

**Citizen Empowerment: An assessment of what  
resources are available and what strategies are  
being employed to increase citizen participation in  
the political process**

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*“No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a choice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, they must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined.”*

*Wesberry V. Sanders (1964)\**

This study seeks to explore citizen empowerment as it relates to taking part in the electoral process, as one avenue of empowering ordinary citizens, disenfranchised populations and minority groups to take an active role in decision making that will impact their lives.

It is my intention to briefly examine past barriers to electoral participation and to conclude with an analysis of some of the present barriers.

After making an assessment of the current resources available to empower different interest groups and to make a projection as to the best strategies that can be adapted across all groupings for future elections, I will conclude with lessons learnt from this past United States election.

I have chosen the electoral process as one method of analyzing how it facilitates citizen empowerment and civic engagement at the individual, local, state and national levels. It was very beneficial to my study that United States national elections were recently held and through a questionnaire, I was able to question representatives from various agencies on three broad levels in terms of activities they participated in prior to the election to mobilize eligible voters, things they did on the actual day of the elections and what they would do differently in the future, having tested some of their strategies in this past election. This methodology was chosen because it was the most functional and economical in terms of conducting brief phone or in-person interviews over a four-week period.

\* *Quoted in Timpone, R.J. (1995). Mass mobilization or government intervention? The growth of Black registration in the South. The Journal of Politics, 57,(2), 425-442*

The inclusion of open-ended questions coupled with the fact that many of the respondents appeared to be dissatisfied with the turn of events regarding the elections provided a fertile ground for them to vent their frustrations and anger regarding the electoral process and to give thought as to what they and their various agencies will do differently the next time around in order to get out the vote.

All data presented are representative of agencies and towns within the State of Connecticut unless otherwise indicated.

### **Barriers To Citizen Empowerment - The Past**

Some of the past barriers to citizen empowerment included the implementation of poll taxes, proficiency tests and a clause that one or his grandfather had to own property. In the years following the abolition of slavery, history books record that hundreds of African-Americans were killed because they either registered to vote or had voted.

All these restrictions were initially implemented to prevent the newly freed Blacks from participating in the political process. The poll tax, for example was very expensive, most African-Americans could not afford it hence they could not vote. If the high cost of the poll tax did not deter the Blacks then most certainly the implementation of the literacy tests would. In order for the Blacks to pass this proficiency test they had to read and interpret parts of the US Constitution. Considering that for years Blacks were barred from using public libraries, attending the better quality schools, the majority of the population was illiterate.

If all eligible citizens were to stop and reflect on the arduous journey to participatory democracy that oppressed populations, such as women and African-Americans, had to endure just to have a say in how the country should be governed, I believe that many more people would view the right to vote not only as a right but as a social responsibility.

### **Barriers To Citizen Empowerment - *The Present***

Current barriers to citizen empowerment in contrast to those in the past are mainly embedded in one's individual beliefs. The Caribbean-American population, for example, have not been significantly participating in the electoral process as many are of the opinion that they intend to return to the land of their birth to retire, so American politics is not their primary concern. This shortsightedness will be explored further when we look at the Caribbean experience towards citizen empowerment.

Other individuals and groups, such as, young adults are generally apathetic and are of the opinion that their one vote will not make a difference in the running of the country. However, no time like the present has it been more apparent what difference a single vote could have made in the swaying of an election.

It is my opinion that many Americans had become very complacent as far as voting was concerned as they had not had any major crisis over the last thirty years that would propel them to want to come out and actively engage in the process. It was only after the conclusion of the recent elections when most people felt that the popular vote was ignored that many are now being reawakened and energized to the importance of participating.

The book by Jim Hightower entitled "If God Had Meant For Us To Vote He Would Have Given Us Candidates", spoke to another rationale put forward by many non-voters who said that none of the proposed candidates represented their interests. To these voters I would say that no one candidate or political party will meet all our requirements, as in reality, there is no perfect party or person. Instead, what we as concerned citizens should do is to educate ourselves about the candidates and find out where they stand on fundamental issues, that way we can make an informed decision when we go to the polls and even lobby them on the other issues on which we disagree.

