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*Habits of Democracy*

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## HABITS OF DEMOCRACY

\*A Presentation by The Honorable Natalie Meyer, Secretary of State of the State of Colorado, U.S.A., for the Conference About Electoral Systems in North America at the session concerning Civic Education, April 7, 1994.

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Citizen participation is critical if a representative democracy is going to function in the way intended by those who established the framework of our government. In order to achieve participation, our community must nourish habits of democracy beginning with the very young and continuing through retirement.

Three conditions are necessary to ensure habits of democracy: (1) education and information; (2) citizen ownership in their community; and (3) governmental structures that respond to citizen participation.

In the United States, voter education and information programs are carried out by a wide variety of both public and private organizations. For the most part these organizations work independently from one another. Further, because these programs are carried out largely on a voluntary or discretionary basis and depend on available energies and resources, it is fair to say that the programs occur unevenly throughout the country and even from one election to the next. In short, no single, systematic civic education program operates routinely throughout the whole nation. Thus, my presentation will focus on some of the kinds of voter education activities that occur from time to time and from place to place within the United States and specifically in Colorado.

Voter education programs begin in elementary school and continue through college. Just as the election system in the United States is highly decentralized, so too is our educational system. Public schools from pre-school through grade 12 are governed

under the laws of each of the 50 states. But they are administered by local boards of education that generally have broad discretion beyond the minimum requirements of their own state's laws.

Because the schools are community governed, each school district has different configurations of classroom activities. Further, each teacher has a great deal of control over the types of projects used in a classroom to accomplish the educational goals. Many teachers design classroom projects where grade school children write to members of their community to begin understanding how they contribute to the community. Other teachers invite members of the community into the classroom to speak about elections and civic matters. Still other classes might conduct mock elections so students get a sense of the election process.

Whether in the form of required classes or assignments that are part of the curriculum, all public schools and most private schools include instruction on the form of government and the centrality of citizen participation to a democracy at each successive level of education.

Many non-profit organizations supplement the educational process. One project is the Voter Education Project which conducts mock elections in the public schools. In Colorado, four school districts participate in the project and the students learn about and then actually vote the same ballot as their parents. Another effort is Project Close-Up which takes students to Washington D.C. to meet with their legislators and get a first hand look at how the government is run.

A third project which is run from the Office of Secretary of State is Citizen Bee. Designed around the theme of an old-fashioned spelling bee where students demonstrate their knowledge of civics, students meet in regional and then national

competitions. Those who win receive scholarships and other prizes.

Voter education projects continue through college and then into the adult life. The League of Women Voters, various Chambers of Commerce, the National Education Association along with many other groups provide materials or sponsor programs to educate the general public on the political process. These organizations also provide fora for candidates and people who are supporting or opposing ballot issues to interact with the electors.

Again, it must be said that voter education in the schools of the United States is spotty, varying over time and from locality to locality. While the philosophy of local control over the curriculum in schools is noteworthy, it does lead to a lack of uniformity in the content and rigor of civic education in the classroom.

Although it is not uniform, the commitment to education through providing two critical pieces of information does lead to the second condition for habits of democracy: citizen ownership in the community.

The first piece of critical information which is given in voter information programs concerns the process of democracy. Unless people feel comfortable with the process of registering to vote, participating in the nomination of candidates and in some states placing measures on the ballot, and going to the polls, they will not vote. Many states and the Federal Government pass laws to make the process of registering as "user friendly" as possible.

State laws vary on what information must be provided to voters by elections offices as well as on how aggressively that information must be provided. Thus, as in most other aspects of the election system in the United States, procedures are different from state

to state and even from local jurisdiction to local jurisdiction within states.

The first step for participating in an election is registering to vote. Most local election offices routinely provide information on how, when, and where to register. In all but one state, citizens must be registered before they can vote. The information about registering to vote can take one of several forms.

