

# Practice civic engagement



**Dianne Mack**

VIEWPOINT

It is ironic that elections for the sphere of government that is least able to be responsive to individual voters draw the greatest voter turnout. It is not surprising—the presidential electoral drama is often entertaining and provides fodder for slow news days—but ironic nonetheless.

In the last 10 election cycles voter turnout in presidential election years has been 69 to 80 percent in Escambia County and 65 to 71 percent in Santa Rosa. In the intervening elections the turnout ranged from 47 to 54 percent in Escambia and 43 to 54 percent in Santa Rosa. To be fair, the years in which we elect a president happen to be those in which we elect sheriffs and superintendents of schools. When those races are much contested, they tend to draw more voters as well.

But even the greater voting percentages noted above are not particularly admirable. Why are voters not voting? What can we do to change this?

It is our contention at the Institute for Women in Politics that we as a community and as a democratic society have forgotten what the Founding Fathers of this nation taught us: that

civic engagement does not materialize out of thin air, that it must be encouraged even when it opposes the established order, that it needs to be genuinely valued.

The path to civic engagement must begin with the acknowledgement that schools (and families) have a responsibility to provide *all* students a foundation for citizenship—knowledge, precepts, practices, duties. A smattering of American government and the mechanics of voting are not nearly enough. Having mentored an Escambia County student for six years, I saw how poorly prepared she was for citizenship upon graduation.

The path to greater civic engagement in the near term, and pointedly for next year's elections, requires some adjustment in how electoral candidates are viewed and received in the community and by community organizations. If we want to see more citizens voting, we need to provide them convenient opportunities to become familiar with the candidates. The majority of people are too taken up with work, family, and personal interests to seek out candidate information on their own; if they care at all, they rely on surface impressions acquired from brochures or news reports or a minute with the candidate (or campaign volunteer) at the front door.

Next year the Institute for Women in Politics will hold public forums for women candidates. We challenge ev-

ery group that holds regular meetings for its membership — civic clubs, neighborhood associations, professional associations, and so on — to do likewise, to invite candidates to speak during a regular meeting or meetings and allow them enough time to deliver a message of substance. You will thereby accomplish two worthy objectives: you will prepare your members to be informed voters, and you will acknowledge that, to paraphrase the object of Rotary International, the ideal of public service is a basis of worthy enterprise.

To those who would make the excuse that their organization cannot “get involved in politics,” we would point out that the genuine definition of politics is “the theory and practice of obtaining the ends of civil society as perfectly as possible.” If we want better government and more civic engagement, we must adjust attitudes and foster participation.

Founding Father Samuel Adams has the last word today (Boston Gazette, 1781): “Let each citizen remember at the moment he is offering his vote that he is not making a present or a compliment to please an individual; but that he is executing one of the most solemn trusts in human society for which he is accountable to God and his country.”

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