much responsibility do members of our news media bear for turning off voters by fostering an attitude of cynicism and hopelessness?
- **Governmental factors** – How do the issues of redistricting and public financing affect voter interest and the willingness of challengers to run for office? The problem of uncontested races – a significant problem in congressional, state, county and local elections – clearly plays a role in depressing voter turnout. After all, why bother to vote when the outcome is a foregone conclusion? But challengers are scarce when it means they would have to face off against incumbents holding an overwhelming edge in terms of money, staff, and, in the case of some districts, party enrollment. In the New York State Legislature, for instance, incumbents are returned to office more than 98 percent of the time. We doubt that constituent satisfaction is the primary factor keeping them there.
- **Schools** – While NYS does require a Participation in Government course in order for seniors to graduate, should schools be doing more to cultivate habits of good citizenship? What role can (or should) they play in building, from the early years, an awareness of civic responsibility that children may not see modeled at home?
- **Internet** – The burgeoning technology of the Internet clearly has influenced our lifestyles in myriad ways, from how we do our shopping and banking to how we follow current events

and communicate with loved ones. How might it serve as a tool for promoting higher rates of voting and political and civic involvement?

Findings

Issues affecting voter participation:

- **Politicians Don't Listen.** In a telephone survey of 357 registered but nonvoting Onondaga County residents, the number-one reason for not voting among virtually all age groups was the belief that politicians just don't listen (cited by 26 percent of our respondents). Similarly, when asked the open-ended question "What would make you more likely to vote?" **respondents cited their desire for better candidates more than any other factor.** Several participants in our focus groups echoed this concern and expressed their belief that politicians just say what they think you want to hear.
- **Too busy or unable to overcome logistical difficulties.** The number-one reason cited nationally in 2000 U.S. Census data was "Too busy to vote," and our local nonvoter survey echoed that finding, with 22 percent of respondents across all age groups citing "More pressing matters to deal with" as the reason they didn't vote in the last election. Among the difficulties mentioned by local residents in our focus groups and public meetings: inability to get time off work or otherwise too busy, lack of transportation, and child-care issues. One OCC student noted that between her day job and her night classes, she simply has no free time to get to the polls. Logistical concerns such as transportation and child care needs are a particular concern among those of lower socioeconomic means. Senior citizens, too, cite logistical difficulties – nearly 25 percent of those over the age of 60 who were surveyed said they did not vote because they were unable to get to the polls. **More than a third of older voters also said they would be more likely to vote if there were more convenient alternatives.**
- **Lack of information on candidates and issues.** This emerged as a major factor among all age groups in our nonvoter telephone survey (cited by 21 percent). Throughout our study, focus group participants also said that while they are interested in the issues, they lack information useful in making decisions. "When I turn on the TV or read a newspaper, I find there's less about issues and more about what the candidates did today," said one SU student. "They don't give us the differences between the candidates. I have to do the research on my own." **Forty-seven percent of nonvoters surveyed said if there was more useful information in brochures or newspapers they would be much more likely to vote in the next local election.**
- **Disaffected by the process.** They didn't feel that voting was a priority or made a difference; and they don't recognize how issues affect them. In informal focus group gatherings at Una Café (West Onondaga and West streets), neighborhood residents said they felt disenfranchised by the electoral process because of their race and lower socioeconomic status; others said they didn't feel that their vote would make a difference.
- **Lack of community ties.** Relocation for a job or other reasons is much more commonplace today than in the past, resulting in fewer attachments to a specific community. "There's nothing to hold people to a certain place today," said one resident, "whereas once you knew everybody who lived on your street, and you lived there and you died there."
- **Intimidation factor.** New or inexperienced voters often feel unwelcome at the polling sites, intimidated by the voting machine, and afraid to ask for help. Poll workers, we were told, often appeared unfriendly or unwelcoming.
- **Lack of party identification.** They don't feel any party represents them. This is a significant problem among the young.

- **Negative campaigning and cynical news coverage.** “All you see is the candidates bashing each other,” said one OCC student. “I’d like them to say, ‘This is my plan. This is my point of view. If you agree, vote for me.’ ”
- **Lack of competition.** This is a significant problem, especially in congressional, state legislative and local races. In the county legislature elections last year, only six of 19 incumbents even faced challenges to their re-election. When voters are denied a choice at the ballot box, they are disinclined to participate in what amounts to a meaningless electoral exercise.

Significant factors among young people:

- **Lack of faith in candidates.** In our telephone survey of Onondaga County nonvoters, more than 21 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 30 cited “Politicians don’t listen” as their reason for not voting in 2003.
- **Lack of information.** Another 21 percent of young nonvoters said they didn’t know enough about the election to vote. Along the same lines, young people in our focus groups expressed a high degree of cynicism toward the media and toward the campaign messages they hear. Observed one SU student: “Most of the coverage is just campaign ads. They just slander the other guy, and there’s nothing about their own views.” Another student echoed that sentiment: “If I’m going to vote, I want to be knowledgeable about it. But I want the truth, not just what they (the candidates) think I want to hear.”
- **Lack of party identification.** Students in our focus groups repeatedly voiced the sense that neither major party represents their views or cares about them. “No one urges young people to vote,” said one. “No one really cares about us. The candidates don’t focus on *us*, so a lot of kids are apathetic because they just feel they don’t have any clout.”
- **Lack of knowledge of registration and voting procedures.** Several young people voiced uncertainty over how to register, how to obtain an absentee ballot, what is required of them in order to register and vote, and where they should go to vote. This is a particularly confusing area for college students living away from home. Observed one high school student, “I think the actual visibility of registration efforts is relatively low compared to how much press there is about ‘getting out the vote.’ The amount of money actually spent on getting kids to vote is small. Kids really have to take the initiative to get registered.”
- **Too busy or general lack of interest.** “I have a lot of opinions, but I just haven’t gotten around to registering yet,” said one high school student. “I’m busy with other things,” said another. Echoed one SU student, “With everything I’ve been doing in school, registering to vote has never been a focus or talked about a lot, so I just never did.”

Issues relating to candidate recruitment

- **Prohibitive time commitment.** Candidates cite the difficulty of taking necessary time off work to run an effective campaign.
- **Lack of funds.** The problem of insufficient funds for mounting a run for office is particularly critical when facing an entrenched, heavily funded incumbent.
- **Lack of party support.** “I felt a little bit like I was thrown to the wolves,” said one Syracuse city councilor of his first, unsuccessful bid for a city council seat. “The party seemed to feel that as long as they had somebody on the ballot, that was enough.”
- **Districts that overwhelmingly favor one party.** Areas affected by redistricting – where registrations for one party overwhelm those of the opposing party – make it nearly impossible for a candidate of the minority party to mount a successful challenge.
- **Insurmountable advantages of the incumbent.** Incumbency means more money, more staff, and more name recognition. In explaining his defeat to a 22-year incumbent of the county legislature, one panelist declared, “It wasn’t issues, but name recognition with these voters. There were no issues.”

- **Negative campaigns.** The negative tone that too often permeates the campaign process, and reluctance to subject family to the rigors and attacks, can discourage otherwise willing candidates from making a run for office. Currently there is no mechanism in place for monitoring or “policing” negative campaign tactics.

Recommendations

As stated earlier, no one factor is the cause of voter apathy, and clearly no one solution exists for reversing the trend. But in the interests of beginning that process, we have compiled a list of recommendations that can be pursued on the local or statewide level that we believe will help us toward that end.

We also acknowledge that change comes slowly, and the status quo – particularly when it serves the interests of those in power – is not an easy thing to change. With that in mind, we have included along with our immediate recommendations several long-term recommendations that will require of our elected leaders enormous vision, courage and commitment to the greater good – but which, we believe, will go a long way toward protecting the integrity of our form of government and restoring the faith of a citizenry that we fear is losing sight of its own role in the electoral process.

Steps To Take Now:

1. Registration Initiatives

- **Institute same-day registration.** Perhaps the single most critical step we can take toward boosting voter turnout is facilitating the process of registration. Our study research shows that there is an enormous amount of confusion, particularly among young people, concerning how to register, when to register and where to register. One such measure that could help would be to extend the registration period through to Election Day. States are required by federal law to keep registration rolls open at least to within 30 days of a presidential election. Currently in Onondaga County, voters must register at least 25 days before an election. Often those who might be interested in voting, or who haven’t decided whether they want to vote yet, are not aware of this deadline; and, on the day when interest in the campaigns is necessarily highest, they find it is too late for them to participate at the polls. This is unfortunate, because research shows that in the six states that allow same-day registration (and in North Dakota, which has no registration), voter turnout is significantly higher than in other states. In the 2000 presidential election, for instance, turnout in those states was 15 percentage points higher than in other states. In the light of such evidence, we recommend a statewide extension of the registration period through to Election Day. It’s a functional deadline and would require of the potential voter nothing more than a trip to the polls to register and cast a ballot at the same time.
- **Establish a voter information page in the local telephone book.** This page would provide information on registration procedures, registration dates, election dates, and Web sites for the county board of elections and political parties.

2. Voter Turnout Initiatives

- **Retool pre-Election Day mailers.** Residents in our nonvoter survey cited “more useful information” as the number-one factor that would motivate them to vote in the next local election. A total of 47 percent of respondents (across all ages, but highest among voters ages 18-30) cited this as the most critical factor. We believe that one way of providing at least a portion of that information is through mailers that currently go out from the County Board of Elections prior to Election Day. We urge the board to re-examine them with an eye toward incorporating additional information in them, for instance, polling sites and hours, district

number, information on candidates running in that district, and a copy of the appropriate ballot.

- **Make “no excuse” absentee ballots available to all – without regard to need.** Currently, 22 states allow voters to obtain “no excuse” absentee ballots. (Onondaga County currently provides absentee ballots to registered voters who will be outside of Onondaga County or who are physically unable to get to the polls on Election Day.) Absentee ballots for all who request them would be a particular boon to those who face logistical or other difficulties in getting to the polls on Election Day. In our survey of nonvoters, the convenience of voting emerged as a particularly important factor among those 60 or older. “Voting by mail” was the number-one factor cited by respondents in that age group when they were asked what would motivate them to vote in the next local election. Internet voting or voting by mail also would be significant motivators for those in the under-30 age group.
- **News media must provide responsible coverage.** Because cynicism and negativity simply feed public disenchantment with the political process, our print and electronic media bear an enormous responsibility for monitoring the tone and substance of their election coverage. Coverage that focuses on elections as though they were a “horse race” diminishes both the process and the significance of the outcome. It also provides little in the way of “useful information,” which our survey respondents cite as a critical motivating factor in getting them to the polls on Election Day. We find it telling that in an era of round-the-clock news coverage and an unprecedented number of information outlets – including cable and network TV, traditional newspapers, and online news sources – many of those who participated in our study still complained of a lack of information on the issues. We wonder if this might be, at least in part, an outcome of the news media’s tendency too often to favor style over substance in its political coverage.

Coverage of campaign tactics and strategies, and constant polling are of questionable value in helping voters make an informed choice. While we believe that the problems of cynical, negative coverage are more characteristic of national rather than local media, they do nevertheless color the perceptions of voters at the local level and take an inevitable toll on voter turnout.