### **Resources That Were Available for the National Elections**

Various agencies were polled either in person or via the telephone over a four-week period following the November 7 elections in the United States. This was done in an effort to ascertain some of the resources available to different sub-groups, such as African-Americans, Caribbean-Americans, Latinos, Women and Young Adults in getting them to exercise their right to vote. What follows is a summary of these findings.

An assessment revealed that most of the agencies established linkages with other organizations in order to spread their tentacles and reach a wider cross-section of people. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) collaborated with churches, the League of Women Voters and the Urban League.

**The Greater New Haven Voter Empowerment Project** comprised of social, civic and religious organizations working under the umbrella of the NAACP registered a total of 800 voters in a series of voter drives throughout the city of New Haven. Prior to the elections they held a “get out the vote” rally and reception. It also focused its energies on Election Day in providing rides to the polls to those persons whom they had registered.

**The Nation of Islam** had individual members who networked with other agencies to carry out voter registration and education drives about the importance of voting. Their efforts were mainly concentrated in the Northend of Hartford. On Election Day, these members in collaboration with other agencies chartered a bus to take people to the polls. They also used bullhorns and went around the community reminding people to go out and vote.

Their target population was Blacks and Latinos in the Hartford area, there was no specific age group targeted however one member of the Nation of Islam said that she was particularly targeting young adults between the ages of eighteen to twenty five years and recent parolees.

These members from the Nation of Islam believed that their efforts in getting people involved were successful and they made reference to the statistics for the Northend, which indicated that several residents voted.

The representative from the Nation of Islam said that next time around she would like to see her group engaged in more follow-up, in terms of the voter registration cards which they distributed to people. Reason being, residents had the responsibility of mailing them in or dropping them off at the relevant authorities. The representative felt that with proper follow-up they would have more people turning in the registration cards and therefore more registered voters.

**The League of Women Voters**, a national representative from the League said that all activities related to voter registration were dependent on Local and State efforts by each League.

For example, the New Haven League carried out a voter registration drive at the Pilot Pen tennis tournament, at hospitals, company fairs and other events throughout New Haven.

On Election Day, the League helped to get out the vote by answering telephone calls and directing people to the polls. They also informed eligible voters who had not yet registered that they could get a presidential ballot, which would enable them to vote, but only for the president and the vice-president.

Their target population was any eligible voter, regardless of age, gender or racial orientation.

The League believes that their overall efforts and collaboration were successful in terms of the national numbers from the elections.

**The Urban League of South Western Connecticut** collaborated with various agencies, such as, the League of Women Voters to carry out voter registration at supermarkets, libraries and other places with a high level of activity.

The Urban League also did mailings encouraging people to vote. Their target population was predominantly African-Americans as well as any other people on their mailing list. The League said that what they would do differently or improve on the next time around is to talk about voter registration and empowerment throughout the years leading up to an election and not only leave it for the election year.

**The Urban League of Greater Hartford's** representative said that their branch attempted to carry out voter education and registration drives by placing articles in newspapers and setting up five key sites throughout Hartford to target voters, for example at Weaver High School. Additionally, anywhere that the League had an office or class, such as the GED, participants were informed about the voter drive and encouraged to participate.

Their target population was multi-racial but most of their clients were Blacks and Latinos.

On election day, the League as an organization was not involved in any political activities because as a 501 (c)3 agency there are certain restrictions on engaging in political behavior. However, their employees were encouraged to participate as individuals in the process.

The League believed that their efforts at voter mobilization were successful as voter turnout was in the high fifties (over 50%) for the Hartford area. Next time around the League said they would engage in more education drives, as individuals need to understand that one vote matters.

**The Hispanic Health & Clinical Council's** activism in relation to the electoral process was limited to having staff members assist walk-ins to fill out the registration cards, which were brought and left at the Council by a noted community activist in the Latino community. The clients then had to mail or drop them off at the respective authorities.

**The Registrar of Voters in Stamford** carried out voting drives at the town hall at special allotted times prior to the elections. Their target population was all eligible voters. The representative said she did not believe that overall their efforts were successful, but as it drew nearer to the elections the numbers improved and even then she said it was only two to three people(2-3) per day. She said the young adults who came in mostly registered as unaffiliated and their apathy was very evident in the fact that many did not vote on Election Day.

The Registrar was not involved in any activities on Election Day, as their primary function is to keep an accurate count of voters.