Colorado, as well as many other states, have public service announcements which remind people when it is time to register to vote and to vote. We set up voter registration booths at schools and shopping malls. And we work with the political parties to "get out the vote" by making sure people know where to register to vote and where to actually cast their ballot.

Other forms of information include pamphlets which are distributed broadly in the community either actively by volunteer groups or passively by making the information available to the community. Others provide the information through newspaper notices. From time to time elaborate and aggressive information campaigns are combined with voter registration drives so that citizens can register at a variety of convenient locations.

Information about absentee ballots and information on voting by the disabled is also critical. Many states have processes where election registrars will go to nursing homes and other group homes to provide registration information as well as applications for absentee ballots. Absentee ballots can be sent to any state or location to assure that those who are at school or away on business on election day can cast their ballot.

If disabled citizens do not wish to vote by absentee ballot, handicapped accessible sites for voting are provided. These may include voting at a central location or, as we provide in

Colorado, a service where the ballot is taken to the elector at the curbside of the polling place so they can cast their ballot.

The last essential piece of voter participation is simplified elections. Colorado, along with many other states, are joining their elections together with voting at a single location. Because of the decentralized form of government, states, counties, school districts and special districts, such as fire protection districts, each have separate boards with authority to call elections. Traditionally those elections happened at many times throughout the year. Even though the regular elections are set by law for specific times, if special elections can be held at other times, the number of elections a year can get to be overwhelming.

Further, many times electors vote at different polling places for each election. These practices cause low voter participation because of voter confusion. Again, legislatures can assure that inside groups don't run elections by mandating that the elections occur at regular times with lengthy notice to the electors that can be sent to their address or published in many places to assure that people know an election is occurring.

The second critical kind of information for citizen ownership is information about the content of the election. Sample ballots and candidate and issue information booklets also let people know what issues and candidates are before them. While partisan information is important, non-partisan education helps people understand both sides of an issue and assure that they know all of the candidates who are running for an office.

Sample ballots can be provided both in the newspaper and through various agencies. By printing sample ballots people know what the ballot will look like and can pre-mark the sample so that voting takes a shorter amount of time. The information on a

sample ballot also lets electors know exactly what candidates and issues they need to study to make an informed vote. Since each political subdivision will have different candidates for the local elections, sample ballots help electors make choices based on their community rather than be overwhelmed by all of the candidates in all of the locations.

Colorado is one of thirteen states which publishes at public expense a booklet which describes all of the state wide ballot issues. Statements in favor of and in opposition to each issue are presented so the electorate can make up their mind. Newspapers and other media publish candidate interviews and give a synopsis of the ballot issues.

Further, Colorado mandates that these statements be mailed to the elector's residence to assure that full information about the election is given. Mailed notice will also include the location of the polling place, the date and time of the election, and a telephone number to call for further information.

Experience has shown that the more invested a citizen is in either a candidate or a ballot issue, the more likely that person is to vote. Therefore, contested issues and candidate races actually contribute to voter participation in that all persons feel as if their vote makes a difference. While having a major ballot issue defeated by several hundred votes is heartbreaking, the satisfaction of high voter participation cannot be measured.

This leads to the third critical factor for voter information and education. Unless electors believe that their vote matters and that the governmental structure will respond to citizen participation, they will not turn out to vote. If they believe the system is corrupt, the candidate elections are greased so that only one candidate has a chance of winning, or that the measures they are voting on make no difference, the citizens will not vote. Further, if the election process is not safe so that



people feel they can participate without endangering themselves  
either physically or financially, participation will be low.

Often, those elections concerning small political subdivisions, such as school districts, are those elections when an individual vote makes the most difference. Yet, ironically, the highest voter turnout comes for the national elections for President where individual votes in fact make the least difference. Again, this is where information about the political subdivisions, what decisions are made and who is running for the board positions can make all the difference in the world to voter turnout.

Voter information and education is the cornerstone of democracy. As habits of democracy are fostered through education and information, citizen ownership in the community, and governmental structures that respond to citizen participation, democracy will flourish and representative government will provide a balanced, diverse method of governance.