- **Local news media should increase the *quantity* of coverage.** A review of local daily campaign coverage in the month leading up to the 2003 fall elections showed that election-related stories were overwhelmingly issues oriented, and we applaud *The Post-Standard* for that. (Unfortunately, the three local TV stations declined to participate in this study, citing legal restrictions on allowing access to scripts and logs, so these remarks relate strictly to local newspaper coverage. We thank *The Post-Standard* for its assistance in this effort.) Particularly helpful were those articles (in both the daily newspaper and in its weekly Neighbors section) that asked opposing candidates the same question and then printed their responses. What we do feel is lacking, however, is the *quantity* of local election coverage, which in the period reviewed appears to be thin and sporadic. According to our review, coverage of seven city common council races, four city school board races, 19 county legislature races (only six contested), and county comptroller and district attorney contests consisted of 54 articles – 44 news articles, nine editorials and one column – in the five-week period preceding the election. And most of these articles appeared in Neighbors, a weekly news supplement with content specifically tailored to readers of a common geographical area. As a result, readers who purchased their newspaper regularly at work might have missed local election articles that impacted the village or suburb in which they lived. In an example of scant coverage, the 2003 race for district attorney – where the 12-year incumbent faced his first challenger – generated only two articles, one of which related just peripherally to the campaign. While local races obviously don’t have the allure of national contests, the

outcome of a city council, school board, district attorney or county legislature race more directly affects local voters than does the outcome of those higher-profile national elections; therefore, we feel that such campaigns are worthy of more coverage than they received during this particular election cycle.

- **Candidate forums.** Again, with the goal of better educating voters on the candidates and the issues, political parties and other civic groups must shoulder more responsibility for bringing their candidates to the attention of voters. We urge them specifically to take on a more active role in sponsoring town hall meetings or citizens' group forums designed to provide a platform for candidates to explain their positions and initiatives. It is in these venues that voters can bring their concerns directly to the candidates, quiz them on their positions, and begin to recognize a connection between their own lives and the issues of the campaign.
- **Encourage poll workers to maintain a welcoming "hotel desk" atmosphere.** Intimidation at the polling site is clearly a problem for some inexperienced or young voters. Poll workers must deliberately work toward welcoming voters in and providing assistance in any way they can. They also should take the initiative of offering first-time or infrequent voters a short tutorial on the mechanics of voting. By proactively offering assistance, poll workers spare new voters the discomfort of having to ask what they may fear will be perceived as foolish questions.
- **Develop an "I Voted" lapel sticker.** By handing out a simple lapel sticker to all voters at the polling sites, elections workers can both raise the visibility of Election Day voting and affirm habits of good citizenship. (Practicing what we preach, in 2004, OCL printed a "Vote November 2" sticker which was distributed before the elections.)
- **Initiate Board of Elections-sponsored infomercials.** Lack of familiarity with the mechanics of voting was one factor cited as a reason for not voting, particularly among young people. "How to Vote" and "Go Out To Vote" infomercials, sponsored by the county board of elections and targeted at infrequent or first-time voters, would go a long way toward dispelling the mystique over the process.

3. Initiatives for young (18-24) voters

- **Present every high school graduate with voter registration forms along with his/her diploma.** All area high schools are encouraged to present seniors with a voter registration card, voting information and, particularly helpful for those going on to college, an absentee ballot along with their high school diploma at graduation. Some students already receive this information as part of their Participation in Government class, but that practice varies from teacher to teacher. Responses from students who do receive this information directly from their school indicate that many do follow through with registration.
- **Parties must reach out to young voters.** One consistent finding in our study of young voters and in other research on the youth vote is that young people feel ignored by the major political parties. Political parties, in turn, report that they don't bother to court the youth vote because young people have such a low turnout at the. It's a Catch-22 situation, and we believe that the parties hold the larger obligation of reaching out and breaking the cycle. One obvious potential tool for reaching out to young people is the Internet – the medium of choice for teens and college-age youth – which local parties can use to post information and upcoming events and activities. (The Onondaga County Republican Party currently does this.) In addition, parties could recruit young people to work as poll workers or enlist them in "get out the vote" efforts by using them to call other potential voters. If young people begin to feel they actually count in this process, they will be more likely to participate – and develop the kind of good citizenship habits that our country will require of them in the decades to come.
- **Easy access to registration information.** Young people who participated in this study revealed a great deal of confusion or ignorance over the process of registering to vote. For

college students living away from home, the questions become especially tricky. Do they request an absentee ballot from their home or register in their college town? As students, are they considered permanent residents of that community? Where do they go to register? And what are the deadlines? One easy way of addressing this issue would be for the Onondaga County Board of Elections to set up a link on its Web home page with information specifically geared to college students. Likewise, area colleges and universities are urged to provide their own links to the county Board of Elections site from their institution's home page. When today's students want information, they go to the Internet. Let's make it as easy as possible for them to find the answers they need to become participating members of their community.

4. Initiatives for pre-voting youth (ages 12-18)

- **Expand the role of schools in fostering good citizenship.** High school seniors in New York state already are required to complete a one-semester Participation in Government course in order to graduate. Many high schools also recognize and encourage good citizenship by sponsoring awards for those involved in community service. We applaud that and urge schools to build on those good efforts by beginning the work of citizenship education at an earlier age. We urge the development of an annual, short-term unit of study on political participation for each grade level, beginning in middle school. We encourage schools to sponsor mock elections, with actual voting machines, to build an awareness of, and excitement over, local, state and national races. (Who knows? Maybe parents will catch the excitement as well!) In addition, we encourage schools to foster an atmosphere of civic engagement on a daily basis, perhaps by maintaining an in-school bulletin board highlighting local political activities and community issues and by inviting elected and party officials to make classroom visits.

5. Initiatives for Candidate Recruitment

- **Initiate a nonpartisan redistricting effort.** In New York, more than 98 percent of the state legislators who run for re-election win, and generally by a substantial margin. Similarly, in the 2002 U.S. House elections, 98 percent of the incumbents seeking another term were re-elected. One of the significant factors behind this incredible rate of success among incumbents is the process of redistricting, which is required after every U.S. census. When it comes to establishing New York state's legislative boundaries, the majority party holds the power in each legislative house -- that means the Republican leadership in the Senate and the Democratic leadership in the Assembly. And officeholders are extremely reluctant to buck the desires of the party leadership on issues of redistricting. The result is that lines from one district to the next are drawn in such a way as to cause a significant imbalance among voters in the two major parties. In other words, districts become overwhelmingly Democratic or overwhelmingly Republican, depending on the party drawing the lines. The result, come election time, is an incumbent of the majority party with a virtual lock on re-election -- and precious few individuals willing to take on the seemingly futile task of mounting a challenge. And the increasingly cynical voters are left wondering why they should even bother to vote when they wield so little influence over the outcome.

This practice, which has been called "creative cartography," or, in the words of our civics teachers, gerrymandering, subverts the very nature of representative democracy by robbing the election process of any meaningful debate of ideas and philosophies and too often denying voters any choice at the ballot box. If this practice is ever to change, the power of redistricting must be taken out of the hands of the parties and turned over to a nonpartisan commission that can establish boundaries in a more reasonable, apolitical fashion (a step already endorsed by the New York State League of Women Voters). We realize that those in

power have little incentive to change a system that serves their own interests so effectively. But, on behalf of a public growing weary of such political machinations, we call on our leaders to display the courage and vision to rise above their own self interest and do the right thing by taking themselves out of the redistricting process. If they cannot bring themselves to do that, perhaps the voters will spur on the reform process by expressing their displeasure at the ballot box on Election Day. Truly competitive elections generate media attention, stimulate greater voter interest, and foster substantive dialogue between differing points of view. In the process, they result in greater voter participation and a more significant, and deserved, outcome. And that's good for the people and good for government.

- **Candidate training programs.** When asked the open-ended question “What would make you more likely to vote?” respondents in our nonvoter survey cited, more than any other factor, their desire for better, more responsive candidates. Many individuals refrain from running for office under the mistaken notion that you're either born to politics or you're not. Those who have persevered acknowledge that the effort is grueling and that party support often is lacking. We believe that candidate training programs, perhaps sponsored by the political parties, by citizens' groups, or by the elections commissioners, would go a long way toward removing some of the mystique of running for office, familiarizing candidates with the statistical information and other resources available to them, and equipping them with some of the skills they will need to successfully meet the challenges ahead. Similarly, candidate preparation programs could be formulated to nurture and develop individuals not yet ready to mount a run but who may be interested in seeking office in the future.
- **Countywide ethics commission.** The negative tone of campaigns today not only turns off voters; it also can discourage potential candidates from seeking office at all. We must hold candidates accountable for their advertising and claims issued against their opponent. To serve as a deterrent against unfair, misleading rhetoric, we call for the establishment of an effective county-level ethics commission charged with the responsibility of reviewing campaign tactics and monitoring negativity in all campaigns within the county. Such a commission would have to have some authority for sanctioning, or publicly reporting, those who violate its guidelines.
- **Allow for electronic filing of campaign financial statements.** This practice already is in place for those running for state office and raising more than \$1,000. But on the local and countywide level, candidates file their reports on paper, an inefficient and ineffective process, and a difficult one for challengers and others to monitor when they want to review an opponent's sources of campaign funding. We believe it only makes sense to extend the practice of electronic filing to all countywide races and to some local races, perhaps under the same \$1,000 benchmark in place for state candidates.

Recommendations for the Long Term

In this category we include several steps that we are strongly inclined to endorse but which we realize are not likely to be accomplished quickly *or* painlessly. Nevertheless, we urge those in a position to effect some of these changes to move forward now in exploring these recommendations with the goal of implementing them in the near future.

- **Public financing for campaigns.** One of the most inequitable aspects of our current campaign system is the tremendous advantage incumbents enjoy when it comes to campaign financing. Lack of funding is an enormous difficulty for those mounting their first run for public office. Challengers not only have to take time from their job to campaign but they also must struggle with the fact that the incumbent they face holds a tremendous advantage in terms of money, staff, name recognition, and party resources. Political parties provide challengers what support they can, but their resources are limited, and sometimes they have

to choose between those races that seem to have a chance of success and those that appear destined for failure. Public financing, initiated first on the state level and eventually extending down to local races as well, would go a long way toward equalizing the playing field and ensuring that anybody, regardless of personal wealth, has the opportunity to mount a viable campaign for public office. A public financing program, titled “Clean Money, Clean Elections,” already is in place for statewide office-seekers in Arizona and Maine. That system prohibits participating Clean Money candidates from accepting donations from political action committees or private donations, with the exception of small initial seed-money contributions. Spending limits also are imposed. As a result, the power over election outcomes is taken out of the hands of special interest groups and heavily funded or wealthy incumbents, and placed squarely in the hands of the voters, where it belongs. In its first four years of existence in Arizona, the “Clean Money, Clean Elections” program resulted in a 24 percent increase in the number of challengers for public office and a 23 percent increase in the voter turnout rate on Election Day.