For future elections, the Registrar said that they would continue to aggressively advertise through direct mailings the ability to register via the mail, at State agencies, such as, the Department of Motor Vehicles and online.

**La Casa de Puerto Rico** located in Hartford said their voter empowerment activities were limited to giving Latinos information on registering to vote and helping them to fill out the registration cards. Their target population was primarily Latinos and they were not targeting any particular age group.

**Several attempts were made to contact other representatives from key Latino and African-American agencies both at the local and national levels but to no avail.**

### **General Strategies Employed for the National Elections**

General activities undertaken by a broad array of groups to empower citizens about getting involved in the process included:

- ❖ Voter registration drives at supermarkets, schools, social service agencies, churches, company fairs, hospitals, libraries, tennis tournaments and outside apartment buildings. Outreach efforts were geared towards any location where a lot of people would be gathered at any one time or over a period of time.
- ❖ Dissemination of information via the use of public service announcements and the placing of advertisements in local newspapers and community newspapers.
- ❖ Community forums on how to register, where to register and who to contact for a ride on Election Day.
- ❖ Representatives from some agencies, such as, the Registrar of Voters were also available by telephone to answer questions on Election Day.
- ❖ Informing citizens who were not registered by the deadline date that they could still vote for the President and Vice-President if they went to their town/city halls on Election Day to register and get a presidential ballot.
- ❖ Mailings were also a crucial part of getting people out to vote.
- ❖ Access to the Registrar of Voters web site allowed persons to register on line.
- ❖ Translation of registration materials into Spanish or other languages as needed.
- ❖ Making ex-prisoners aware that once they had completed serving their sentence they could go to city hall with their release form and register to vote.

- ❖ One group used a bullhorn on Election Day to go around their community to remind people to vote.
- ❖ The same group also worked with other agencies to charter a bus to take people to the polls.

Interestingly enough, very few agencies to date were aggressively involved in activities on Election Day to get-out-the-vote. The feeling I got was that most organizations felt that the work they did leading up to the election was sufficient in mobilizing constituents to go to the polls.

### **Literature Review On Citizen Empowerment & The Electoral Process**

My own experience as a poll stander on election day and my interactions with party representatives and students working for class credits, reaffirmed the notion put forward by Pomper and Sernekos (1991). In their article entitled “Bake Sales and Voting” they stated that people will get involved in the process mainly for individualistic reasons based on:

- demographic characteristics(age, income, sex, race, education and region)
- policy preferences
- attitude toward politics
- community integration/involvement

## **The Caribbean Experience**

This section will examine citizen empowerment as it relates to both participation in ones home country, in this case Jamaica and in the adopted country of America.

As a spin-off from the recent elections in the United States, a poll was conducted on a Jamaican website in which the following question was asked “ Should Jamaicans overseas be allowed to vote by absentee ballot in general elections?” This is a relevant question, as Jamaica currently does not have an absentee ballot system for the 2.5 million citizens residing overseas.

The responses to the above suggestion ran the gamut from overwhelming acceptance to being uncommitted to open refusal to the idea. Eighty-two percent (82%) of Jamaicans residents overseas felt that they should have the same rights and opportunity to cast their votes as other citizens. While the naysayers, which accounted for seventeen percent (17%) felt that the system could not accommodate the extra complication.

One of the arguments against absentee ballots said that even though the overseas Jamaicans have rights as citizens they do not pay taxes in Jamaica, so they do not have the right to vote.

The arguments for absentee ballots went like this: these Jamaicans would bring some semblance of objectivity, as they were not necessarily fiercely partisan as Jamaicans residing on the island. Moreover, many Jamaicans do not vote because they view it as a right but because they want to remain in good standing with the political leaders or his/her community activists. Additionally, we as migrants send a lot of remittances back home and those have never been questioned or rejected so why should our right to vote as citizens of Jamaica.

I believe our system could facilitate these additional voters as Jamaica has consulates all over the world so it is definitely feasible as the embassies could facilitate this process and it could also help to minimize corruption and intimidation. Reason being, there are presently communities in Jamaica where people cannot make it known which political party or candidate they are affiliated to for fear of reprisal.

Other Jamaicans believe they should have the right because it is their intention to go back home to either retire or work and help to strengthen the economy. Most Jamaican immigrants have an interest in our country’s stability because they see themselves in this adopted country of America only to acquire things and then return home to live comfortably and strengthen the economy.

