

# Assessing public participation in Maine: The old and the new in civic involvement

## Maine Policy Review (1992). Volume 1, Number 3

by David D. Platt

*Lack of citizen participation in American government is a complaint that is frequently voiced by politicians, political scientists and media commentators. The steady decline in voting, the rising number of Americans who say they are disaffected with their government, and the increase in two-earner households all have been cited as evidence of this decreased involvement by Americans in public life. Maine, with its long tradition of participatory democracy, reflected in town meeting government at the local level, is not necessarily a microcosm of what is occurring nationally. The state has, however, experienced its share of the civic maladies cited above, according to David Platt, a veteran Maine print and broadcast journalist, who was asked by MPR to gauge civic involvement in Maine communities. Among other things, Platt found that non-conventional, participatory approaches to public life are being attempted. Some innovators are trying to create ways in which grassroots organizing can be used for developing realistic alternatives rather than being employed merely to prevent bad or unpopular public policy decisions from being implemented.*

Rick Erb had not been in office a week as Kennebunk's town manager when 400 people showed up for a public meeting. "I knew I was in for it," he says, relaxed now that the experience is seven years in the past

The issue that brought out the crowd in Kennebunk was zoning, a familiar "hot button" in communities all over Maine. Although zoning ordinances have preserved historic neighborhoods and have kept commercial and residential areas of the town separate for years, a proposed change in the ordinances would have allowed the construction of motels in a part of town where they had not been permitted previously. After residents showed up at the public meeting to protest, town officials rejected the proposal.

In one sense Kennebunk was not typical of Maine towns because it had a zoning ordinance already in place. Most of the people who showed up at the well-attended public meeting were there to object to a change. But in another sense they were behaving very much as Mainers do when confronted with something they do not like: They get involved.

"That type of thing is really going to bring people out," says Christopher Lockwood, executive director of the Maine Municipal Association. NIMBY - the so-called Not-In-My-Backyard syndrome - is alive and well in Maine, he says, and it can almost always be counted on to encourage civic participation, although perhaps not the sort of participation municipal officials or the authors of civics textbooks would prefer. Even in Kennebunk, voter turnout in local elections

remains distressingly low. But such participation is strong evidence that citizens, when pressed, care about what goes on outside their living rooms.

There are many ways to gauge participation in public life, of course. Hold a meeting to discuss a dump - be it a new town transfer station or recycling center, or a resting place for hazardous or nuclear waste - and you will have in attendance more than the usual number of interested citizens. Threaten to raise or lower the school budget and you will get a crowd as well, although its composition will differ noticeably depending on whether the budget is going up or down. Tax revaluations, gun control ordinances, and efforts to control topless dancing and pornography can all be expected to fill the local hall for a spirited discussion.

Attendance at regular or special meetings, however, is only one measure. Public participation takes dozens of different forms in Maine today, from simply writing a letter or marking a ballot to marching in a protest, running for elective office, lobbying or working in a campaign to advance a special interest. It is a moving target: Petition-initiated referendums, call-in forums, electronic polling and other "new " ways to participate have proliferated in recent years, even as the number of voters showing up on election day to vote on local questions has steadily declined. (In Maine, presidential elections are an exception to this last trend: The state set national turnout records in 1988 and again in 1992.)

### **Calling all volunteers**

A variety of names in the records of town boards and commissions indicates broad interest in the civic life of a community. The same names appearing in those records year after year tell a different story. Persistent vacancies (most boards expect citizens to serve without pay) are a sure sign that a town is having difficulty convincing people to participate in civic life.

The pattern seems to depend on what a town is asking people to do. When Millinocket seeks candidates for its personnel appeals board or its airport commission, for example, citizens do not always jump at the chance. The board of assessment review and the planning board used to be in this category as well. But town clerk Diane Lombard says participation on those boards has increased recently. She attributes interest in serving on the planning board to the development a zoning ordinance in Millinocket. Getting people to volunteer for service on the library and recreation committees always has been easy, Lombard notes.

The same names continue to appear on Millinocket's lists of appointees, but not always because there are not enough volunteers. The town council's policy is to reappoint incumbent members who are active and who express an interest in continuing their service. On occasion, the town publishes advertisements in newspapers seeking volunteers for its appointive boards. Generally, citizens respond well to such appeals.