- **Reform campaign finance law.** Another initiative designed to level the playing field when it comes to campaign financing would be to institute a requirement that incumbents dispose of any existing “war chest” funds that remain at the conclusion of a campaign. Existing money from prior campaigns gives an enormous edge to the incumbent and puts the challenger at a significant, usually insurmountable, disadvantage. Currently the state of New York requires that judges running for office dispose of any remaining funds in their campaign accounts at the conclusion of the election cycle. We recommend that the state implement similar requirements for all statewide officeholders.
- **Utilize the resources of the Internet.** In our telephone survey of nonvoters, 41 percent of respondents said “Internet voting” would make them very likely to vote in the next local election. Also among our survey respondents, 74 percent reported having access to the Internet either at home or at work. In light of such widespread access to this technology, we believe that the Internet can be a powerful tool for engaging citizens in the political process and making registration and voting more user friendly for the public. The Internet already proved its worth in the Democratic presidential primary of 2004 as an amazingly effective tool utilized by Howard Dean’s campaign for raising funds and building a network of grassroots support. It also proved to be a particularly effective device for engaging younger voters. Currently, Onondaga County voters can use the Internet to go to the county Board of Elections web site and request a voter registration form to be mailed to them, or they can print out a form to fill out, sign and mail in. But we envision the day when residents can register completely electronically via the Internet, a process that would make this crucial initial step that much faster and easier, especially for computer-savvy young people. While security issues, and equal access to computers for all populations, doubtless will be a concern, we also envision someday having the capabilities of voting via the Internet just as many of us do our banking and shopping online today. The current system of voting in this country was established to meet the needs of a society seemingly light years removed from the society we live in today. As one Onondaga Community College student put it, “We need the flexibility to work with the lifestyles we have today instead of the lifestyles of 100 years ago.”
- **Computer access to your local ballot from polling sites statewide.** This goes hand-in-hand with our first recommendation in that it uses today’s computer technology to make voting more accessible. In the same way we have ATM cards to do our banking, we would like to see the installation of a computerized system that would allow us to swipe a card into a computer and access the appropriate ballot from any polling site in the state. This would eliminate the logistical and time issues that plague voters whose polling site is located some distance from their workplace.

Conclusion

Clearly the growing problem of citizen apathy is a complex issue, with myriad contributing factors and no easy solutions. While voters ultimately must decide for themselves to exercise their right to vote, our political, educational, societal and cultural institutions also must shoulder some responsibility in reversing this disturbing trend.

We recognize that the status quo – particularly when it so effectively serves the interests of those in power – is not easily changed. Nevertheless, we call on all who are in a position to effect positive change to show the kind of vision and commitment necessary to implement these recommendations – recommendations which we believe could go a long way toward re-engaging our citizenry in the electoral process and ensuring that we as a country live up to our democratic ideal of a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

STUDY REPORT

Study Methodology

The study committee took a multifaceted approach to information gathering. Public sessions included discussion and written surveys centering on these primary questions – How can we increase voter turnout? How can we promote registration efforts? How can we encourage more candidates to run for office? Research included:

- Public forums in towns and villages throughout the county
- Meetings with several Tomorrow’s Neighborhoods Today (TNT) groups throughout the city of Syracuse
- Talks by a variety of expert sources, including a former newspaper journalist, an election pollster, and an academic expert on the Internet
- Panel discussions with successful and unsuccessful candidates for local office
- Panel discussion with representatives from local media
- Focus group sessions with Syracuse University and Onondaga Community College students
- Focus group with high school students
- Meeting with county chairs of the two major political parties
- Telephone survey conducted for OCL by Knowledge Systems & Research of a representative, random sample of 357 Onondaga County registered voters who have not participated in recent elections

Finally, we supplemented these efforts by reviewing studies on national trends, collecting data from the Onondaga County Board of Elections to further illuminate local trends, and conducting a survey of media coverage during a typical election cycle.

List of Study Sessions

Notes on the following Study Sessions and Presentations are included in the Appendix.

- “Political Reporting: Beyond Campaign Coverage” – Professor Charlotte Grimes of the S.U. Newhouse School of Public Communication -- March 11
- “Declining Voter Turnout” – Professor Jeff Stonecash of the S.U. Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs– March 22
- “Election Coverage” Local Media Panel – March 25
- Camillus Town Meeting -- April 5
- DeWitt Town Meeting – April 7
- Candidates Forum – April 8
- Student Focus Group – Syracuse University – April 13
- “Candidate Recruitment Issues” Candidates Forum – April 22
- Student Focus Groups – Jamesville-DeWitt High School – May 3-4
- Student Focus Group – Onondaga Community College – May 4
- Student Focus Group – Liverpool High School – May 6
- North Syracuse Town Meeting – May 6
- Cicero Town Meeting – May 7
- North Syracuse Town Meeting – May 6
- Cicero Town Meeting – May 7
- Clay Town Meeting – May 19
- “Dwindling Voter Participation” – Professor Grant Reeher, of the SU Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs – May 25
- “Clean Money and Elections” – John Bartholomew of Citizen Action – May 28
- Informal Neighborhood Meetings at Una Café, West Onondaga and West streets –June

**NOTES ON
STUDY SESSIONS**

Study Session #1: “Political Reporting: Beyond Campaign Coverage”

March 11, 2004

Charlotte Grimes, former newspaper journalist and now a professor at SU’s Newhouse School of Journalism (and Knight Chair in Political Reporting) spoke on “**Political Reporting: Beyond Campaign Coverage.**” Some of her observations:

- The job of a free press in a democracy is to hold those in power accountable to the public and expose wrongdoing. This role, Grimes says, is safeguarded by the First Amendment, which represents “the soul of democracy.”
- The press and the public **MUST** make connections between politics, campaigns and our everyday lives. One study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism revealed that only 13 percent of political stories focused on everyday concerns of voters. More than 80 percent focused on the politicians themselves, internal party matters, organizational issues, and party strategizing.
- 21 percent of individuals under the age of 30 regularly get their political news from comedy shows (Saturday Night Live, The Tonight Show, i.e.) or other non-news sources. Other less than reliable sources include “celebrity journalism” and radio talk shows, which put the focus on opinions rather than on facts.
- The dominance of non-issue related political coverage reveals that the press is more concerned about campaign tactics than about the things that matter to voters. Such coverage, Grimes says, gives voters “a fine education” but, in addition to being boring, tells them little about matters that affect them as citizens. And a “high boredom quotient” results in lack of interest among the voters.
- This type of coverage is largely the result of the way in which the press view the role of the “political reporter.” Too often, the political reporter does not report on specific issues because those issues – health care policies, taxation, Social Security, local government concerns, i.e. – are covered by reporters on other beats. As a result, they are not perceived or presented as political/campaign news.
- How to expand campaign coverage to get to the heart of the issues? Broaden the definition of political reporting. The press needs to focus “less on the gun barrel and more on the *splat*” – in other words, less on campaign intricacies and more on those issues that affect us in our daily lives.
- Develop public interest in politics by teaching “government appreciation,” or civics, classes in high schools. Teach young people how the government shapes our lives through politics.
- Coverage has to be informative – good journalism focuses on who, what, when, where, how and why. It should educate people in a way that will help them make an informed choice as voters. Political coverage should be helpful to the voter in making up his/her mind (not telling them **HOW** to vote but giving them the information they need to decide).
- Bring politics to a level that people can understand and relate to. Focus on issues that touch their lives (i.e., the politics involved in building a local stadium, downloading music from the Internet).
- Journalists should avoid the “Gotcha!” type of questions that make for great sound bites but do little to illuminate the issues that matter to voters.
- Coverage needs to focus more on “who gets what, how and when – and who *doesn’t* get what, how and when.”
- Stories should have a clearly defined purpose, and coverage should focus on facts and illuminate for readers why they should care.

Study Session #2: “Declining Voter Turnout”

March 22, 2004

Jeff Stonecash, an SU political science professor and political pollster, met with members of the OCL study committee to share some of his thoughts on voter turnout and political participation patterns in Onondaga County.

Stonecash said that while nobody really knows why voter turnout levels have been declining nationally over the last several decades, a number of theories exist:

- The negative tone that began to creep into campaigns during the Vietnam and Watergate eras of the '60s and early '70s has left voters feeling increasingly alienated and cynical toward the political process.
- Similarly, an increasingly negative and cynical tone on the part of reporters, who view politicians as conniving and dishonest, has resulted in distancing voters from the process.
- The busier lifestyles of today's two-income families leave less time for political engagement and for keeping up with campaign issues.
- Some maintain that the high number of immigrants entering this country over the last 30 years results in a distortion of voter turnout numbers. Generally, it takes about 15 years for immigrants to become naturalized citizens, integrated into the community, and then active voters. If you discount that group, Stonecash says, some argue that the voter turnout rate remains largely unchanged from the past.
- Yet others fault campaign (and polling) practices, which tend to focus cultivation efforts only on active voters. Polls and targeted mailings directed only at those who regularly vote perpetuate the problem of disengagement among infrequent voters.

Voter participation has been declining steadily among all groups of people, says Stonecash. The rate among young people has always been low, he says, and is showing even more of a decline in recent years. He faults the natural self-absorption of young people, particularly those in college who are not necessarily assimilated into a community yet. The rate of voter participation goes up as people age.

Turnout also varies depending on the election year, with presidential elections showing a very high turnout rate.

Voter participation patterns in Onondaga County basically mirror the national trends. One study that examined voter participation in Syracuse, Baltimore and Philadelphia over the last 100 years found that while rates in each of the three cities rose through the '20s, '30s and '40s, they began a decline the following decade, and that decline continues today.

When asked about the possible effects of uncontested races on voter turnout, Stonecash noted that there are more contested races nationally now than ever before. Uncontested races tend to be more of a problem in areas that strongly favor one party over the other.

As for the possible benefits of term limits, Stonecash says he knows of no research that shows that term limits promote higher levels of voter participation.

Most likely to vote are those who feel more engaged in the community; who have been in the community for a significant amount of time and therefore seen some of the consequences of political policies; and who have a greater sense of civic duty.

Stonecash theorizes that perhaps inadequate media coverage is partly to blame for low voter interest. He suggests that if news reporters did a better job of informing the public on issues of importance to them, they might be more likely to vote. But he acknowledges that as an election pollster, he has never conducted any studies on why people don't vote. He focuses his polling strictly on those who do vote.

It was suggested that perhaps the study committee should conduct its own telephone survey of nonvoters and put the question directly to them.

Study Session #3: “Election Coverage” Local Media

March 25, 2004

Notes from the March 25 media panel featuring Fred Pierce (Post-Standard), Jim Kenyon (Channel 3), and Chris Ulanowski (WRVO radio):

Fred Pierce of *The Post-Standard* noted that stories about candidates and races are of limited interest, in part because of the sheer number of races each year and because issues in a given race are often limited to only that district. He explained that *The Post-Standard* uses its Neighbors section to cover many of these races in a format most likely to reach those most interested. It also provides candidate profiles in this section as Election Day nears. Candidates who get the most coverage, he observed, are those who have staked out positions on issues and generated community interest based upon those issues.

He admitted that coverage of the mechanics of voting is both boring and confusing. Since everyone is in competition for the public’s ears/eyes, this is not an effective place for this type of coverage. Fred recommended that in order to effect greater voter participation, it will be necessary to first interest the public in **issues**. Voter involvement will flow automatically from issue involvement. The media, he suggested, is a difficult place to learn about the process.

He also noted that press conferences are not always the best way to win coverage – that reporters don’t just run when a press conference is called. He said that the newspaper takes its role as the “fourth branch of government” very seriously.

Jim Kenyon began his remarks by observing that several factors and pressures—notably the demand for ratings and the abundance of more than 80 cable channels—have changed the focus of television news away from institutional news (such as government meetings and related issues). Getting people interested in elections means covering elections, and television stations now focus on personalities or appeal to a broader issue. News must be entertaining. In the months before 9/11, the big stories were Chandra Levy and shark attacks. Run-of-the-mill political campaigns simply do not attract the attention of assignment editors.