With regards to Caribbean-American political participation in the United States, I will examine one body of research, which will perhaps be helpful in understanding why so many immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean participate less in the political process once they migrate to the United States.

A recently established South Florida based group known as Caribbean-American Politically Active Citizens (CAPAC) had moved to increase voter turnout among Caribbean-Americans in the past elections after seeing the poor turnout in the primary and runoff elections held in Florida in September in which the turnout was as low as five percent in some contests.

The group published a voters guide endorsing and highlighting candidates in the presidential, local and county races. CAPAC saw the need to stir Caribbean-Americans out of their doldrums by developing and distributing a "**Caribbean-American Voters Guide**". CAPAC was convinced that the primary reason Caribbean-Americans do not vote is because they do not know who to vote for as they were not sufficiently informed about the candidates and their take on key issues of interest to them. The creation of this voters guide endorsed candidates who supported "Caribbean-American perspective on issues such as immigration policy, reducing the income gap between Blacks and Whites, education and affirmative action".

CAPAC endorsed Al Gore and Joe Lieberman in the presidential election and in the Florida Senatorial race it endorsed Democratic candidate Bill Nelson. The group has defended their sanctioning of the Democratic candidates by saying that it was through careful discussions, research, watching of C-Span, reading newspaper articles, attending town hall meetings and analysis of a survey which was developed and sent to State and Broward candidates.

The group said they assessed candidates based on their "positions on education, the American judiciary, driving while black, healthcare, hate crimes, gun control, economic opportunity, the American justice system, U.S. immigration policy and affirmative action".

The CAPAC had also published three other documents aimed at increasing voter turnout, these are:

- 8 Reasons Why Caribbean-Americans Should Vote on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2000
- Are You Politically Savvy?
- Typical Political Mistakes Which Caribbean-American People Make

In the document "8 Reasons Why Caribbean-Americans Should Vote" several key points are listed as to why Caribbean immigrants should be empowered and motivated to vote. The writers in appealing to Caribbean-Americans state that they live in America, pay taxes and city, county, state and federal officials decide how to spend their tax dollars, so they should become involved in the process at the very basic level, which is to vote. It is a tradition in the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, to sit and have "Caribbean-style veranda conversations" and make telephone calls in to radio talk shows as the primary means of influencing local politics and airing their grievances in relation to the state of the economy. However, the document aims to inform the Caribbean immigrants that this type of political involvement though it is important, it is also very limited and will not successfully influence the political process or how decisions get made within the United States context.

The final crucial point that the CAPAC makes is that one vote can make a difference, a fact that they alluded to by saying that in 1845 a single vote brought Texas into the Union, the same thing happened in California five years later and in 1923, one vote gave Adolf Hitler leadership of the Nazi Party.

The document "Typical Political Mistakes which Caribbean-Americans make was a little more revealing as to why when Caribbean people migrate to the United States their political exuberance wanes. I will include a few insights here as I believe they **are** indicative of us as a Caribbean people, feelings such as "I am going back to the Caribbean anyway" and " I cannot become an American citizen because I am still a citizen of Jamaica and I don't want to lose my citizenship".

The answer to all the concerns expressed and excuses given for Caribbean-Americans not being as empowered and active in the political process in America is education. It is possible to be an American citizen and simultaneously have dual citizenship with certain other countries (like Jamaica) and it is possible to be politically active in your adopted country and in your home country.

In my assessment I believe that some Caribbean-Americans, especially Jamaicans still have not come to terms with the fact that they can actively participate in the electoral process without fear of being penalized or stonewalled for going against the ruling party.

### **The American Experience**

In the recent U.S. elections, 90 % of African-Americans who voted, 63% of Latinos who voted and 55% of Asian-Americans who voted all voted for Al Gore. The Popular vote showed a pro-Democratic majority and it was heavily skewed towards people of color (Flanders, 2000). Given that a disproportionately high number of minorities went to the polls in support of the Democratic party and could have significantly changed the results of the elections had more minorities voted it is with much regret and concern that in an article in the November 2000 Essence by Lani Guinier, a Harvard Law School professor, entitled "Voter Empowerment" she stated that of the 2 million prisoners in America, most of them are Blacks and Latino.