"Are we able to fill positions? Yes, for now," Erb concludes as he looks down Kennebunk's roster of boards and appointees. Appointive bodies like the planning board seem to get more than their share of newcomers, and filling unexpired terms is easier than full ones. Erb surmises that citizens are more willing to undertake civic responsibility if it is short-term. "There are lots of pressures from jobs and family and everyone has to prioritize," he suggests. "When you see large

turnouts [of angry citizens], controversy and lawsuits it doesn't help [attract people to serve]." Kennebunk generally gets labeled as "not very activist," says Erb. Judging by the lack of vacancies on the town's committees and boards, that label may be unfair.

The MMA's Lockwood offers a theory about participation at the volunteer-service level, be it elective or appointive. "Watergate changed things," he suggests. The government-in-the-sunshine and freedom-of-access laws were established in the wake of the scandal that shook everyone's faith in government "Those laws apply most fully in municipal and local government, and I've seen a change in 25 years in the gender, occupation, and age of members of boards of selectmen. Typically, in the old days, you had several downtown businessmen. Now, because of the time and political risk involved, business people are probably shying away."

The perspective and expertise of civic-minded businessmen may be missed (Lockwood and Erb both worry about high turnover and the resulting lack of institutional memory), but the change has made room for housewives, students, retirees and others. "If you're able to get people to serve on boards, that's an important test," says Lockwood, of the level of citizen interest in a community's civic life.

Other indicators of people's willingness to participate in a community's public life are available. For example:

- *Turnover or the lack of it on community boards and committees.* Despite numerous elections in the intervening years, three of the five selectmen who hired Rick Erb seven years ago are still on the board.
- *Vacancies:* Millinocket has had trouble filling slots on boards that are not very active. An issue like re-zoning can change the pattern. Membership on some boards is easy to find.
- *Uncontested elections.* Not uncommon in Kennebunk, although races for the local school board are more likely to be contested than those for selectman. At the state level, the perception that incumbents are hard to defeat has left some of them without challengers. Last year, House Speaker John Martin had mixed success in finding Democratic candidates to run against entrenched Republicans. Republican leadership has experienced similar problems in certain districts.
- *Voter turnout:* 70.8 percent of Kennebunk voters turned out for the 1988 presidential election, compared with 47.6 percent for the November, 1991 referendum on widening the Maine Turnpike. Approximately 25 percent of the eligible voters participated in a March, 1992 vote on a gun-control ordinance, despite a public meeting on the subject that brought out 300 people - implying that people who felt they had a direct stake in the outcome took part, while others stayed home.

## **Taking risks**

Participation by the public was critical to Maine's statewide growth-management effort two years ago, according to Kay Rand, a former state economic development official who worked with towns on their plans. It took various forms and could be measured in different ways. Some communities accepted the state's challenge with enthusiasm, worked hard to involve the public in the planning process, and even at the end of a two-year process could count on 20 to 25 people to

show up for meetings. Others resented being told what to do and viewed the process as a nuisance. If selectmen were not supportive, the process usually did not work.

"There's no common denominator among the success stories," Rand responds when asked what worked. "My advice [to towns] was to figure out what the tensions were in the community - it's very important to have the various camps represented, but take some risks as well." If selectmen packed their growth-management committees with people who were pro-planning, the process was likely to backfire. "Our advice was to get people willing to participate but who may not have thought about it," she says. "That sometimes worked."

Leadership was another important variable: in towns such as China where a strong leader stepped forward, the process produced a plan. In the absence of leadership it often did not. Rand recalls one Knox County town where the committee "was scared to make a decision, paralyzed by what they thought the natives would say."

Rand found sharp differences among towns. "The political boundaries that separate towns have a lot of meaning," she says. The adjacent towns of Stonington and Deer Isle are examples of the differing effects of such boundaries. "The struggle between natives and flatlanders paralyzed Stonington, but it didn't in Deer Isle - in different towns you'll have a whole different set of political struggles." Rand shudders at the term "flatlander," but as an Aroostook-born Mainer she feels entitled to use it. "You know what I mean," she tells the interviewer. What she *means* is that the good-natured rivalry between natives and outsiders in many Maine towns can mask deeper differences that come to the surface when certain issues - land use planning is perhaps the most prominent example - are debated.

Set by natives or not, she argues, the best public policy is always made by people who have relationships with one another. When citizens who know each other well are able to sit down together, hash out their differences and arrive at something to which they all agree, the result is likely to endure. If things are not that way - that is, if discussion is not allowed to reach the real issues, if a small group in town writes a comprehensive plan or a proposed zoning ordinance without involving others - then failure is inevitable. Encouraging everyone to take part can exact a price, of course. "Sometimes it is easier to get things done in a more sterile environment," Rand acknowledges.