His suggestions for more television coverage include the following:

- Tailor elections to broader issues (so candidates can give television something to cover), and give them something visual
- Announce voter registration drives in a school (where the television reporters can photograph students voting and speak to them)
- Make contact with the community affairs director at the television stations since virtually all stations have such programs, and they are especially good vehicles for this type of coverage
- Learn how television works, and tailor or orient candidates/issues/mechanics of getting people out to vote to this medium
- Look for ways to counter the growing phenomenon in this country of taking our citizenship for granted

Chris Ulanowski suggested that in his case, this subject is a matter of preaching to the converted since public broadcasting tends to draw its listeners from those who are already socially committed. That notwithstanding, public broadcasting attracts only a very limited audience (1% to 2% several years ago and presently somewhere in the neighborhood of 4%).

He suggested that it is a challenge to get the “fringe” involved as opposed to core groups. He further suggested that issue-driven campaigns are necessary (i.e., smoking bans, etc.) to attract more than the core groups that are traditionally active politically. Moreover, he noted that one cannot zero in on small races unless there are larger ramifications that resonate with the wider community.

He theorized that good story-telling requires conflict or tension, which will draw the audience into the story. He contends that campaigns need to address things and issues that create interesting and compelling radio coverage. Chris suggested that the first step is to get people interested in issues, then worry about getting them out to vote. He acknowledged that it is a challenge to get candidates to run against the power of incumbency.

Chris wondered whether two recent phenomena—the Internet and comedy—might be more effective vehicles for reaching young people. He acknowledged that WRVO does see a responsibility to encourage civic participation but that both a candidate and tension/conflict are necessary.

During the question-and-answer period, it was noted that campaigns have changed considerably over the years and that candidates are much less accessible to the media because they are managed more carefully and campaign managers are more prevalent now and exercise considerable influence.

Fred noted that the newspaper uses dramatic elements to draw people into a story, while acknowledging that drama alone will not keep someone interested in a story. He went on to emphasize that the stories that **last** are the ones with a substantive issue associated with them.

One questioner asked what the role of “facts” in reporting is. Fred acknowledged that all reporting **should** be investigative reporting, but that not all reporting **can** be such because time restraints constrict the ability to conduct research.

Jim suggested that the key components of television coverage are people, pictures and pacing. This is what television news presents. He said that consultants advise stations on how to gather an audience – in other words, **how** to cover the news, not **what** to cover. He suggested that the average length of a television news story is about 105 seconds (including the introduction) which does not lend itself to an extensive presentation of the facts.

In terms of the entire television industry, Jim suggested that there is a significant decline in the number of folks who tune in to the news and that the television industry has changed tremendously due largely to increased competition and especially cable saturation.

Chris suggested that there may be a need to revamp news programs in light of current realities. He stressed the need to understand the changing audience and then tailor the news programs to that fact. One example, he cited, is the tendency of listeners to lose interest in longer news programs. News programs, he suggested, need to resonate with people.

Fred suggested that the media spotlight has grown much harsher for candidates and that some reporters are looking to further their own careers and reputations. Furthermore, most people simply do not pay attention to election issues until September. Moreover, there are more forces at work than just the media.

Chris commented that audience habits have changed, and Jim reinforced this point with the observation that the 8-second sound byte allows reporters to highlight a person’s position (and that viewers and listeners are defining this).

Chris reiterated that voters need an issue to grasp onto, something that resonates with them. He defined news as what people are, or should be, talking about.

Fred cited one consistent challenge – the difficulty of taking a complicated issue and making it both clear and interesting.

Another questioner asked why it was necessary for the newspaper to make editorial endorsements, in lieu of simply presenting the facts and letting voters make up their own minds. Fred suggested that the paper feels it is their obligation to take a stand on the races. “If we don’t make a choice in a race, it tells the voter that it’s OK not to vote,” he said. He went on to suggest that the influence of editorial endorsements on voter turnout is probably minimal. In other words, those who read them are probably already going to vote. Jim suggested that editorial endorsements can only help, while Chris felt that they no longer carry the influence that they used to carry.

Asked about media coverage of personal issues, Fred noted that on a local level, reporters tend to stay away from doing that.

Study Session #4: “Camillus Town Meeting”

April 5, 2004

The April 5 meeting, coordinated by the Operations Subcommittee, was held in the Camillus Town Hall, with four residents attending. Clyde Ohl led the group in a discussion on ways of increasing citizen participation, primarily in terms of increased voter turnout and increased willingness to run for office.

After a brief introduction by Clyde outlining the purpose of the OCL study, the group went through a list of possible measures (most taken from the survey instrument designed by the Operations Subcommittee) to promote voting. Among the items discussed:

- One resident said she would like to see a “None of the above” line on ballots for those disenchanted with either candidate. She noted that voters would be participating in the process even as they display their displeasure with the choices.
- The possibility of lowering the voting age drew some interest, with discussion on the theory that if we allowed high school students to vote, we would be establishing the habit of voting before they left for college and settled into an unfamiliar community. Several of those present liked the idea of including a voter registration form along with every high school diploma.
- The need for educating the public on where they can obtain voter registration forms and the possibility of providing residents with online registration forms. Some concern was expressed over the security of online voter registration services, however.
- Voting by mail or establishing Election Day as a holiday also drew interest from the group. Another thought was the possibility of allowing an extended period of time for voting, perhaps a week.
- Clyde spoke briefly on Arizona’s clean money-clean election law and how that measure, designed to prevent candidates from “buying” an election, has resulted in increased voter turnout. One participant, a member of the League of Women Voters, noted that the league once attempted to monitor campaigns in an effort to discourage “dirty” campaigning but that the effort had no clout and that often candidates would wind up accusing the League of partisanship.
- Use of the Internet to post positions from the candidates. It was noted that the LWV, through DemocracyNet (DNet), already tries to do this as well, by encouraging candidates to post their views on various issues. They have found, however, that incumbents are reluctant to participate in this effort.

In terms of encouraging more people to run for public office, the group liked several ideas mentioned in the survey. Those present, many of whom had run for office themselves, particularly liked the idea of providing nonpartisan candidate training, perhaps through the Board of Elections. They also felt that petition requirements should be loosened. Clyde noted that in order to run for the County Legislature, for example, one must realistically obtain about 700 signatures in order to meet the required 400 signatures.

In closing, one participant noted that those in government simply have to work harder at “getting the word out” about voting – how to vote and who can vote. Added another, “We have to instill in people what they have in this country, and that we have the right to vote. Until 9/11, we all felt so comfortable that everything was fine. I think people have to realize that to help this country do what you would like it to do, you have to participate in the process.”

Study Session #5: “DeWitt Town Meeting”

April 7, 2004

The April 7 meeting in DeWitt was attended by nearly a dozen people, including a few current and former holders of public office in the town. After a short introduction by Clyde Ohl, who introduced the OCL study topic, the session was opened for general comments.

The discussion opened with one participant noting that the decreasing interest in voting is probably a side effect of today’s “portable society.” “There’s nothing to hold people to a certain place today,” he said, “whereas once you knew everybody who lived on your street, and you lived there and you died there.” With people relocating several times during their lifetime, they feel less attached to a particular community and less inclined to participate in local politics by voting.

Hectic lifestyles – including two-income families, stores open round-the-clock, the need to pick up children from child care, etc. – also were cited as contributing factors to low voter turnout and citizen engagement in politics. It was suggested that one way of rectifying this might be to encourage – or require – all employers to give their employees at least a 30-minute break to vote on Election Day.

Voters need to feel a greater sense of empowerment on neighborhood issues, another resident said. She pointed out that Portland, Oregon, has enjoyed steady increases in voter turnout for local elections, a trend that has been attributed to local governments giving neighborhoods more say in resolving neighborhood issues. When people feel they can have direct input on an issue that affects them in their daily life, they are more likely to vote, she said.

Building voter awareness was mentioned several times. Some ways of doing that: educating high school students about political parties and the election process and then lowering the voting age so that the habit is established at an early age; and mailing to every registered voter a pamphlet (as California does) that would include information on all candidates.

Several people suggested that the act of voting needs to be made more convenient. Voting by Internet was one suggestion, and while a few people had concerns about security issues, most felt it would be workable. “We do so much from our home now that for some people it is becoming more and more of a burden to get out and vote,” said one. “We do everything by Internet. Why shouldn’t we be able to vote by Internet?” Another commented, “If the Internet is good enough for my money, it should be secure enough for me to vote.”

Another way of making voting more convenient would be to allow an expanded period of time for voting, perhaps a week. Others thought that the option of voting by mail should be available to anybody who chooses to do so. “Anybody should be able to get an absentee ballot,” said one. “And they shouldn’t need to give a reason.”

One resident expressed concern over the large number of races on the local level: “We have too many school boards, our court structure is too big, and in the towns we have too many public officials. It’s just chaos.” As a result, he said, people feel overwhelmed, uninformed and disinclined to vote. He suggested that consolidation of offices would be one possible solution.

The second question addressed was – How do we encourage more people to run for public office? Redistricting by a nonpartisan commission was one suggestion for cutting down on one-sided races and thereby encouraging challengers to enter the race. Candidate training was another option that residents felt was important.

Term limits were discussed as an effective way of cutting down on entrenched incumbents. In the case of town boards or legislatures, however, it was noted that if term limits were instituted, they should be staggered so that the boards would always include a mix of both veteran legislators and newcomers.

One resident felt strongly that the media should take a more active role in the months prior to an election to encourage citizens to learn about candidates and vote on Election Day. She suggested that perhaps television stations should be required, as part of their licensing agreement, to provide a certain amount of time for public service announcements for all candidates and for encouraging people to vote.

Finally, it was noted that if we want young people to vote, we should make it easier for college students, who often don't vote because they don't know the location of their particular polling place. It was suggested that one central area be designated as the common polling place for all students, regardless of the location of their campus address.

At the end of the meeting, Clyde asked each participant to fill out the survey drawn up by the Operations Subcommittee in an effort to collect and tabulate additional input.

Study Session #6: “Candidates Forum”

April 8, 2004

Panelists: Steve Paquette, Don Hamilton, Robert Smith and Mary Jane Szczesniak

The panel consisted of several individuals who had either run for public office in recent years or been involved closely with the process—or both. They spoke about their experience with that process and reflected on the implications for other participants—either as voters or as potential candidates—contemplating an active role in the political process.

Steve Paquette spoke first and noted that the voting process does not encourage people, especially young people who are accustomed to doing everything whenever and wherever they want to. He noted that this is not so much of an issue for older voters who tend to vote on a much more regular basis.

Mr. Paquette commented specifically on the implications for any candidate running for public office, underscoring the fact that every aspect of the candidate’s life will be exposed, that the campaign will involve very long days and, if successful, he or she will endure even more long days, all the while earning less than would be the case if they had remained in the private sector. These factors notwithstanding, he went on to cite several reasons why individuals do choose to run for office.

- They think they can win (they certainly don’t run because they think they can’t win because of the way the district is drawn)
- They have an ax to grind (either they are angry with someone or they have a cause to advance)
- They want publicity (they are an accountant, attorney, undertaker or some other professional whose work will benefit from the publicity of a run for public office, even if that run is unsuccessful)
- To pay their dues (in anticipation of the next time around when they may be able to run for an office that they can win)
- It’s fun (in which case they simply love the political process and don’t need any of the rewards because just being a part of the process is their reward)

Mr. Hamilton commented that people don’t vote unless there is a real controversy. In other words, they tend to stay home unless there’s a real issue of concern to them (e.g., the possible closing of Blodgett School brought many people out). He also noted that competitive races will bring people out to vote, suggesting that a race for county executive between Michael Bragman and Nicholas Pirro would have generated a high voter turnout in 2003. However, with only one contested race that year (for Town judge); the turnout was very low in the Town of Onondaga.

