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Faculty Research Note: "Memo to the Governor" - Citizen Participation in Massachusetts

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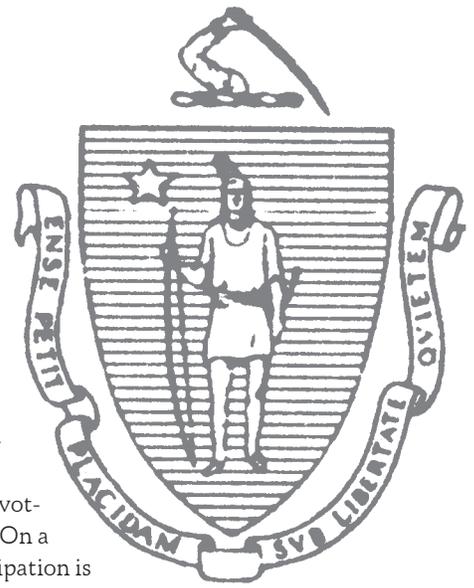
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Faculty Research Note

“Memo to the Governor”

Citizen Participation in Massachusetts

by Members of the Political Science Department



During the period from February 25–March 11, 2002 a scientific survey of Massachusetts citizens was conducted by a research group which included Professor Victor DeSantis of the Institute of Regional Development and Professors Michael Kryzaneck, Brendan Burke, David Hill (now of Valdosta State University) and Mark Kemper, all of the Political Science Department. The purpose of the survey was to understand the political attitudes and behaviors of a random sample of citizens across the state, especially with respect to participation in the political process. The research was part of a larger study of key public policy concerns commissioned by the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Society for Public Administrators. The complete study will be presented to Governor Mitt Romney in January in book form under the title of ‘Memo to the Governor.’ The essential parts of the study on participation are presented below.

To examine citizen participation of Massachusetts national elections the survey asked the respondents to report the approximate frequency of voting in presidential elections across their adult life, and whether or not they intended to vote in the upcoming midterm elections. To explore citizen contact with government officials the survey asked respondents whether or not they had contacted a government official within the last twelve months. Finally, respondents were asked several questions regarding their participation in community politics, such as attending town meetings, serving on governmental and non-governmental boards, and working with others to solve community problems.

The data shown in **Figure 1** suggest a moderate to high degree of citizen participation in presidential elections. Fifty-eight percent of respondents stated they had voted in every presidential election, and another 21.1% stated they had voted in more than half of the presidential elections during their adult life. While these data do indicate a high degree of overall participation, it is

important to compare participation across demographic groups due to the differential voting rates across social groups. On a national level, electoral participation is strongly related to social characteristics.

The data in this project suggest this pattern is also present among Massachusetts respondents. Age, education, income, and length of residence are all positively and significantly related to electoral participation, which indicates that individuals from higher socioeconomic groups, older Americans, whites, individuals who attend church frequently, and those with longer tenure in the current community report a higher frequency of voting in presidential elections.

Questions were also asked regarding respondents’ intention to vote in elections of November, 2002. Eighty-seven percent of respondents stated they intended to vote in the fall elections. There are several potential reasons for this very high proportion of respondents reporting the intention to vote in the 2002 elections. One is simply that a larger proportion of respondents stated they intended to cast a ballot in the upcoming election than will actually show up on Election Day. Additionally, with a relatively high profile gubernatorial race in November many respondents may have been influenced to state their intention to vote due to the increased publicity given the race. Finally, there is the possibility that in the wake of September 11th politics and duty to country became more salient to citizens.

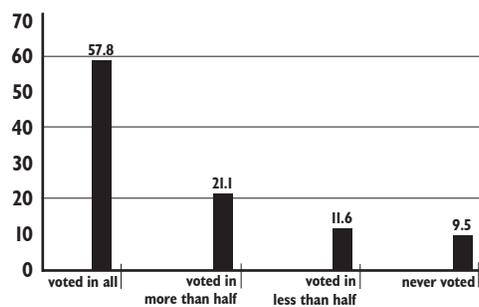


Figure 1.
Voting History of Respondents.

As with presidential elections, there are systematic differences across social groups in the prospective report of voting. Individuals from higher education and income groups, older Americans, union members, individuals who attend church frequently, and those with longer tenures of residence are significantly more likely to state their intention to vote in the elections.

The second type of participation examined was initiating contact with local, state, or federal government officials. As shown in **Figure 2**, 25.2% of respondents stated that within the last twelve months they had initiated contact with a government official. This number is consistent with national data that suggest that between 20-25% of citizens report a contact with either a local or national government official. There are also systematic differences across demographic groups in contacting government officials. Individuals from higher educational and income groups, men, and union members are all significantly more likely to initiate contact with a government official.