### **Putting the pieces back together**

"Somebody should bring together a list of all the people in Maine who do anything in their communities," argues Rick Barton, a Portland-based consultant whose public life experiences include an unsuccessful run for Congress and a stint as chairman of the Democratic State Committee. Barton thinks such a list (it would include everyone from poll-watchers to Little League parents) will reveal "a huge community of caring people. It would be a phenomenal resource."

Such a list might accomplish several things. It might reinforce the belief held by Barton and other activists that Maine people do care about their communities and that, once convinced they can make a difference, people will participate in civic life. The list also might help break down

the fragmentation that has plagued the political process since the advent of "targeted" marketing. "We've gone niche marketing crazy," Barton complains.

Democrats like Barton have seen the politics of fragmentation close up. Their party long ago captured the hearts of feminists, abortion rights activists, civil rights advocates, environmentalists, organized labor and a long list of others. But with success came trouble. The party gained a reputation as the tool of special interest groups, representatives of which paraded before the TV cameras at Democratic national conventions. It was not until this year, when the Republicans seemed paralyzed by their own right wing and its pronouncements, that the Democrats began to look - by comparison - less like a collection of special interests and more like a party capable of running the country.

"After a while you owe them," Barton says of special interest groups, pointing to a tendency among the groups to institutionalize themselves, particularly after they have achieved their initial goal. The failure of the major political parties to understand what motivates the members of special interest groups, coupled with a failure to recognize the ability of these groups to focus the public's attention on issues, has cost Democrats and Republicans dearly in terms of influence and membership. The success of independent candidates from former Gov. James B. Longley to Ross Perot is an indicator of this decline; so is the transformation of national political conventions into gigantic television shows where little party business actually takes place.

### **Odd jobs and short terms**

Last year the Maine Municipal Association published a directory of municipal innovations entitled "The Good Idea Book." In 47 pages the book describes 60 ideas that had been tried out in about 40 towns. While many have to do with the nuts and bolts of local government - finance, administration, human services, public safety, public works - others were designed to increase or enhance citizen participation.

Troy, for example, printed sections of the Maine Moderator's Manual on the last page of the town report in the hope that attendees at the town meeting would be less confused about procedure. Falmouth put together a packet of information for new and potential residents. Raymond combined its comprehensive planning survey with a raffle. By filling out and returning their questionnaires, citizens got a chance to win a \$250 prize. The response rate was 35 percent, compared with the usual 20 percent. Presque Isle developed an outreach program to make the manager and other city officials more available to the public. Belgrade officials promoted a petition drive to change the voting system for school budgets, in the belief that a secret ballot would allow residents to vote on the budget all day, instead of at a poorly-attended meeting. Brunswick took a step in the opposite direction, promoting a town meeting as a way to involve citizens in its comprehensive planning effort. The meeting took place over four days. It was Brunswick's first town meeting in 22 years. Gorham, in the spirit of Yankee communities that once divided up winter road maintenance among the local farmers, convinced 55 families to "adopt a hydrant." According to the fire chief, the families agree to keep "their" hydrants free of snow all winter. (The fire department sends a truck to check after each snowstorm.)

Looking for volunteers to work on a land use ordinance, Augusta ran a classified ad. "No experience necessary. Salary: personal satisfaction that you have contributed towards the development of future growth standards in your hometown." Fifteen people volunteered.

In Topsham, faced with the usual shortage of help, town manager Larry Cilley also placed ads and found volunteers to do budget modeling on a computer and do winter maintenance on the town's rescue boat. More volunteers are being sought for a variety of other tasks. Millinocket and other communities place advertisements in local newspapers for volunteers to serve on their appointed boards.

Technology offers ways to encourage involvement The MMA's Chris Lockwood describes a "24-hour city hall" proposed by Washington, D.C.-based Public Technology Inc. "You put it in a kiosk in a supermarket," he explains. Citizens can use it as they do an automated teller machine to transact business with their local government, any time of the day or night. Two-way television systems that poll people in their living rooms are another means of involving citizens; so are systems that make it easier to register and to vote. "I know it's a cost issue, but I've always found it frustrating not to be able to vote on my way to work," says Lockwood. Of course, just because the polls are open longer, that will not by itself guarantee higher turnouts. Lockwood sometimes wishes it were all as simple as the view he once heard a woman express: "If you didn't vote, you shouldn't be allowed to complain."

