

Section IV: Conclusions

As voter turnout has fallen in many countries of the world, concern has been rising. Government agencies, EMBs, voluntary associations and individuals have undertaken extensive efforts to reverse, or at least to stabilize, the decline in turnout. In a way, the amount of attention that is being given, and the effort that is being spent, to facilitate voter participation represents a small upswing in participation in its own right. And it is an important testament to the centrality of democratic ideas and practices in many countries that reduced voter participation is viewed with such alarm.

Any inventory of initiatives to encourage higher turnout will be incomplete, as selections have to be made which are inevitably somewhat arbitrary, and as a new project is probably being started every day somewhere in the world. That we have been able to compile as much information as we have presented here is a direct result of the explosion of accessible information available on the Internet. Voter participation projects have in common that their initiators and practitioners are proud of their activity and anxious to share their experiences with others who wish to learn what is being done elsewhere. A good example of an idea and an activity that has spread from one country to others is that of Rock the Vote. Thus, although this book will quickly be overtaken by developments, it will have succeeded if it sparks new interest, and new turnout encouragement projects, in all corners of the world.

This book has created a classification system for the numerous projects which have been identified. To some extent, this also is arbitrary, but most of the projects do fit reasonably well into one of the six categories. Most numerous, perhaps because they are the least controversial, are the **voter information campaigns** undertaken largely by those authorities which actually conduct elections. These campaigns are designed to answer the basic 'how, where and when?' questions related to voter registration and to casting a ballot.

Information campaigns certainly involve advertising, a separate category of **advertising campaigns** has been designated for those which tackle the 'why' question head-on and exhort citizens to go to the polls. These campaigns use various messages, rang-

ing from appeals to citizen duty ('vote because you should') to self-interest ('vote because you need to protect or advance your interests') to the ubiquity of politics ('vote because politics is all around us').

Grass-roots campaigns operate on the assumption that personal contact and exhortation are the ways to get out the vote rather than more impersonal advertising methods. **School programmes, such as mock elections**, are another popular method of trying to engage young people in the political process in the hope that they will learn the 'habit' of voting, which will then stay with them for life. School programmes are conducted from primary school to university level. There is an important category of **entertainment** events, the largest and splashiest of which are massive rock concerts, which put out a message of participation as a by-product of engaging youth at leisure. As the group of case studies indicates, however, there are other, smaller-scale productions, such as travelling theatre troupes, which carry a similar message about participation. Theatre groups are particularly common in societies where the literacy rate is low. Finally, there are **inducements** to vote. Examples of these are, however, rare, and some of those which have been implemented or suggested have aroused controversy.

As can be seen in the matrix at annex A, the six approaches to encouraging voting correspond to somewhat different mixes of problems. Voter information campaigns are directed towards the facilitation of voting, providing information that will reduce the information need associated with the act. The registration problems which occur in some countries can prevent people from voting, while in other countries they are merely an inhibition (if registration is permitted at the polls, for example). Information campaigns can help voters to get registered. Information campaigns also point out the location of the poll, the voting hours, and alternative voting methods if they exist. If voting is a marginal activity for some people, particularly young voters or the unregistered, this information may make the difference between a vote and an abstention.

Advertising campaigns which actively promote voting are directed at several of the reasons non-

voters give for their lack of participation. Three of these stand out. First, they often promote the idea of ‘civic duty’, with the message that continual public participation is necessary to democracy’s health and very survival. Second, they carry the message that individuals need to ‘speak’ for themselves at the polls, lest others speak for them. Our case study of CIDEM in France points out that this is often the message of its advertising. Finally, the advertisements often attempt to show the positive side of politics, decisions being made in the public interest, to counteract some of the negative attitudes which are related to a lowering of turnout.

Grass-roots movements often combine elements of both information campaigns and advertising campaigns. Organizations as diverse as Pora in Ukraine and the Minnesota Participation Project (see the two case studies) use groups of volunteers to reach out to citizens directly. Mobilization through direct contact is the method used by grass-roots organizations such as these. Sometimes their methods can include entertainment events as well. While their goals can be different, and in some cases (like that of Pora) they take on a partisan cause, their methods can have direct success in bringing people into the political process to participate. Once again, the goals of grass-roots movements are to combat negativism, to promote civic engagement, and to show how participation at the ballot box is meaningful to everyday life.

Schools are a major arena for promoting the importance of voting to young people, often those below voting age. The broader subject of civics education in the school curriculum is beyond the scope of this book. However, schools are also used at election time to promote a future culture of voting by holding mock or practice elections, like the Canadian Student Vote programme described in the case study. These ‘kids vote’ programmes have become quite common in recent years. They are sometimes run by schools themselves, but can also be coordinated by public service groups, often with the active support of EMBs, which provide literature and voting materials. Media outlets can also be involved in order to publicize the results of the school vote in conjunction with the release of the official election results. The goal of student vote programmes is once again to combat the lack of interest in politics and elections which affects the voting rates of young eligible citizens, and, along with civic education, the programme also attempts to dispel negativity by providing information about the important issues in the election.