He also suggested that many good people do not run because they don’t want to expose their families to the publicity that accompanies a run for office. For example, if there is any kind of “blemish” or problem in the past, it will certainly come out in the media during a campaign and the prospect of that discourages people from running for office.

Mary Jane Szczesniak lives in the Town of Clay and noted that in her town there are more than 60,000 residents and over 33,000 voters (15,000 Republicans; 9,000 Democrats; 8,800 non-enrolled and 2,400 other) yet voter turnout is low regardless of the year or the race. Older voters (aged 60-75), she said, represent the most reliable voters.

She suggested that one of the reasons for low voter turnout in Clay may be linked to the fact that it is a “transient” area in the sense that it has many first-time homeowners (who tend to be under 40 years of age, one of the groups with a traditionally low voter turnout rate). As a result, people come into the town for a few years before moving on to another home and typically don’t establish ties to the community. She also observed that Clay consists of many regions and that it is not just one uniform town.

Mary Jane suggested that older individuals tend to not like change. As a result, if taxes aren’t rising very much and they are receiving the services they want, and if they are the ones who vote with the most regularity, they will tend to support the incumbents. In the town there she lives there is no ward system so every office is elected town-wide.

The difficulty in attracting more individuals to run for office, she said, stems largely from the fact that candidates need both money and time to run for office—as well as a chance to win. Individuals who are working parents or who have young families usually lack the time and money required for political campaigns. Mary Jane also commented on the practice of office holders resigning before the end of their terms of office so that the party in power can appoint their successor who will then run as an incumbent rather than leaving the seat open.

One questioner indicated that New York State laws are out of date and that individuals cannot vote in situations that affect their lives. In response to that comment Mr. Smith suggested the possibility of a “voter swipe card” for everyone that would function in a fashion similar to a bank ATM card. In other words, when the voter swiped the card in a voter machine it would pull up a screen with all the races for which that particular voter would be eligible to vote. He also raised the possibility of making such voting “booths” available in places frequented by the public, such as Wegman’s (or other grocery stores), bus stops, the Civic Center and other places of work or business. He also questioned whether we need to elect so many positions, such as Highway Superintendent and Town Clerk.

Another member of the audience suggested that there is no correlation between voter registration and voter participation (a fact which he attributed to Professor Stonecash). He was concerned that “education” has been left out of the process.

Still another member of the audience observed that the facility of voting may not be the controlling issue so much as a duty to vote. He suggested the establishment of a web page at the Board of Elections web site that would provide candidate biographies so that voters unfamiliar with a candidate could easily obtain information about him or her.

Mr. Szczesniak, who was in the audience and is one of the two Commissioners of Elections for Onondaga County, noted that the Board does have a web site but that it is geared mostly to the process. He underscored the fact that the Board of Elections needs to be candidate-neutral. He cited, for example, the likely challenges involved if a candidate were to go “off the deep end” and if those views were on the Board’s web site. In such a situation, he asked, who would “fix” it and who makes the value judgments involved.

Mr. Paquette suggested that one alternative might be for the Board to simply add to its web site the links for the various candidates.

Mr. Smith concluded by observing that there is also a certain sociological aspect to the issue of voter participation in the sense that many people no longer feel a sense of community. A diminished sense of community represents a change in our society that has direct implications for the political process and who and how many people participate.

Study Session #7: “Syracuse University Student Focus Group”

April 13, 2004

Rebecca Livengood facilitated the student focus group, which was convened by the OCL Study Group’s Operations Subcommittee. A total of 13 students participated – five male and eight female – and included four freshmen; three sophomores; four juniors; and two seniors. Ages ranged from 18 to 22. Their political awareness/participation levels:

- Registered to vote: Yes: 10 No: 3
- Member of an advocacy group: Yes: 6 No: 7
- Active in an advocacy group? Very active: 3 Active: 3 Not active: 1
- Aware of campus voter registration efforts? Very aware: 5 Somewhat aware: 6 Not aware: 2

Students also represented a wide geographic region, from Texas and Oklahoma to Maryland and Maine.

Rebecca opened with a welcome and review of the purpose of the session. She noted that there were no right or wrong answers and that all students would be encouraged to speak. Before the questioning began, members of the group introduced themselves, stated their year, their major, whether they are old enough to vote and whether they have ever voted.

What are your experiences with voter registration?

About half of the 10 registered students are registered in their home state. A few students said they had registered locally through their campus involvement with NYPIRG.

Sources of information on voter registration included the Internet, NYPIRG or other campus sources.

One student cited confusion over his registration status. He said he would like a way of verifying whether he is registered to vote but doesn’t know how to do that. He suggested that perhaps a list could be posted in the campus center or online.

Another student, who is not registered to vote, said she just never took the opportunity to do so because it had never been a priority. “With everything I’ve been doing in school, registering to vote has never been a focus or talked about a lot, so I just never did.”

What would make registration easier for students?

Centralized campus location. One student suggested that registration forms be made available at Schine Student Center on a daily basis so that students could pick them up at any time.

Incorporate voter registration into classwork. Asking freshmen to take five minutes out of their class time to register also was suggested.

Online registration. Students seemed to think they could register online but didn’t know how to go about it. “They need to get the word out on this – through PSA’s or ads or something – because young people do everything online,” one student said.

Have you voted before? Why or why not?

One student said that he had been very much engaged in local issues, especially school board concerns, before coming to college. After coming to SU, he initially continued his participation in local election issues via absentee ballot. Since that time, he said, he’s grown increasingly out of touch and has not kept up the habit of voting.

Two students indicated that although they were registered they have not voted. Why?

“None of the issues seemed to pertain to me,” said one. “I think they should’ve tried to reach me while I was still in high school.”

Another, who said she wasn't sure about the voting age in her home state of Oklahoma, added, "I haven't been informed, so I would have been too unsure about whom to vote for. I'm not terribly aware."

Is convenience of voting/polling sites an issue?

Yes. One student noted the difficulty he had experienced in attempting to get an absentee ballot. Said the process was confusing and that many people he knew actually received their absentee ballots too late to file their vote.

Another student noted that polling places can be difficult to locate and to get there. "I think that makes it hard for a lot of students to vote." Another student agreed but added, "If there was somebody I really wanted to vote for, I could find the information."

One participant said he would only be motivated to vote if he felt deeply about the issues. "If there's nothing I feel passionate about, then nothing hooks me to vote," he said. "I really have to *want* to vote if I'm going to vote."

How do you get your information on the candidates and issues?

Online newspapers and other Web sites. These were mentioned frequently, including candidate sites. One student noted she avoided candidate sites because of her belief that they were one-sided. Few students said they consulted traditional (print) newspapers. Media coverage in general was considered untrustworthy: "When I turn on the TV or read a newspaper, I find there's less about issues and more about what the candidates did today. They don't give us the differences between the candidates. I have to do the research on my own. It's not like it's out there for me to see."

A note on freedom of media access: One student spoke out strongly on the financial inequities that result in uneven access to the media for candidates. "I don't think it's fair that some candidates have more money, more access, more exposure," he said. "I think we should have some standardized information available for all. I think we can't have a democracy until everyone has the same amount of money – period."

What might help you learn more about candidates/issues?

Candidate information available at polling sites. One student suggested that this would be particularly helpful for local elections.

Mailed-out booklet that includes information on all candidates. Two students noted that California and Washington state send out a "book" to every resident, with write-ups on each candidate. They felt that practice would be very useful. As it is now, one said, "I feel like I don't get enough information."

Directions to relevant Web sites. One student said she wished newspapers would publish the Web sites to which voters could go to learn more about candidates' positions on the issues.

What issues are important to you?

Foreign policy and other national concerns. These are increasingly relevant to students since 9/11 and the Iraq war. One student said the war, and general concerns over the country's foreign policy, definitely was motivating him to vote in November.

Higher-education issues. The availability of financial aid and other issues concerning higher education were voiced as primary concerns by one student. She also said the economy and availability – or lack – of jobs was a big concern.

Other national issues: Other students mentioned such issues as women's rights, abortion, equity in public education funding and services, the environment, and campaign finance reform.

Local issues: A few students expressed an awareness of, and concern for, such local issues as: public education, corporate tax breaks, teacher salaries, zoning regulations, economic development.

What do you think would help motivate you and others to vote?

Trustworthy and substantive information on candidates. “I feel like politicians just tell you what you want to hear,” said one student. She would like information that she can be confident is truthful and accurate. Several students expressed their distrust of TV coverage: “Most of them are just campaign ads. They just slander the other guy, and there’s nothing about their own views. If I’m going to vote, I want to be knowledgeable about it. But I want the truth, not just what they (the candidates) think I want to hear.”

Candidates who actively court the support of young people. “No one urges (young people) to vote,” said one student. “No one really cares about us. The candidates don’t focus on *us*, so a lot of kids are apathetic because they just feel they don’t have any clout.”

Easier access to information. One student who has never voted admitted she doesn’t know anything about the candidates and is not likely to do research on her own. “I’m lazy,” she said. “You have to make the information more easily accessible for me.”

Mandatory Public Service Announcements. These free spots, one student suggested, would focus on the positions of both candidates and would air in the final weeks or months of the campaign.

Better education. Making students more acutely aware of their right, and duty, to vote once they turn 18. “I think our generation looks on voting as more of a right rather than as a duty, as it was considered in the past,” said one.

Inspiring teachers and professors. One student said she will definitely vote because “It’s just so cool!” She credits much of her enthusiasm to a particular professor who she said is good at motivating and inspiring his students to get involved in the political process.

Discontinue the “winner-take-all” form of elections. One student suggested that each candidate should be able to claim a certain percentage of the vote to more accurately reflect the support each candidate generates.

Create a viable third party. “I think the presence of a third party would get more young people involved in politics,” said one young woman. “I feel a lot of young people believe their point of view is not represented at all by either party. I feel like there isn’t a party for me.”

Pay citizens \$5 to vote. Or offer them a tax break.

Will you vote in November?

Nearly every student said they planned to vote this year because of their strong feelings on several issues facing the country. The war in Iraq and the poor state of the economy were specifically mentioned as concerns. “I want more opportunity for our generation,” said one.

Noted another: “I think most kids think this is a very important election.”

Study Session #8: “OCL Candidates Forum”

April 22, 2004

The OCL Operations Subcommittee organized a bipartisan candidates panel following the Thursday Morning Roundtable presentation by John Zogby. Participating in the panel were: Tim Stapleton (R), former candidate for County Legislature; Melody Holmes (R), former candidate for City Council; Bill Ryan (D), city councilor; Stephanie Miner (D), city councilor; Greg Limpert (R), former candidate for County Legislature; and Bill Kinne (D), county legislator.

The panel was organized to examine factors that encourage or discourage individuals from seeking public office. Virtually all candidates said they decided to run for office because they wanted to make a difference in their community; a few said they wanted to challenge an incumbent who they felt had grown too complacent in office.

The **advantages of incumbency** – and the difficulty to mount a successful challenge in an **overwhelmingly Democratic or Republican district** – were cited as major problems by several candidates. Melody Holmes said that while she knew she wasn’t going to win – no Republican had won her district in about three decades, she said – she decided to run in order “to get people involved and show them they could make a difference. I wanted to further the discussion.”

She found, however, that many voters didn’t even bother to read the ballot, but rather voted a straight party line. As a result, many who told her they would vote for her wound up voting for her opponent.