Rick Barton is part of an effort that may be anathema to some of his former colleagues at the Democratic State Committee: a "No More than 4" petition drive to set term limits for state legislators and constitutional officers. "Term limits are a way to turn over the system," Barton says. Under the plan, four consecutive two-year terms in office would be the limit; only after sitting out a term could legislators or constitutional officers run again. The plan would offer voters more choices, give more people the opportunity to serve, reduce the influence of "powerful special interests and entrenched bureaucrats," preserve the citizen legislature and prevent power from being concentrated in the hands of a few long-time lawmakers, proponents of the measure argue.

Term limits and the resulting turnover could cost something in terms of experience and institutional memory, as Rick Erb points out in Kennebunk, but on balance it may be a good way to encourage new people to take part in public life.

### **A political scientist's view**

"Citizen participation is simultaneously one of the least and one of the most controversial issues of democratic theory today," writes Stuart Langton of the Tufts University's Lincoln Filene Center. "It is least controversial in that it represents a value accepted across the political spectrum...the controversial question is not whether there should be citizen participation, but rather how much and of what kind."

Conservatives, Langton suggests, stress the need to limit participation to the election of representatives - voting in elections, in other words, as opposed to mounting petition drives. Liberals emphasize the importance of participation "as a vehicle for social change and stress the

values of citizen empowerment and advocacy." Pragmatists focus on the need to achieve consensus and "inform and involve" citizens in their government's decisions. Langton goes on to offer strategies that strengthen the quality of civic life, such as developing a constituency for the community as a whole. "An enduring ideal of community in America," he writes, "is that...public institutions, attitudes, and practices can be nourished by a shared sense of interest and values." Echoing Kay Rand's experience with local comprehensive planning efforts, Langton stresses the need to bring together "a strong group of citizens...to discover how best to communicate, resolve differences, appreciate and understand each other, celebrate and improve the quality of life. [W]ithout a constituency that comes together to explore the possibilities and needs of a community, it remains no more than a place where people work or live."

Communities must have a "civic improvement agenda," he argues, and encourage a participatory process that is comprehensive and empowers the disadvantaged. Finally, Langton writes, there must be an emphasis on community education and integrating "often fragmented institutions." Rick Barton agrees.

### **Citizens as activists**

The number of referendum questions in Maine in recent years should make it clear that regional and statewide questions - matters traditionally the province of the Legislature if they were publicly debated at all - are increasingly likely to be put to the voters.

Since 1970, voters have been asked three times to consider shutting down the Maine Yankee nuclear power plant in Wiscasset. During the same time period they have been asked to express themselves on subjects ranging from pornography to moose hunting, from cruise missiles to widening the Maine Turnpike. If the efforts of the "No More than 4" committee are successful, a term-limit initiative will appear on the ballot in 1993.

Some issues do not involve voting at all. Washington County residents who opposed the establishment of an ash landfill in Township 30 several years ago mobilized public opinion by intervening in the licensing process and being visible at hearings. In like manner, hearings on an oil refinery proposed for Eastport and on the Big "A" dam proposed for the West Branch of the Penobscot River brought out well-orchestrated support and opposition, much of it from well beyond the communities where the projects were to be built. It was not public participation in a conventional sense, but for those who took part, the involvement was as direct and meaningful as taking part in a town meeting or participating in an election campaign. The results - neither the refinery nor the dam were built - demonstrate that these activist citizens were successful at bending the system to their will.

The prospect that Washington will soon stop sending Defense Department dollars to Loring Air Force Base, Bath Iron Works, the Brunswick Naval Air Station and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard has spawned a regional movement that promises some new opportunities for civic participation. Like other efforts to change minds and to plan for the future, marking ballots may not be as important as volunteering one's time. The focus of the Economic Conversion Project, according to coordinator Susie Schweppe of Falmouth, is twofold: education and building partnerships.

The project researched the impact of defense cuts on Maine communities and distributed 5,000 copies of its findings. It convinced 87 towns to adopt its draft "reinvest in hometown America" resolution and sent the results to Maine's members of Congress. It is undertaking a "dollar for dollar" campaign featuring public hearings designed to spread the message that "now that the Cold War is over, we want our money back, dollar for dollar." The project has helped set up regional economic conversion task forces in Bath-Brunswick and Androscoggin County (areas with large numbers of Bath Iron Works employees), in York County (affected by cuts at Portsmouth and the closure of Pease Air Force Base) and in Aroostook County, where Loring Air Force Base is scheduled to close.