If past studies hold true and history repeats itself then we can assume that African-Americans will continue to vote in record numbers for Democrats, therefore if in ten (10) States a convicted felon permanently loses his or her voting rights, even after they have completed serving a full sentence, this is cause for alarm.

Additionally, thirty-two (32) States prohibit paroled felons from voting and forty-six (46) States and the District of Columbia prohibit inmates from voting while serving time. Consequentially, nationwide Guinier reasons that about 13% of Black men have been disenfranchised and this number is higher in the Southern States where as many as 31% of Black men have been disenfranchised.

I view this phenomenon as a carry over from the era when the White ruling class implemented regulations and restrictions aimed at deterring Blacks from voting following the abolition of slavery.

It is the argument of the author and other local interest groups, such as Democracy Works, that offenders who have served their time should regain their full rights as a citizen, including the right to vote.

Depriving offenders of the right to vote and to participate in decision-making that will affect their lives will give them very little incentive to want to reintegrate into society because their most basic tool of empowerment has been taken stripped away.

It is the author's observation and I agree with her assessment that the justice system is especially unfair to communities of color because disparities in punishment and sentencing already exist for similar crimes committed by White. An analysis of the judicial system reveals that it "medicalizes" drug use for White offenders so they end up in a treatment program but for Black offenders the system "criminalizes" the same offence and they end up in prison stripped of their right to vote.

Presently, the nationwide prison population of about 2 million is being counted by the Census to allocate legislative seats, Guinier argues that the strategic placement of prisons in predominantly White rural districts often means that these districts gain more seats based on the disenfranchised people in the prison, while the inner-city communities the prisoners came from suffer a disproportionate loss of political power and representation.

In an article entitled "Locking up the Vote" by Salim Muwakkil published in the November 2000 Essence magazine, the writer makes reference to a 1998 report by Human Rights Watch and the Sentencing Project which states that 2% of all Americans or 3.9 million have lost the right to vote because of felony convictions. 1.4 million of that number or 36% are African-American men and this is indicative of a rate of disenfranchisement that is seven (7) times the national average.

In Florida and Alabama, 1 in 3 Black men is permanently disenfranchised. The report goes further to say that if the current trends continue about 30% of the next generation of Black men in America will lose their right to vote.

Presently, forty-seven (47) States and the District of Columbia have legislation that prevents inmates from voting. Vermont, Maine and Massachusetts do allow inmates to vote. Thirty-two (32) States further deny the right to vote to persons on parole or probation. He indicated that they are fifteen (15) States that can ban a felon from voting for life.

According to the writer he knows of no other democracy which bars convicted offenders from voting for life. Many European and dare I say progressive countries, such as, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway and Poland allow prisoners to vote.

I have chosen to include these two articles on prisoners and especially minorities losing their right to vote in several States at an alarming rate, because as proven in the past

election each person's vote can make the overall difference in who wins an election. More importantly, the communities that these prisoners are from are further disempowered because they have less legislative seats allotted within their communities.

In a study carried out by Canady and Thyer (1988) in which they conducted a controlled experiment to assess the effectiveness of using reminder letters to registered low income Black voters as one mechanism for empowering them to participate in the 1988 Presidential elections. There were three groups, totaling 85 voters and each group received one, two or three letters reminding them to vote just prior to the elections being held, a fourth control group received no letters. An analysis of the findings reveals that reminder letters did not appear to have any impact on voting behavior, there was no overwhelming increase in voter turnout among these individuals.

It is my interpretation that people are not big on getting extra mail and just regard these reminder letters as another piece of “junk mail”. Additionally, even though the experiment was timed to coincide with the upcoming elections it seemed to me that people were wary of the reminder letters as an election ploy, even though no candidates were endorsed.

This study revealed that voter participation is a function of socio-economic status and that the higher the level of earnings, education or occupation the greater the voter turnout. This view has also been expressed by Pomper and Sernekos in the article “Bake Sales and Voting”, also according to Cloward and Piven, “traditionally the poor, the handicapped, racial and ethnic minorities and other members of oppressed groups have had relatively low levels of participation in national elections”.

In an article by Ira Colby entitled “Registering the poor to vote: lessons from the 1984 general elections” the writer examined the findings of a low-income voter registration and education project conducted by undergraduate social work students from the University of Texas in relation to the 1984 general elections.