Party support plays a critical role in candidacies, said Bill Ryan. In an earlier, unsuccessful run for Common Council, he said, “I felt a little bit like I was thrown to the wolves. The party seemed to feel that as long as they had somebody on the ballot, that was enough.”

Stephanie Miner stressed the importance of door-to-door campaigning to her win. But the effort, she admitted, was physically and emotionally exhausting. She said she’s not sure whether she would run again. “You have to be in the right place, emotionally and physically, at the right time,” she said.

Name recognition of the incumbent was a significant factor in his unsuccessful bid for County Legislature, said Greg Limpert. In his defeat to a 22-year incumbent, he said, “It wasn’t issues, but name recognition with these voters. There were no issues.” Another drawback, he said, was that his opponent also had the support of two minority parties, giving him three slots on the ballot.

The panel cited several major factors that discourage individuals from running for office:

- **Time commitment** – “It costs me to be away from my work in order to campaign,” said Bill Kinne. “It’s hard to balance things.”
- **Money** – If candidates don’t have enough money, they’re not going to win. Money buys public exposure.
- **Negativity** – Politics is a difficult business, and those in office sometimes feel that whatever they do, it’s the wrong thing. “The trick is to make more people happy than not,” said Kinne.

How to increase voter interest in local races? Ideas from the panelists:

- **Recruit opposing candidates** for uncontested races.
- **Recruit nontraditional candidates** (helps to generate wider interest).
- **Better media coverage** of local issues and campaigns.
- **Marketing efforts** from party committees.
- Concentrate on **getting people out to vote** rather than trying to sell them on a specific candidate.

Study Session #9: “Student Focus Group – Jamesville-DeWitt High School”

May 3 & 4, 2004

Two focus groups were organized as part of senior government classes at Jamesville-DeWitt High School. Both sessions were facilitated by Sylvia Martinez-Daloia of the OCL study group.

The two classes involved a total of 46 students (20 in one class, 26 in the other) and included 25 males and 21 females. Most of the students (30) were 18 years old. Fifteen were 17 years old, and one was 19 years old. A total of 33 students were not registered to vote; 13 students were registered. In terms of their awareness of voter registration activities, 26 students considered themselves very much or somewhat aware; 20 said they were not aware of such activities at all.

Why did you register?

Registration form was sent to me by my teacher. Several students credited their J-D government teacher, Mrs. Oppedisano, with sending them the registration forms directly.

This is a big election year.

For those who haven't registered – Why not?

Disinterest/Too busy. “I have a lot of opinions, but I just haven't gotten around to registering yet,” said one student. “I'm busy with other things,” said another. “I need to know more about the issues on both sides.”

Lack of party identification. “I don't like either the Republicans or the Democrats.” One suggested that they add a “None of the Above” line to the ballot.

My vote won't change anything.

How can we make it easier for young people to register?

Increase visibility of registration efforts. “I think the actual visibility of registration efforts is relatively low compared to how much press there is about ‘getting out the vote.’ The amount of money actually spent on getting kids to vote is small. Kids really have to take the initiative to get registered.”

Send forms home. Some students don't know where to get forms. As soon as students turn 18, registration forms should be sent home to them. That should be automatic. “If our teacher weren't sending us the registration forms, I think some of us wouldn't register,” said one student. “The forms are not as visible as they should be. It requires some effort to get them.”

Why do you think voting is important?

Voicing your opinion. “It's an important way to state your opinion,” said one student.

Has to be issues-driven. “I wouldn't vote simply because it's an obligation. If there's something out there that I cared about, then I would vote.”

How do you get your information on candidates/issues?

Newspapers and television, Larry King Show, CNN, Internet headlines. Others cited their government class, which opens each class with a discussion of current events.

What issues are important to you?

Iraq war was cited most frequently. Also spending policies and environment.

How can we encourage others to vote?

Get rid of silly slogans. They are extremely ineffective, said one student. But another suggested a **youth slogan contest** (for use on billboards, i.e.) might pique interest among young people.

Better campaigning practices. “You need to know what kind of person the candidates are,” said one student.

Make it personal. Instead of just telling people to vote, you should tell them WHY they should vote. “People become more interested when it hits home,” said one student.

Expand election period. Maybe two or three days or over a weekend.

Election Day holiday.

Allow time off work to vote.

Will you vote in college?

Several students said they would be too busy with classes and grades to worry about voting. Others said that given the importance of the November election this year, they definitely plan to vote.

Study Session #10: “Student Focus Group – Onondaga Community College”

May 4, 2004

This OCC focus group, moderated by Rebecca Livengood, met at the North Campus of Onondaga Community College. A total of 13 students from Professor Nina Tamrowski’s political science class participated, including six men and seven women. The group also was diverse in terms of age (ranging from 17 to 51, with about half aged 21 or younger), occupation (full-time students as well as those balancing jobs with classes), and ethnicity; it also included one naturalized citizen.

Eleven of the participants were registered to vote; the two who weren’t were too young. Five students in the group had never voted. Following are highlights of the discussion:

How can we make registration easier?

Internet registration. People should be able to register via the Internet from any computer anywhere.

Increase visibility of registration efforts. “If people see registration forms all the time, instead of only when we’re in the middle of campaigns, they’ll be more likely to register,” said one student. Another suggested making registration forms available when you pay town taxes.

Same-day registration.

Difficulties in voting?

No time. One student was a full-time student during the day and working nights. In the last election, she had to skip a class in order to vote.

Confusion over where to vote. “The first time you vote, you get a notice telling you where to go, but after that you get nothing. It would be good to get a letter every year telling you where and at what times you can vote. It would be a good reminder.” Another individual noted that whenever he moved his residence, he was unsure of where to go to vote. This individual did call the board of elections to get the information. “But I had to stay on top of it in order to get the information.”

Those who have voted – Why?

It’s our duty in a democracy. Said one, “There are a lot of people who don’t live in a democracy and who can’t vote. People have died for the right to vote, and it’s an insult to them that some of us are able to vote and don’t.”

It affects our lives. “The policies of those who are elected affect us, whether we vote or not,” observed one. “If 20,000 people don’t think their vote is going to make a difference, *that’s* going to make a difference!” said another.

Every vote counts. Especially significant for those who live in small communities, where each vote takes on more importance. “I think the smaller the town, the more it matters,” said one.

Those who haven’t voted – Why not?

Lack of interest/Lack of information. “I believe we should vote, but I also think we need to do the research,” commented one 30-something who had never voted. “We have to know both parties and what they stand for. I don’t think you should congratulate yourself for voting if you don’t know who or what you’re voting for.”

How do you get information on issues and candidates?

Internet, TV and newspapers were cited for information on national issues and candidates. Others cited workplace and friends.

One individual said “it’s almost impossible” to obtain information on local candidates through local media. Another criticized media for covering local issues and politicians only when elections roll around. Yet another said he does not read the newspaper because he thinks it’s biased. “I don’t listen to anything local anymore.”

Suggestions for distributing campaign information:

Mailed candidate material. It was suggested that candidates prepare and distribute written material or postcards outlining their positions. That material also would help to hold them accountable for their promises once they got into office.

Door-to-door campaigning and town meetings.

Use of Internet. One suggested that candidates go live on the Internet to take questions and comment on issues.

Straightforward campaign ads. “All you see is the candidates bashing each other. I’d like them to say, ‘This is my plan. This is my point of view. If you agree, vote for me.’ ”

What issues are important to you?

Foreign affairs. This was the overwhelming concern of those in the group.

Other issues: Federal funding policies, education and, locally, plans for Destiny USA and lake clean-up.

How can we encourage others to vote?

Ballot referendums. Give voters more of a direct say in issues that affect them.

Adjust business hours. Close businesses early on election day to enable employees to vote.

Civics education. Explain to children the differences between Democratic and Republican parties’ philosophies. And start early.

Expand election period to a few days or a week. “We need the flexibility to work with the lifestyles we have today instead of the lifestyle of 100 years ago,” said one. Expanded period would particularly help with those working two jobs or balancing a job with school. Another individual (majoring in fire science) noted that firefighters, for instance, have to work 48-hour shifts periodically, and when that falls on an election day, they don’t get to vote.

Expand polling hours. Polling sites should be open 24 hours.

Mail out ballots in advance. Very popular idea.

Mail out information booklet along with ballot.

Take voting machines into neighborhoods a la “bookmobiles.”

Run “How To Vote” infomercials. Spots should be nonpartisan, perhaps sponsored by the Board of Elections.

Note: All students in the focus group indicated they are planning to vote in the November election.

Study Session #11: "Student Focus Group – Liverpool High School"

May 6, 2004

Following is a summary of notes from the Liverpool High School student focus group session in May.

Fifteen students (and one student who was not a citizen) in a Liverpool High School senior social studies class participated in the meeting. Eight of the students were already registered; the remaining seven indicated that they will vote in the November election.

Students reported that most of their information comes via newspapers, TV, Internet sources, classroom discussions, and family input and influences.

Online Registration

The consensus of the group was that online registration as well as registration within a school class would facilitate registration for 18-year-old students.

Candidate Information

Ten of the students were in favor of a "Candidate Booklet" that would detail information about each office seeker. They also indicated the need for relevant Web sites with no "mud-slinging" or biased information to help them choose among candidates for public office.

How to Encourage Voting

Leading motivators cited by the students included:

- Saturday voting
- Lengthier polling period
- Encouragement from teacher(s)
- Substantive information
- Easier access to information regarding candidates and propositions
- Candidates who reach out to young people.

Students voiced disapproval of the idea of offering pay as an incentive for encouraging people to vote.

Issues of Importance

Students cited the following as issues that were important to them:

- **National:** War/Draft, terrorism, poverty, welfare reform, the economy and gas prices.
- **State:** Education/school funding, road/highway maintenance, taxes, jobs, poverty.
- **Local:** Zoning (especially the Wal-Mart zone change controversy on Rt. 57 at the NYS Thruway), school budget, roads/highways, jobs, property taxes.

Study Session #12: “North Syracuse Town Meeting”

May 6, 2004

The session opened with Don MacLaughlin providing some brief background information concerning the Onondaga Citizens League and its current study regarding political participation. He asked participants to respond to the OCL questionnaire and mentioned specifically the widespread problem relative to the absence of contested races and asked for those present to identify the factors which they felt might constitute impediments to fuller political participation. The impediments cited by those in attendance include:

- People feel distanced by the political process (it doesn't feel relevant to them)
- People simply don't care
- Individuals need to feel a connection between political participation and their self-interest
- People feel bothered or annoyed when candidates come to the door campaigning
- Lack of education about how an individual can impact local issues (such a zoning and development matters affecting their neighborhoods)
- People don't follow the news to realize that they can have an impact
- People feel embarrassed if they hold an unpopular position or opinion
- The reasons for political participation are based currently on emotions rather than judgment or knowledge
- The educational system does not necessarily foster citizenship as it pertains to the real world

Mr. MacLaughlin then invited the participants to comment on a series of recommendations intended to increase voter turnout. As they reviewed the list of possible actions, individuals commented on the feasibility and the likely effectiveness of the various steps listed below. The recommendations are listed below along with the assessment of the participants.

