



## *The Price of Democracy: Citizen Responsibility*

by Sandra K. Trivett

*A democracy is government by the people. It guarantees, through the Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution and a declaration of rights in the North Carolina Constitution, certain personal freedoms for all citizens. Although these freedoms may vary from one democratic country to another, there is a consensus that Americans enjoy more freedom than other citizens of the world. However, "[j]ust when America's democratic ideals are held in the highest global esteem, growing numbers of Americans fear that democratic government is faltering here at home," writes Professor Robert D. Putnam of Harvard University, a respected scholar on civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> Although democracies are "free" societies, citizens must "pay" to preserve their freedoms. The price? Citizen responsibility. Without vigilant public involvement, democracies are threatened.*

**P**ublic involvement, or civic engagement, can be as simple as staying informed on community issues, voting, paying taxes, serving on a jury, returning your census form, and volunteering, or it can be as demanding as running for elected office. Each creates

an opportunity for individual input on the formulation of public policy through participation in our democratic system. Meet Jane, who wants to be a responsible citizen.

### **An Informed Citizenry**

**A**t the very least, citizens owe it to themselves and their democracy to be knowledgeable about important public policy issues. Although most Americans rely on television for the majority of their news, given the brevity of news reports, television is not an effective medium for citizens who want to learn about the issues and understand the underlying public policy debates. To be "informed," Jane Citizen needs to do more than watch TV news reports and read a daily newspaper; she needs to attend local government meetings and public hearings. However, a survey by the Roper Organization reveals that the number of Americans who in the past year have "attended a public meeting on town or school affairs" decreased from 22 percent in 1973 to 13 percent in 1993.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, Americans are becoming disengaged.

How does Jane promote civic engagement by attending a town or county meeting? James Fishkin, a professor at the University of Texas, believes that "people make sounder public policy decisions when they deliberate together, for that way they have the benefit of others' points of view."<sup>3</sup> When Jane attends a local government meeting, she learns not only what the issues are,

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but she meets her neighbors, hears what they have to say about the different issues, and begins to develop a sense of social trust.

In addition to attending town meetings, citizens can serve on regional study groups, task forces, local boards and commissions, and attend public meetings of organizations that make decisions which affect their lives, such as water authorities, school boards, and other governmental bodies. Even if a person's time is limited to mere observation, various sunshine laws<sup>4</sup> protect a citizen's right to see public documents and attend open meetings. In this way, citizens can perform the "watchdog" role so essential to democracy and open government.

This type of citizen involvement has many positive ramifications. On election day, for instance, Jane can make informed and deliberative choices, rather than uneducated choices. A thriving democracy results: "The correlation between civic engagement and effective government is virtually perfect."<sup>5</sup>

### Political Participation and Voting

**T**hrough her participation in local government meetings, Jane Citizen now is able to identify issues that are important to her, her fam-

ily, and her community. Registering to vote and then actually getting out to the polls on election day are the next steps in the fulfillment of her responsibilities as a citizen.

In a democracy, each citizen has the right to vote—a privilege to elect leaders and thus affect public policy. "Political participation is action directed explicitly towards influencing the distribution of social goods and social values," according to Steve Rosenstone and Mark Hansen in the book *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*.<sup>6</sup> Basically, those who participate in elections are those who care strongly about the outcome, whether it is an issue or a candidate. However, many people who care about the issues never vote because they feel that one vote cannot influence the system. And, it is easier to stay at home and leave political participation to others.

"By almost every measure, Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education—the best individual-level predictor of political participation—have risen sharply throughout this period," writes Robert Putnam. "Americans have . . . disengaged psychologically from politics and government over this era."<sup>7</sup>

***Voters in Guilford County pass the time while waiting to vote in a slow-moving polling place.***



John Page, News & Record, Greensboro, N.C.

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"AT THE BOTTOM OF ALL TRIBUTES PAID TO DEMOCRACY IS THE LITTLE MAN, WALKING INTO THE LITTLE BOOTH, WITH A LITTLE PENCIL, MAKING A LITTLE CROSS ON A LITTLE BIT OF PAPER. NO AMOUNT OF RHETORIC OR VOLUMINOUS DISCUSSION CAN POSSIBLY DIMINISH THE OVERWHELMING IMPORTANCE OF THE POINT."

