

Support your local government?

Center for Economic Development

Carnegie Mellon University
Center for Economic Development
UTDC Suite 208
4516 Henry Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Phone: 412.268.9880
Fax: 412.268.9828
www.smartpolicy.org

Smart Policy for Innovative Regions

Alexis Haakensen
Jerry Paytas, Ph.D.

April 2004

Support your local government?

In Pennsylvania, we certainly seem to like local government. Our state has more than 2,500 sub-county governments and more than 46,000 municipal officers—only Illinois and Minnesota have more. Every once in a while some outsiders, most recently researchers from the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., tell us how bad it is to have so much government and warn us to cut down. They just don't get it. We like local government so much, we prove it with the higher taxes we pay.

One would think our unwavering support for local government would also be displayed at the voting booth. But wait, in the November 2003 election, with mostly local offices on the ballot, turnout in metropolitan Pittsburgh ranged from a low of 30% in Westmoreland County to a whopping 42% in Allegheny County. In total, nearly 615,000 civic-minded citizens turned out to decide who should run our local governments. Let's put that in perspective: out of more than 1.6 million registered voters, only 38% bothered to vote in the elections. Furthermore, in 610 races in the 8-county area, *418 were unopposed*, as reported by the Post-Gazette (November 5, 2003). So maybe we don't like government that much after all.

The continuously dismal rate of national voter turnout has been well documented, with merely 51.3% of the voting-age public showing up at the polls during the 2000 presidential election. At 53.7%, Pennsylvania ranked just above the national average. Turnout is even worse in a non-presidential year: for the 1998 election, national and Pennsylvania rates were 36.4% and 32.4% respectively. As a result, Senator Arlen Specter was elected with the support of 26% of registered voters and only 19.8% of the voting-age public. And in those races, at least, there were multiple candidates to choose from. The recent elections had neither the allure of high-level offices nor the excitement of contested offices to draw voters.

Is there anything we can do to fix this? The first question that should be asked is whether it is necessary to have so many elected offices. Many of the uncontested races were for primarily administrative positions such as Clerk or Register of Wills. It may be more useful to treat some of these as ordinary civil service jobs; especially since no one is voting for them anyway.

The second question to consider is whether there is any use in continuing to hold off-year elections. While holding such elections removes the distraction of federal elections from local politics, this has not translated into increased interest in the local races. In addition, it is difficult to argue that voters *should* participate when 68% of elections are unopposed. Running on-year elections could be more efficient for all involved.

The third question to consider is whether we should introduce a mandatory minimum for an election's legitimacy. Some legislative actions require a quorum of members to be considered valid; this ensures that a program for the many is not guided by the will of a few. Although the idea of compulsory voting is unpopular, setting a minimum level of participation may force a higher turnout, particularly if we have to keep holding elections until a quorum is reached. Alternatively, we could set up a system

that allows positions to become appointed if the races go uncontested over a specific period of time.

In theory, we have a representative democracy run by the consent of the governed. However, if voters do not voice their consent by participating in elections, where is the mandate to govern? The electoral process itself does nothing to encourage voter participation. Elections are the vehicle for citizens to exercise choice; if there is no choice to make, then there is no reason for voters to show up at the polls. There is no proof that our abundance of local government and municipal offices contribute to voter apathy. The apathy, however, is a fact and we need to ask ourselves how to fix it. Unfortunately, that would require finding enough people who care.

Alexis Haakensen is a Research Assistant at the Carnegie Mellon University Center for Economic Development. She is an Alumni Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School for Public and International Affairs.