- On-line registration: Awesome! A great idea if it can be made safe and tamper-proof.
- Mailing the actual ballot: A good idea. This could help remind people of the election.
- Same day registration: A good idea.
- ATM-style card for voting: A good idea.
- Eliminate restrictions to absentee ballots: A good idea, particular since absentee voting restrictions are stronger in New York State than in many other states (at the same time, however, it would be important to publicize more widely the requirement that employers must provide a two-hour window to vote if employees cannot get to the polling place either before or after work).
- Slim down the ballot: A good idea.
- Distribute voter registration forms with high school diplomas: A good idea (in conjunction with this idea, there was sentiment to insure that colleges and universities are fulfilling their responsibilities to give out voter registration forms).
- Increased training for inspectors (including customer service training): The consensus was that this was a good idea because everyone recognized the value of having efficient inspectors (if it takes too long to vote, people will be turned off and might not participate)
- Voter outreach: The group consensus indicated a need to publicize the process more and to initiate more voter education efforts (for example, public service announcements that highlight the date and exactly what happens on that date. In addition, more public service announcements that compare and contrast the candidates and the issues and that emphasize voting as a sense of “duty” versus a “right” would be helpful. Finally, more outreach efforts to educate the voters about the role of each office and how it affects the average person

would be helpful since the “vocabulary” in terms of office nomenclature differs somewhat in each locality, leading to some confusion).

In reviewing possible actions intended to encourage more candidates to run for office, the participants had the following assessments for the actions listed:

- Establishment of term limits: The group consensus did not support term limits because they felt that that is what voting is all about (in other words, if you don't like the candidate, vote them out). Participants indicated that it takes time to learn the job and to get something accomplished and that term limits would not help.
- Lengthen terms of office (from 2 years to 4 years): Participants liked this idea and thought it would encourage more candidates. Without it, they felt that candidates would have to run again in as little as two years and they saw that as a disincentive for attracting more candidates for public office.
- Non-partisan Redistricting Commissions: Participants cautiously supported this concept as they acknowledged that a critical factor is the appointing authority and they expressed interest in balancing this concept with a variety of civil rights issues (i.e., creating districts that might allow for success by Hispanic or other minority groups).
- Increased Internet use by County Government: Participants thought this idea could be helpful because it might provide more and better information to keep people informed, thereby resulting in better informed voters.
- Proportional Elections: Participants were receptive to this idea and felt that it would diminish the feeling of disenfranchisement among some voter groups. Based upon the party vote in a given election, smaller parties would not necessarily be shut out of legislative bodies, although proportional voting would not work for executive positions.
- Public Financing: Group consensus supported this concept because it would allow many people to achieve a certain threshold of support which is all that most people need
- Electronic filing: Participants agreed that this would be a good option and endorsed its expansion since it already is operational at the state level.
- Candidate training: The consensus was that this was a good idea, especially if the training is under the auspices of a non-partisan group such as the League of Women Voters or BOCES
- Replace petition requirements: Participants did not feel as though the current petitioning requirements were onerous.
- Ethics Commission: While generally supporting this idea, participants noted that the timeliness factor is critical because sometimes the ruling (as far as what is in bounds and what is out of bounds in terms of how one treats one's opponent) comes **after** the election, thereby diminishing its value during the course of the campaign.
- Government classes: Participants recognized the value of such classes, not just for candidates but for regular citizens at the level of town, county and other political jurisdictions.

Study Session #13: “Cicero Town Meeting”

May 7, 2004

Notes from Cicero Town Meeting on Voter Participation – May 7

Three residents turned out to discuss the issue of voter participation (or lack thereof) in a meeting facilitated by Clyde Ohl and Don and Pat MacLaughlin. Following are some of the suggestions that came out of the one-hour discussion:

Increase focus of government education in the schools. Some suggestions included:

- Increase the current required one-semester government course for high school seniors to a full year.
- Bring in elected officials to speak to classes.
- Hold mock elections in the schools.
- Start government education during the middle-school years.
- Include voting literature with diplomas, including an explanation on the importance of voting.

Provide Internet registration. This was a popular idea, although it was pointed out that precautions would have to be in place to ensure against identity fraud.

Establish voting access from any polling site. A computerized swipe card would automatically bring up the voter’s own voting precinct ballot, enabling him/her to vote from any location.

Standardize qualifications for absentee ballots. One attendee noted that currently there are no statewide uniform requirements for obtaining an absentee ballot.

Make public financing available for potential candidates. Lack of funding was cited as one of the major concerns of those considering running for office.

Provide a voter guide in telephone book.

Participants at the meeting also filled out surveys in which they could indicate their support for additional ideas on increasing voter turnout. The surveys were collected, and the results will be tabulated by Clyde.

Study Session #14: “Clay Town Meeting”

May 19, 2004

The Town of Clay hosted the Onondaga Citizens League (OCL) study session in the new Town Hall. Town Supervisor Mark Rupprecht welcomed the participants and indicated that he was glad that OCL was making the study sessions accessible to many citizens by holding them in various communities throughout the county.

Following quick introductions among those present, Clyde Ohl provided an overview of the purpose of both the meeting and the OCL study. He distributed a list of various recommendations that had been suggested thus far in response to the issue of low voter turnout and invited those present to indicate which ones they might support and to suggest other recommendations that they might have to address low voter turnout.

As the participants were indicating their preferences on the lists they also began to speak about the problem and how to address it. One individual suggested that there needs to be something to make voters care about the process and the results, especially in an era of double and even triple income households. “If they (the voters) don’t see a significant negative issue, what,” he asked, “will pull them away from earning their living or their kids’ soccer matches?” Another participant suggested that people want to “drive the results” and cited as an example the way in which people tend to get involved when a Wal-Mart store is proposed for their neighborhood.

Another participant recommended getting individuals involved in the complexity of voting early in their lives and suggested that an appropriate time would be high school with the voting process as part of the curriculum. He suggested that many people do not understand how things affect their own lives and went on to say that they need to be drawn in to the “work” of the voting process. He thought that students at the twelfth grade level could attend public meetings or contribute volunteer hours to the voting process. True participation through hands-on experience, he suggested, would be far more meaningful than classroom-based exercises.

Another participant articulated an entirely different perspective on the matter of low voter turnout by suggesting that people are generally satisfied with town and county government but not with the state government because they cannot reach that level of government. He summarized this position by saying that, “If they’re satisfied, they’re not voting.”

Still another participant echoed the position of the previous speaker by questioning whether every non-vote really equals apathy. He went on to suggest that “they may not be *boycotting* the election; they simply may be satisfied with things as they are and may not feel compelled to vote.”

As the discussion continued, one speaker felt that those in office are always influenced by the next election while another individual felt that mass participation is subject to manipulation. Moreover, said one person, on-line registration is income-biased and another speaker said that he does not support anything “that expands the franchise.”

Two speakers underscored the widespread belief that many people think that “politics” is bad or dirty and therefore don’t want to be involved with it. “Responsibility with no authority” is how one person described it. Another individual felt that we won’t get more people involved if they have no authority. The session concluded with the final speaker suggesting that people would be more engaged if there were forums available for presenting issues as well as an opportunity to respond to those issues.

Study Session #15: “Dwindling Voter Participation”

May 25, 2004

Grant Reeher, professor of political science at Syracuse University, spoke with members of the OCL study committee about dwindling voter participation and the possible use of the Internet in voter recruitment efforts.

Comparing the U.S. to other countries, Reeher said while voter turnout is declining in other countries as well, turnout in the U.S. has shown the most severe decline, with the lowest level recorded in the 1996 election.

Along with a decline in voter turnout, U.S. shows declines in numbers of candidates running for political office, those attending political rallies, and those who regularly read a newspaper.

Some differences between the U.S. and other countries:

- The U.S. voter registration process is more complicated
- The number of elections and elective offices is greater
- We have an all-or-nothing form of calculating voting results
- Most countries vote on a Sunday or holiday

Unique factors that may contribute to voter indifference in the U.S.

- Erosion of political parties – Now they function more as fund-raising machines than as an organizational force for motivating the electorate.
- Media coverage is more negative, more cynical and shallow
- Elections more expensive by some measures
- Negative campaigns – Rather than building support for one candidate or the other, these campaigns tend to turn voters off entirely.
- General decline in civic engagement

Use of the Internet as a possible solution:

While Internet voting is politically dead, the Internet still holds potential. The Internet has the advantage of being an anywhere-anytime medium. Also takes away the need for candidates to build huge resources of funding. The Internet also is a very popular tool among young people.

Strengths and potential of the Internet were evident during the Democratic presidential primaries this year in the Dean and Clark campaigns. Internet groups generated letter-writing campaigns, raised funds. The movement to draft Clark to run was an Internet phenomenon.

Unclear whether the Internet is a tool for bringing in new people or more of a tool for energizing those already involved to some extent.

Calling parties and “meet-ups” are two ways the Internet has been used as a tool for rallying support for candidacies. Internet also can give support to those whose views are outside the mainstream and who feel silenced or intimidated in face-to-face political discussion.

Reeher maintains that voters today are not apathetic; rather, they are “quiescent” – inactive because they feel beaten down and frustrated by the process.

Reeher does not see term limits as a solution to the problem. He said term limits are a restriction on voters' rights. Two objectives he does advocate:

- Public financing of campaigns
- Control over the way candidates advertise, and a ban on TV ads (as in Britain)

Redistricting and a change in the Electoral College system also might result in greater voter participation, Reeher said.

Reeher also noted that in Vermont, candidates below the state legislative level do not run as members of a specific political party. He suggested that might be a model for New York as well.

Study Session #16: “Clean Money and Elections”

May 28, 2004

Location: Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce

Speaker: John Bartholomew, Citizen Action

The speaker focused on the issues of fairness and equity in political campaigns and particularly on the role of money in that regard. He believes that money determines who runs for office and, once the office is filled, policies as well. Speaking from his own experience as a candidate, he observed that when he announced that he was running for office in Seattle, the first question he was asked was “How much money can you raise?” Interest in his experience and his positions was secondary to his fundraising ability.

He noted that from 1993-98, the pharmaceutical industry (one of the most profitable sectors) spent \$10.5 million in Congressional campaign contributions—more than any other industry. Accordingly, this infusion of campaign money into the Congress tends to limit Congressional action on certain issues. Moreover, broader interests (such as women and blacks) aren’t represented in elected office or even in political races. The current structure and nature of campaign contributions, he contends, create special access to legislators.

Mr. Bartholomew explained that Clean Money Clean Elections (CMCE) supports public financing for political campaigns. The concept behind this approach is to replace the practice of going to a small number of large contributors with the practice of going to a large number of smaller contributors to demonstrate that the candidate has public support. Typically this requires that a candidate obtain a minimum of 400 contributions of up to \$500 each.

He noted that six states (Maine, Arizona, Vermont, Massachusetts, North Carolina and New Mexico) have some form of public financing of political campaigns. In Arizona, 9 out of 11 statewide office holders ran with clean money in the last election cycle. Three-fourths of the Maine Senate and two-thirds of the Maine House were elected with clean money. It is his sense that at least in Maine and Arizona, there have been noticeable changes in the kind of persons running for office as a result of the infusion of clean money. Specifically, he notes that candidates seem to represent a broader voice and base than was the case previously.

Portland, Oregon is now looking at the possibility of using clean money for city elections while New York City already has a matching funds program.

In terms of potential sources of funding to support state clean money programs, he noted that some jurisdictions use general revenues, an increase in lobbyist fees or a tax return check-off option. Another possibility is a surcharge on civil penalties.

The states of Vermont, North Carolina and New Mexico have adopted legislation for clean money campaigns but it applies ONLY to statewide races. New Jersey has passed a bill to set up a pilot program in a few districts. In general, he feels that there is nothing to compel legislators elected the old way to endorse this new approach. He explained that Citizen Action sees this as a core issue; otherwise they feel that democracy is for sale.