The results were insightful as to what can be done in future elections to motivate the poor and near poor to take part in the political process.

Non-voters had what the investigators called internal reasons for not voting in the 1984 elections. Internal reasons were characterized as those conditions over which the non-voters had control over, the reasons given included they did not want to vote, they were too busy, they forgot and the issues were just not important to them.

External reasons (conditions over which they had no control) given for not voting included: they were working, medical reasons, they were out of town, they could not find the polls and they could not get a ride.

This study also presented an interesting finding, it said that literature mailings, telephoning and personal contacts from candidates all contributed to increasing voter turnout.

This study’s sanctioning of literature mailings, similar to the “reminder letters” in the previous study shows that some techniques for empowering citizens may work well for one group but not the other. It would be advantageous to any individual or group, which is trying, to empowering citizens to become involved in the political process by voting that it would be in their best interest to use multiple techniques to achieve their goal.

Some of these techniques will be addressed later in the paper.

I am including reference to an article by Fukurai, Butler & Huebner-Dimitrius (1987) entitled “Spatial and Racial Imbalances in Voter Registration and Jury Selection” because in my assessment it shows an important linkage between minority populations and oppressed groups not registering to vote and the impact on the jury selection system. This data is based on findings from the Los Angeles County Superior Court districts and the results showed that there is not a high rate of voter registration for Latinos and Blacks thereby resulting in their under representation on jury panels. There is a direct correlation between this racial imbalance in voter registration and jury participation. Again, not registering to vote and registering but not going to vote has severe repercussions all along the spectrum of the political process.

The “Dynamics of Political Participation among the Urban Elderly” study by Jirovec and Erich (1992) corroborated previous findings where it was discovered that high political participation and voter turnout in political activities were primarily based on one’s affluence, health and education. Even though this study was carried out among urban elderly adults past studies have shown the same conclusions in that the more educated and richer a person is he/she will participate in the process. The inference being made in relation to these studies is that these “educated and more affluent” people participate because they understand the importance of voting, what it means for their communities in terms of securing resources. Therefore, it stands to reason that if organizers and agencies could help to demystify the political process and find some way to bridge the gap between non-voters and the system it would go a long way in empowering citizens.

Tony Mein, the Democratic Registrar in the city of Hartford, Connecticut for the past seven years who also has ten years of experience in the Office of the Registrar said in an article in The West Indian American newspaper that voting is ones constitutional right and responsibility.

According to Mein, if people who are eligible to vote do not exercise that right then someone else will make decisions for them.

To combat low voter turnout and increase citizen empowerment and civic responsibility Mein advocates for indoctrinating the children from early, at the elementary, middle and high school years on the importance of voting. He believes that early and continuous education would let them know that their single vote can make an overall difference in how much resources their community will get and in the quality of leadership elected to run the country.

### **Lessons Learnt & Recommendations**

I felt it would be useful to include this section on lessons learnt from the past United States election with regards to techniques used to empower and mobilize people to get involved in the process. These lessons represent a composite of my personal views and those of the authors and interviewees who I had an opportunity to both research and learn from.

❖ It is important for voters to take the time to educate themselves about candidates and where they stand on issues pertaining to them so that when they go to vote they can make an educated decision.

