



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

Fact Sheet-05-53

Motivating Reasons for Community Participation

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INTRODUCTION

Community participation is at the heart of any community development program and is generally recognized as a critical ingredient to civic life and a healthy democracy. However, a majority of citizens choose not to participate in community and many choose not to even vote.

Although voter turnout was relatively high for the 2004 election, with 77% of registered Nevadans voting, this surge in voter turn-out could be a “blip” in voter participation (Wattenberg 2005). In the 2000 elections, only 44% of registered Nevadans voted. While voter participation has swung up and down, participation in community groups has declined significantly.

Over the last 30 years, community participation has dropped by 40% (Putnam 2000). As Putnam says, people today have “*stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers and stopped going to meetings*” (Putnam 2000, 63-64). It seems that as a nation our civic muscles have become flaccid from lack of exercise. Although barriers to participation are commonly cited as lack of time, no interest and poor civic skills, motivating reasons to participate are less understood.

What motivates a citizen to participate in community and how can we help channel that motivation toward community health? Community participation may be defined differently for each person. Additionally, the act of participation has different levels. Voting is perhaps the

simplest form of participation and serving on a local community board may be the most intensive. Involvement with a community board often requires numerous meetings, group discussion and decision-making. By surveying a broad spectrum of participators, from voters to community board members, we are better able to understand what motivates individuals to participate.

METHODS

A four-page questionnaire was mailed to randomly selected registered voters ($n = 554$) and past community board members ($n = 209$) in Washoe County. Reminder postcards and replacement surveys were also mailed to increase the response rate (Dillman 1978). The response rate is the percentage of respondents in the study who return completed questionnaires. The overall response rate was 49% ($n = 375$)¹. Registered voters had a response rate of 40% and past community board members had a response rate of 73%. Respondents were asked to rate 17 reasons listed according to how important each reason was in their decision to take part in a community group. They rated the reason using the Likert scale from not important (1) to very important (5).

RESULTS

The top 10 reasons rated as most important are outlined in Table 1.

¹ For a detailed description of the methodology, please refer to Rebori 2004--UNCE Publication # EB04-04.

Table 1. Top ten reasons given for *Why People Participate* and the significance between registered voters and community board members.

Rank	Reason Listed	Frequency [^]	Percent	Level of Significance
1.	The chance to make the community a better place to live.	292	70%	<.001
2.	To solve a particular problem.	257	62%	.151
3.	To influence government policy.	252	61%	<.001
4.	To lend a hand to people who need help.	236	57%	.795
5.	It is my duty as a citizen.	194	47%	.008
6.	To do my share.	189	46%	<.001
7.	To work with people who share my ideals.	175	42%	.880
*8.	To be with people I enjoy.	120	29%	.007
9.	To learn about politics and government.	115	28%	.082
10.	I find it exciting.	102	25%	.346

[^] Responses reflect frequency of respondents who rated this reason as a 4 or a 5 on a five point Likert scale for level of importance in their decision to participate.

*All items in bold were rated as significantly more important to community board members with the exception of item 8. This item was ranked as significantly more important to registered voters.

The most important reason given by both groups (registered voters and past board members) was the item, *The chance to make the community a better place to live*, with 70% of respondents (n = 292) rating this reason as a 4 or 5 on the five-point Likert scale (Table 1). When conducting a Pearson chi-square between the groups regarding their level of importance on the items listed, significant differences emerged. As indicated in Table 1, community board members place significantly more importance on four of the 10 most frequently cited reasons for participating in community. Those items are indicated in bold in Table 1.

Community board members rated the reasons *to make the community better, to influence*

government policy, to do their duty and to do their share as a citizen as more important in their decision to join and participate on a community board than registered voters. Conversely, registered voters rated, *to be with people I enjoy* as more important in their decision to join a community group (Table 1) than community board members did.

When looking at the top 10 reasons for each group, other differences emerged. The top 10 reasons for participating in a community group for past board members are listed in Table 2. Table 3 lists the top 10 reasons given by registered voters.

Table 2. Community board member's 10 most important *reasons for participation*.

Rank	Reason Listed	Frequency of Responses [^]	Percent of Responses
1.	The chance to make the community a better place to live.	147	90
2.	To influence government policy.	125	82
3.	To solve a particular problem	110	72
4.	To do my share	98	64
5.	It is my duty as a citizen.	95	62
6.	To lend a hand to people who need help.	93	61
7.	To work with people who share my ideals.	72	47
8.	To learn about politics and government.	51	33
9.	I find it exciting.	48	31
10.	To meet important and influential people.	46	30

[^] Responses reflect frequency of respondents who rated this reason as a 4 or 5 on a five-point Likert scale for level of importance in their decision to participate.

Nine out of the 10 items listed in Table 2 were also contained in the registered voter's top 10 reasons (Table 3). Registered voter responses and their ten most important reasons for participating are outlined in Table 3. However, 9 of the ten items listed in Table 2 are ranked in a different order in Table 3. Community board members had a unique top reason not found in the registered voter top 10 list, *To meet important and influential people* (Table 2). Likewise, registered voters had one unique top reason not found in the community board top 10 list, *To be with people I enjoy* (Table 3).

The item *To meet important and influential people* was the 10th most important reason to participate for community board members but was important to only 41 registered voters, or 18.5% of those surveyed. The item *To be with people I enjoy* was ranked as the 8th most important reason to participate for registered voters but was only important to 36 board members, or 24% of those surveyed.

Table 3. Registered voter's 10 most important *reasons for participation*.

Rank	Reason Listed	Frequency of Responses [^]	Percent of Responses
1.	The chance to make the community a better place to live.	155	70
2.	To solve a particular problem	147	66
3.	To lend a hand to people who need help.	143	64
4.	To influence government policy.	127	57
5.	To work with people who share my ideals	103	46
6.	It is my duty as a citizen.	99	44
7.	To do my share	91	41
8.	To be with people I enjoy	84	38
9.	To learn about politics and government.	64	29
10.	I find it exciting.	54	24

[^] Responses reflect frequency of respondents who rated this reason as a 4 or 5 on a five-point Likert scale for level of importance in their decision to participate.

Although some minor variations were displayed in tables 2 and 3, it appears that most citizens want to participate to help make their community a better place to live, to solve problems and influence policy and to be responsible citizens. Based on these results, it seems people will participate on community boards or groups in order to have direct influence and impact over decisions in their community. These reasons appear to link to their sense of quality of life and what is important to them in the community. Although it is important to understand what motivates people to participate in community, it is equally important to know the barriers to participation. The most common barriers to participation include lack of time and interest and poor civic skills (Verba et al. 1995). If a person has the time and the interest, civic skills can be fostered through participation. However, people need to participate in order to develop and foster their civic skills.

No community development program or local project is successful without citizen participation. Yet, the number of citizens who choose to participate in community-oriented groups has declined. To increase citizen participation efforts in community programs and groups, citizens need to realize the impact they potentially can have on a project or program and feel empowered to influence decisions that impact their lives. Obviously, personal reasons for participating in a community group or board will differ for each individual. However, ensuring an individual's participation efforts have positive impact on the community will validate a person's decision to take part in a community group or join a community board.

Literature Cited:

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