Various towns and cities have passed memorializing resolutions in support of Clean Money programs. Mr. Bartholomew feels that clean money allows a very different kind of person to run for office in the first place. Maine and Arizona, for example, saw a 20% increase in the number of

candidates running for public office. Maine adopted legislation in 1996 that took effect in the 2000 election cycle. This year some 80-90% of candidates in Maine are participating in the clean money program. In Vermont the program applies only to statewide offices. In Massachusetts, it has been used in just one election cycle so far and thus the long-term impact is not yet clear but Mr. Bartholomew contends that turnout was higher (because of public financing) because the races were more competitive.

Mr. Bartholomew directed individuals to the following web site for more detailed information pertaining to studies on campaign financing: www.publiccampaign.org

In response to a question about the potential drawbacks to public financing of campaigns, he conceded that perhaps the money could be used more effectively for another public purpose and that this could drive up the use of soft money unless that activity is controlled or addressed by the law. Additionally, he noted that another drawback might be the potential loss of an opportunity to become a stakeholder in the process (as many Howard Dean supporters did in the last year or two). Only 5% of the public ever donates financially to a political campaign and only .2% ever donates more than \$200. In terms of administration, he noted that the State board of elections would administer the program (as is proposed in the New York State bill). Qualifying candidates would get a debit card (applicable only for certain qualifying expenses which would be reported electronically).

**Onondaga Citizens League
Telephone Survey of Onondaga County Non-Voting Registered Voters
Conducted by Knowledge Systems & Research, Inc.
September - October 2004**

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|--|-------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | N=357 | N=104 | N=89 | N=74 | N=47 | N=43 |

1. When thinking about politics and government in our community, do you consider yourself:

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|-----------------------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Very interested | 20.2% | 22.1% | 19.1% | 18.9% | 27.7% | 11.6% |
| Somewhat interested | 56.9% | 59.6% | 50.6% | 60.8% | 48.9% | 65.1% |
| Not at all interested | 22.7% | 18.3% | 30.3% | 20.3% | 23.4% | 20.9% |
| Don't Know/Refused | 0.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 2.3% |

2. Which of the following were the reasons that you did not vote in the 2003 LOCAL election?

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|---|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Didn't know where the polling site was | 9.5% | 16.3% | 10.1% | 4.1% | 6.4% | 4.7% |
| Thought the election was boring and not worth voting in | 12.3% | 15.4% | 10.1% | 9.5% | 12.8% | 14% |
| You were out of town | 16.8% | 27.9% | 12.4% | 13.5% | 14.9% | 7.0% |
| Other pressing matters to deal with | 22.1% | 21.2% | 25.8% | 24.3% | 14.9% | 20.9% |
| Don't really know much about politics | 22.4% | 22.1% | 24.7% | 24.3% | 17.0% | 20.9% |
| You don't care about politics | 13.4% | 12.5% | 12.4% | 12.2% | 19.1% | 14.0% |
| You forgot | 10.4% | 16.3% | 7.9% | 10.8% | 2.1% | 9.3% |
| Local politics is irrelevant | 9.5% | 12.5% | 6.7% | 9.5% | 6.4% | 11.6% |
| Politicians don't listen | 27.5% | 22.1% | 27.0% | 31.1% | 31.9% | 30.2% |
| Don't think your vote matters | 17.9% | 16.3% | 18.0% | 20.3% | 21.3% | 14.0% |
| Other | 25.9% | 1.9% | 6.7% | 6.8% | 12.8% | 4.7% |
| Unable to get to polling site | 5% | 1% | 0% | 6.8% | 4.3% | 23.3% |
| Don't know/Refused | 0.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 2.3% |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------|------|------|-------|------|------|----|
| Not Registered | 6.4% | 5.8% | 10.1% | 6.8% | 6.4% | 0% |
|----------------|------|------|-------|------|------|----|

3. What would make you more likely to vote?

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|---|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Nothing | 40.1% | 42.3% | 40.4% | 37.8% | 34.0% | 44.2% |
| Response | 58.3% | 55.8% | 57.3% | 62.2% | 63.8% | 53.5% |
| -better candidates | 21.6% | 17.2% | 21.6% | 26.1% | 23.3% | 21.7% |
| -intending to vote in the next election | 13% | 20.7% | 11.8% | 8.7% | 10% | 8.7% |
| -compelling issues | 15.4% | 17.2% | 15.7% | 15.2% | 13.3% | 13% |
| - more convenient voting- alternative voting channels | 16.8% | 12.1% | 15.7% | 17.4% | 13.3% | 34.8% |
| -plausible change | 7.7% | 6.9% | 9.8% | 10.9% | 6.7% | 0% |
| -better informed about candidates and the uses | 14.9% | 22.4% | 15.7% | 8.7% | 10% | 13% |
| -other | 11.5% | 5.2% | 9.8% | 13% | 26.7% | 8.7% |
| Don't know/Refused | 2% | 1.9% | 2.2% | 0% | 2.1% | 2.3% |

4. Using a 10-point scale with 10 as highly likely and 1 as not at all likely, how likely would you be to vote in the next LOCAL election if the following occurred? Answer 8-10 (very likely)

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|--|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| The campaign was shorter | 17.5% | 20.4% | 10.1% | 20.3% | 19.6% | 19.0% |
| There was more useful public information on the candidate in brochures or newspapers | 47% | 58.7% | 39.3% | 50.0% | 44.7% | 32.6% |
| Internet voting was possible | 41.3% | 46.2% | 50.0% | 40.5% | 38.3% | 16.3% |
| You could vote by mail over a longer period of time | 37.4% | 34.6% | 32.6% | 43.2% | 46.8% | 33.3% |
| You could vote someplace near where you work | 34.3% | 45.2% | 28.1% | 37.8% | 36.2% | 11.9% |
| Election day was a holiday | 25% | 26% | 21.3% | 36.5% | 23.4% | 11.9% |
| Other | | | | | | |

5. Again using a 10-point scale with 10 as highly likely and 1 as not at all likely, how likely are you to vote in elections for the following offices. Answer 8-10 (very likely)

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| President of the US | 72.8% | 80.8% | 71.9% | 71.6% | 66.0% | 64.3% |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| US Senator from NYS | 57.3% | 66.3% | 53.4% | 48.6% | 57.4% | 58.5% |
| NYS Ass'blyperson | 37.2% | 42.3% | 31.5% | 35.1% | 34% | 43.9% |
| Mayor or other local officials | 49.5% | 46.2% | 46.1% | 36.5% | 34% | 20% |
| County Executive | 34.7% | 36.5% | 36% | 27% | 40.4% | 35% |
| Town or City Judge | 25% | 28.8% | 25% | 20.3% | 29.8% | 17.9% |
| School board | 36.1% | 39.8% | 41.6% | 35.1% | 38.3% | 12.8% |

6. How often do you read the local newspaper?

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Daily | 43.4% | 42.3% | 46.1% | 37.8% | 48.9% | 44.2% |
| A few times a week | 30.5% | 38.5% | 28.1% | 33.8% | 19.1% | 23.3% |
| A few times a month | 11.8% | 8.7% | 13.5% | 16.2% | 12.8% | 7% |
| Almost never | 13.7% | 10.6% | 12.4% | 12.2% | 19.1% | 20.9% |
| Don't know/Refused | 0.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 2.3% |

7. How many hours per day, on average, do you watch television?

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|--------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| None | 5.3% | 8.7% | 4.5% | 5.4% | 2.1% | 2.3% |
| 1-3 | 67.8% | 68.3% | 73% | 71.6% | 72.3% | 44.2% |
| 4-6 | 19.9% | 20.2% | 18% | 13.5% | 19.1% | 34.9% |
| 7-10 | 4.8% | 1.9% | 3.4% | 8.1% | 4.3% | 9.3% |
| More than 10 | 1.7% | 1% | 1.1% | 1.4% | 2.1% | 4.7% |
| Don't know/Refused | 0.3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4.6% |

8. How many times per week do you watch a local news program?

| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
|--------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Never | 8.4% | 9.6% | 6.7% | 12.2% | 6.4% | 4.7% |
| Once | 5.6% | 6.7% | 7.9% | 5.4% | 2.1% | 2.3% |
| Twice | 8.7% | 12.5% | 9% | 8.1% | 8.5% | 0% |
| Three times | 9% | 9.6% | 7.9% | 13.5% | 6.4% | 4.7% |
| Four-Six times | 17.9% | 18.3% | 24.7% | 13.5% | 19.1% | 9.3% |
| Daily | 49.9% | 43.3% | 43.8% | 47.3% | 57.4% | 74.4% |
| Don't know/Refused | 0.6% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 2.3% |

9. Do you have Internet access at home and/or at work?

| | Total | 18-30 yr. | 31-40 yr. | 41-50 yr. | 51-60 yr. | 60+ yr. olds |
|--|-------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
|--|-------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|

| | | | | | | |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | olds | olds | olds | olds | |
| At home | 33.1% | 35.6% | 30.3% | 36.5% | 34% | 25.6% |
| At work | 8.1% | 6.7% | 9.0% | 8.1% | 10.6% | 7% |
| Both | 32.5% | 42.3% | 36% | 33.8% | 27.7% | 4.7% |
| Neither | 26.3% | 15.4% | 24.7% | 21.6% | 27.7% | 62.8% |

10. How many hours per day, on average, do you use the Internet?

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
| None | 18.3% | 9.1% | 14.9% | 29.3% | 17.6% | 43.8% |
| 1-3 | 64.3% | 68.2% | 73.1% | 58.6% | 55.9% | 43.8% |
| 4-6 | 11% | 15.9% | 4.5% | 6.9% | 17.6% | 12.5% |
| 7-10 | 3.4% | 5.7% | 1.5% | 3.4% | 2.9% | 0% |
| More than 10 | 2.3% | 1.1% | 4.5% | 0% | 5.9% | 0% |
| Don't know/Refused | 0.8% | 0% | 1.5% | 1.7% | 0% | 0% |

11. How much of the news that you read comes from the Internet?

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | Total | 18-30 yr. olds | 31-40 yr. olds | 41-50 yr. olds | 51-60 yr. olds | 60+ yr. olds |
| None | 26.5% | 23.8% | 26.3% | 26.8% | 28.6% | 44.4% |
| Very little | 32.6% | 37.5% | 36.8% | 22% | 25% | 33.3% |
| Some | 22.3% | 15% | 19.3% | 39% | 28.6% | 11.1% |
| Most | 14.4% | 17.5% | 17.5% | 9.8% | 10.7% | 0% |
| All | 3.7% | 6.3% | 0% | 0% | 7.1% | 11.1% |
| Don't know/Refused | 0.5% | 0% | 0% | 2.4% | 0% | 0% |

Additional Resources

www.allegheny.edu/mobilizing.pdf

www.allegheny.edu/news/releases/pcfactsheet.php

www.journalism.org

www.ongov.net/Board_of_Elections/home.html

www.people-press.org

www.takeyourkidstovote.org

www.vanishingvoter.org

www.vanishingvoter.org/Releases/release043004.shtml

Analysis of Local Press Coverage for the 2003 Local Elections, September 28 – November 4, 2003. Linda Mathis, July 14, 2004

Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action. Steve Davis, Larry Elin and Grant Reeher. 2002. Westview Press

Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy, and What News Outlets Can Do About It. Thomas E. Patterson. 2000. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. (Research publication is available to read online at

www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/Research_Publications/Reports/softnews.pdf)

The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in the Age of Uncertainty. Thomas E. Patterson. 2002. Vintage Books