- ❖ Elected officials expect you to let them know your concerns. This is democracy at work. Moreover, most of them want to be re-elected therefore it would be in their best interest to listen to their constituents.
- ❖ Citizen's involvement in the political process should be ongoing and not only resurfacing during election time.
- ❖ We begin to solve a problem by talking about it, but we don't always solve the problem completely because we do not move from talking to action, by contacting the people who are in a position to solve the problem.
- ❖ The U.S. Electoral College needs revamping as their winner takes all system disenfranchises other candidates and parties. A New York Times writer commenting on the Electoral College said that "the College was designed at the founding of the country to help one group-white Southern males-and this year, it has apparently done just that"(Yale University Professor, Akhil Reed Amar)
- ❖ Felony disenfranchisement laws adopted after the end of slavery were aimed at disempowering the freed but impoverished Blacks. The laws exist today in several States and it disproportionately affects Blacks and Latinos, many of whom are barred from voting.
- ❖ I have often wondered about the possibility of a proportional representation system, so that smaller parties, such as, the Green Party and minority constituencies could have a voice in the running of the country. In the proportional representation system, each party gets seats in the legislature in proportion to the number of votes it receives. Instead of the winner takes all situation which currently pervades in the US model, each vote would count towards enhancing the political power of the other parties or candidates who were voted for.
- ❖ Electoral reform is needed in the form of standardized voting procedures and federal enforcement of the Voting Rights Act, amidst reports from Latinos and African-Americans that they were intimidated either en route to the polls or at the actual polling station.
- ❖ Most elected officials term lasts 2-4 years, citizens should use the time in between to mobilize voters or put up their own candidate.
- ❖ Voting and taking in the process is not only your constitutional right, it is your social responsibility.
- ❖ Attention should be given to the high voter turnout in western democracies, where statistics put the number between 75%-95%. There may be lessons to be learnt from adopting some of their techniques at mobilizing citizens to the polls.
- ❖ One radical view put forward was to make voting mandatory, however this would seriously go against the individuals right to choose.
- ❖ The Internet is a powerful tool and once understood can provide the means of empowering citizens as the information will literally be at their fingertips.
- ❖ Government-sponsored door to door registration of eligible voters, this practice is commonplace in Jamaica.
- ❖ The need to lobby for progressive policies that do not restrict voter participation and subsequently turnout. Such as, the restoration of voting rights to ex-prisoners.
- ❖ Demystifying the political process to the ordinary citizen so they do not feel intimidated. The League of Women Voters and United Seniors in Action currently have tours and lobby day at the Legislative Office Building for this purpose.

- ❖ Citizens in Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, Virginia and Wyoming should lobby their legislators to abolish the lifetime disenfranchisement of felons.
- ❖ Bi-lingual (Spanish & English) translators should be present at the polling stations on Election Day.
- ❖ Cooperation with other countries is essential in the search for solutions to increasing citizen empowerment through the electoral system.
- ❖ There was insufficient data available on the empowering of the Latino population to go out and vote.
- ❖ In a paper written by University of Connecticut social work student, Edward Silva he stated that Latinos traditionally have a low voter turnout and participation. According to his research, the barriers to Latino political participation were socio-economic, demographic, psychological, cultural and structural factors. Citizenship issues was also a major element as it is estimated that 33 1/3%-40% of Latinos are non-citizens.
- ❖ Silva also discovered that most Latinos have a fear of governments and politicians. They believe that if they have too much information about them they can take away the little they have.

### **Conclusion**

Any society which claims to be a democratic one should have certain underlying principles, firstly it should be inclusive, participatory and the leaders or their representatives should be accessible to the ordinary masses.

The importance and relevance of citizen participation in the electoral process and what it means to democracy and the individual's right to self-determination is immeasurable.

Any democratic government should promote the input of civil society as this is true democracy at work, citizens being empowered and knowledgeable about the process means that there will be concrete checks and balances.

Researching this topic has strengthened my beliefs that sometimes in order for citizens to be empowered they may have to seek to increase their numbers by establish coalitions with other groups. Studies have indicated that minorities and oppressed groups are less likely to vote than other groups, if African-Americans, Latinos, feminists, gays, lesbians and the disabled were to come together as a unified force to promote citizen involvement in the electoral process they would be a formidable opponent.

Many people marched, fought and died so that everyone irrespective of gender, class or race could have a voice in the process through his/her vote. Because most of the barriers to voting and the racist restrictions have been lifted we no longer have to die for this right, the only requirement is to be eighteen years old and a United States citizen.

Any reference to the term empowerment often conjures up images of individuals seeking progress, a change in their current situation, a sense of entitlement, independence, feeling better about their life and gaining mastery over their community. However, I challenge every citizen to not limit himself to empowerment solely based on "feeling better" about

one's circumstances but transferring that feeling into something more concrete by taking part in the political process, either by voting and/or playing an active role in a community association.

It is not my objective to proclaim citizen empowerment, via electoral participation, as the elixir for all the problems facing us as a people. However, if an individual does not participate in the process at even the basic level he is forfeiting his power and has allowed himself to forget the past struggles and hardships that minorities and oppressed groups had to endure.

An empowered citizen should never be comfortable being a bystander.

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