"We're working to bring the stakeholders [individuals or organizations that have an identifiable interest in an issue] together and find some common goal," Schweppe says. She encounters the familiar rivalries between towns and Maine's traditional reluctance to talk with New Hampshire, but increasingly she also finds that people "welcome the opportunity to begin working together." Like the organizers of the referendum that stopped the widening of the Maine Turnpike or the Washington County residents who kept the dump out of Township 30, she may be on to something.

### **Is the system broken?**

Evelyn Marthia, Kennebunk's town clerk, bemoans the low turnout at municipal elections. Christopher Lockwood knows how hard it is to convince good people to get involved in civic life. Kay Rand speaks of the public's distrust of government, citizens' reluctance to make tough decisions, and the ease with which opponents can stop even projects that enjoy broad public support, such as the Sears Island Cargo Port. Rick Barton worries about the past and future of political parties and their failure to understand what makes people care.

Is the system broken? Have we, through inattention or preoccupation with material things, forgotten how to participate in public life? Has Stuart Langton's call for an agenda that would "celebrate and improve the quality of life" eluded us?

If we look to traditional institutions for the answers to these questions, then we set ourselves up for disappointment. These institutions offer many discouraging messages. Such as:

- *Low voter turnout.* Even though Maine surpassed most other states' percentages in this year's presidential election, there is no escaping the fact that even people who vote regularly are increasingly cynical about their influence. "If there's a majority of voters who believe voting makes a difference, I'd be surprised," says Rick Barton.
- *Familiar faces.* The town records showing that despite changes in who is likely to run for local offices, the same people serve on boards of selectmen, year after year.
- *Incumbency.* The length of time people serve in the Maine Legislature increased from 1982 to 1992, according to the term-limits campaign. The percentage of legislators serving for five terms or longer has more than doubled.
- *Citizen activism.* Over the years Mainers have always had better luck stopping developments they did not like than they have in coming up with solutions for their



problems. After three referendum votes to shut down Maine Yankee, the state still has no long-term plan to deal with its existing pile of nuclear waste.

"The system [is] as near to broken as I've seen it," says Kay Rand, lamenting the gulf of mistrust she and others see between the public and their government.

It is only when one looks beyond the traditional institutions that the signs of hope appear. Through the experience of repeated referendum votes, Mainers seem to have redefined the term "community" to include much that lies beyond the borders of their towns. In 1991, people living all over the state were asked to consider the wisdom of their "business as usual" transportation system. They did not like what they saw and opted for something else. The Economic Conversion Project, likewise, has brought together groups from all over Maine that often find themselves on opposite sides of the political fence. Together, they hope to fend off economic disaster.

The success of Topsham and Augusta in recruiting volunteers for short-term municipal tasks suggests it may be possible to convince people to participate, if conditions are right. The ability of town officials in Raymond to increase the response rate for its comprehensive planning questionnaires by 15 percent through the use of a lottery, demonstrates what a little imagination can accomplish. When Troy officials reprinted portions of the moderator's manual in their town report, hoping to increase understanding of the meeting process, they were encouraging participation by showing respect for the public. Good ideas will go a long way to improving citizen involvement in public life.

Much of the traditional civic dialogue may have broken down, the victim of other priorities in people's lives and the perception, at least, that what individuals think no longer matters. But as Kennebunk's Rick Erb learned during his first week on the job, no force known can keep an aroused public from making itself heard when it wants to be. The key to civic participation is understanding what is important to people, and then providing them meaningful ways to participate. In America, we call the application of that understanding "leadership."

## **References:**

Leighton, Stuart. 1987 "Strengthening Citizen Participation and the Renewal of Community." *National Civic Review*, Vol. 76, No. 3; 224-230.

*David D. Platt is a freelance writer who lives in Yarmouth. He writes for a variety of publications, including Island Journal, Inter-Island News and WoodenBoat. He is media coordinator /or the Gulf/ of Maine Project. He is a former editor of Maine Times.*

**Full cite:** Platt, David D. 1992. **Assessing public participation in Maine: The old and the new in civic involvement.** Vol. 1(3): 10-18.