Entertainment programmes such as Rock Volieb

in Slovakia (see case study) take a more ‘popular culture’ approach to the promotion of voting by combining the serious message about the importance of voting with the wide appeal of music or theatre. The rock concerts specifically involve messages from the musicians or other celebrities to the effect that voting is ‘cool’. The stars make clear that they will be voting and that the audience should do so as well. At times, information about registration or voting procedures will be transmitted. Voting is described as a meaningful act, and the target audience are exhorted to have their own say in the choice of their representatives and to express their own opinion on the issues of concern to them or their age (or other relevant) group. This approach appears to have enthused and built support for electoral participation in the context of change in 1998 Slovakia .

A final approach to encouraging voter turnout is to provide material inducements to participate. A straightforward response to the view that voters find the costs of voting in terms of time and effort too high would be to pay them in some form to do so. The ancient Roman Republic paid citizens compensation for voting, since in some cases they needed to journey to Rome to do so. Cash payments, or tax deductions, have been suggested in contemporary times, as has allowing voters to decide over a small tax budget if they participate, while non-voters will not get that opportunity. The case studies have provided examples of the distributions of lottery tickets to voters, making them eligible for a substantial prize. These methods of encouraging voting have been more controversial than the others, since the argument can be made that the opportunity for direct material gain should not be necessary in order for people to do their civic duty. Perhaps as a result, few such schemes have been implemented, and those which have been tried are not often repeated even if they are successful in raising turnout.

Many of the approaches to voting encouragement listed in our inventory have been launched, or been expanded, within the past decade, as falling voting rates have brought the problem of electoral participation more directly to the public’s attention. The results of these activities have been difficult to quantify with precision. If the implementation of programmes in a country coincides with a further drop in turnout, does this mean that the programmes failed, or that the decline would have been even greater without them? Conversely, if the turnout seems to be stabilized, or even to increase, does this mean that the programmes should get the credit? The fact that cause

and effect are difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain with certainty is at times frustrating, but not a reason to exercise undue caution in setting up programmes to encourage turnout. In fact, many of those described here have become institutionalized over the past decade, and their operations are expected and appreciated by a wide variety of those active in the election process. While not all activities to encourage turnout have produced results that are demonstrable, and not all are cost-effective, it is possible to draw on the range of global experience that now exists in order to produce some lessons of good practice.

Several of the case studies illustrate the fact that evaluation strategies are often missing in the project plans. Very few countries publish turnout data broken down by age or sex, and for most there are only survey results to use. This makes it particularly difficult to know whether, even if turnout increases at an election after voter mobilization activities have been carried out, it increased within the target groups or within other groups. In addition, few organizations have conducted studies before they design and implement their activities. The fact that turnout is low, or declining, seems to be reason enough to implement smaller or larger activities without studying and specifying the underlying problem or target groups. **It is good practice for organizations considering programmes to encourage voter turnout also to consider evaluation methods which will allow them to judge whether their efforts have been successful, and for EMBs and other bodies to make such evaluations. It is also good practice for EMBs to consider evaluation needs in defining their data collection activities, and to seek to collect data that will support research on factors which affect electoral participation as long as this can be done within a sustainable commitment of human and financial resources.**

Such attempts at evaluation, while limited, have not been entirely lacking. Experiments have shown grass-roots methods to be effective, comparing personal contact to telephone calls.¹ As the case study mentions, surveys conducted by the UK Electoral Commission indicate the success of its advertising campaigns in reaching potential voters and influencing some to vote. Elections Canada's advertising campaigns have also been validated by survey research.² Student vote programmes can also cite survey evidence to support the success of their efforts, as the case study from Canada indicates.

It is good practice for organizations considering ways of encouraging voter turnout to evaluate

their relative balance of human and financial resources, and to implement a grass-roots or advertising campaign accordingly.

It is good practice for schools to participate in special educational and voting activities at election time, to engage the interest of students and prepare them for voting as they become eligible. In some countries, such activities can be initiated at the level of the individual school. In others, policy decisions or even government regulations may be required to permit such activities to be included in or alongside the school curriculum.

As more evidence and research about the results and the cost-effectiveness of programmes to encourage turnout is gathered, governments, EMBs, groups and concerned individuals are invited to peruse the inventory and case studies in this publication, to consult the appropriate organizations for information, to launch or continue relevant initiatives designed to contribute to the important task of encouraging people to exercise their right to vote, and to evaluate and to share their experiences.

Endnotes

- 1 Green, Donald P. and Gerber, Alan S., *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).
- 2 Pammett, Jon H. and LeDuc, Lawrence, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters* (Ottawa: Elections Canada, 2003).