The final category of participation considered was community-based participation. The first question used to gauge participation within an individual's community asked the respondent to report his or her approximate frequency of attendance at annual or special town meetings over the last five years. As **Figure 3** indicates, a relatively low 20% of respondents reported attending



Figure 2.
Percentage of Respondents Reporting Contact With a Government Official.

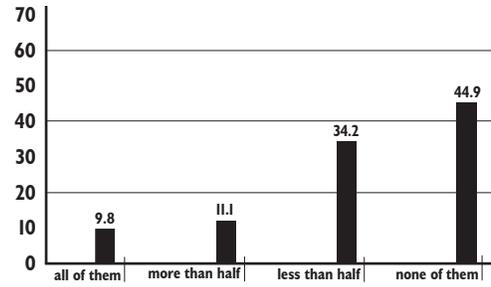


Figure 3.
Respondent Town Meeting Attendance History.

more than half of the town meetings over the last five years, with only 9.8% of respondents claiming to have attended all town meetings. Clearly, a much smaller number of citizens are participating than in the other forms of participation considered here. This is in large part due to the high degree of initiative required to attend a public meeting that lasts an entire evening (or possibly several evenings). As with other types of participation, town meeting attendance differs systematically across social groupings. Older Americans, individuals from higher educational and income groups, individuals who attend church frequently, and those with longer tenures of residence in their community are significantly more likely to attend town meetings.

The next question asked respondents whether or not they had served in an elected or appointed status on any official body in their community. **Figure 4** indicates that only 12.4% of respondents stated that they served on a community governing body. As with town meeting attendance, the time and effort required to serve in an elected or appointed position reduces the proportion

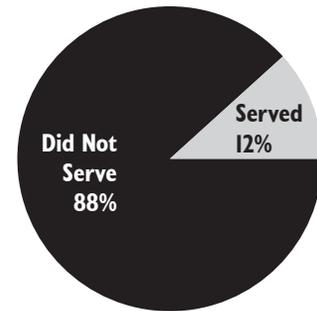


Figure 4.
Percentage of Respondents Serving on an Elected or Appointed Board.

of citizens engaging in this form of participation. As one would expect, there are demographic differences among those claiming to serve. Older Americans, whites, union members and those with longer tenures of residence in their communities are significantly more likely to serve in an elected or appointed capacity.

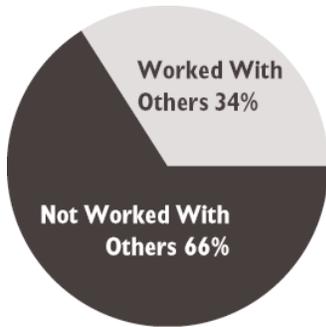


Figure 5.
Percentage of Respondents Working With Others to Solve a Community Problem.

Respondents were also asked whether or not they had worked informally with others to deal with an issue facing their community. As shown in **Figure 5**, a higher percentage (34%) of respondents stated that within the last twelve months they had worked with others in their neighborhood or community to deal with a community issue or problem. As with the other forms of participation considered here, there are differences in participation rates across demographic groups. Individuals from higher education and income groups, union members and those individuals who attend church services frequently are significantly more likely to work with others to solve community problems.

Finally, respondents were asked whether or not they had served in a leadership position in a non-governmental organization within their community. **Figure 6** indicates that 37% of respondents stated that they had served in a leadership role in a non-profit organization. As with all the other forms of participation considered here, there are differences across demographic groups. Individuals from higher education and income groups, union members, and individuals who attend church frequently are significantly more likely to serve in non-governmental organizations.

There are several patterns worth noting in the data presented above. First, the level of citizen participation in Massachusetts is not substantially different than the national average. Second, with the exception of serving on an elected or appointed board, all forms of participation considered here are skewed toward higher education and income groups. This is consistent with national data that suggests the participatory arena is skewed toward those most capable of participating. Finally, membership in unions and attendance at religious services are significantly related to most of our measures of participation. This is not surprising. Participation in secondary associations such as unions and churches or other religious organizations imparts civic skills upon an individual that make the act of participation easier. Additionally, membership in secondary associations places a citizen in a social context which increases the likelihood of recruitment into political or community activity.

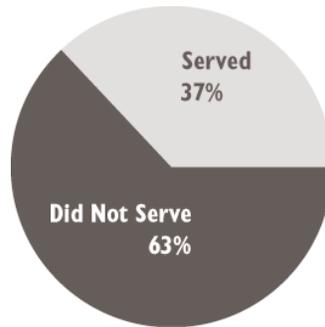


Figure 6.
Percentage of Respondents Serving in Non-Governmental Organization.