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

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Who does participate in politics in America? "The wealthiest Americans are 15.8 percent more likely to vote in presidential elections, 5.7 percent more likely to try to convince others how to vote, 1.8 percent more likely to work for a party or candidate, and 14.8 percent more likely to make a campaign contribution than the poorest Americans," according to Rosenstone and Hansen.<sup>8</sup>

Federal, state, and local governments have tried to empower citizens and encourage civic involvement. For example, many states are trying to make it easier to register to vote. Citizens now are allowed to register at driver's licensing offices and by mail in North Carolina. However, the question is not whether people are registered, but whether they vote. In 1992, 73 percent of North Carolinians were registered to vote, but only 68 percent of those registered voted on election day and only 50 percent of the voting age population voted. (See Table 1 on p. 101.) Voter turnout in non-presidential election years is even lower. Thus, some states are trying to make it even easier to vote. Oregon, for example, is experimenting with voting by mail.

Political candidates, political parties, interest groups, and other organizations also try to foster political participation by involving their constituents and getting them to the polls. There has been a great proliferation in special interest groups. It seems every group has its cause. And, due to mass media and communication techniques, all are able to influence local and national policy debates.

For example, in Asheville, the conservative Christian community formed the Family Coalition of Asheville, a political action committee (PAC), in 1995. Other organizations and religious congregations became concerned over the influence garnered by the Family Coalition, so they formed the Interfaith Alliance for Justice. Sometimes these groups agree on issues; sometimes they disagree. One way for citizens to voice their opinions to government is by aligning themselves with such special interest groups.

Whether citizens choose to voice their opinions collectively or individually, it is more important than ever for Jane Citizen to demand access to decisionmakers. Current efforts at the federal level to move social problem-solving to the state level through block grants is causing considerable public debate. Some believe this is a way of empowering the people; others believe it is merely a way to dismantle social programs. Regardless of one's point of view, if these changes occur, local citizen input will be vital. People in Washington will be making fewer decisions, leaving decision-making up to state and local leaders.

### Running for Elected Office

**M**any public offices in North Carolina counties—county commissioner, sheriff, and register of deeds, for example—regularly come up for election. While political parties work to make sure that there is a candidate for every office, often incumbents are not challenged.

It is not surprising that Jane Citizen is reluctant to enter the political arena as a candidate. "For three reasons, it's almost impossible to get people to run for office anymore," says Andy Penry, chair of the Wake County Democratic Party. Running for office and serving is too time-consuming. The monetary reward is nominal,<sup>9</sup> and the cost of running for office is high.<sup>10</sup> "It now costs upwards of \$50,000 to run for any seat in Wake County," notes Penry. "But people don't like asking their friends for money, especially when it just doesn't seem like it's worth it." And, negative campaigns are becoming the norm. "People are reluctant to be the target of negative publicity. They don't want to be raked through the mud." Penry concludes that an individual who decides to run for office, despite these deterrents, usually has two characteristics. "A serious desire for public service and ego—in equal doses."

### Paying Taxes

**G**overnment can force civic involvement in some ways—for example, local, state, and federal governments tax Jane Citizen to pay for services for the public good. These services include transportation, education, fire protection, safety from crime, the judicial system, assistance to those in need, and the national defense, among others. Most people don't object to paying taxes when they believe the benefits are worth the expense. However, in 1990, for every \$5 in federal taxes owed, \$1 was evaded. The amount of

taxes evaded annually exceeds \$100 billion. The IRS knows of 6.5 million citizens who do not file tax returns.<sup>11</sup>

Tax evasion is illegal, undermining a basic tenet of our democracy: Citizens pay for the services provided by government. Unfortunately, it is common to read in the news that political and religious leaders, celebrities, and many other Americans regularly fail to pay taxes.

### Serving on a Jury

**T**he concept of a citizen jury is integral to our democracy. "Jurors keep law in the U.S. from getting too far from the people, preserving a guarantee of freedom and democracy that many in the world are still struggling to achieve," writes the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law in a book titled *When Justice Is Up To You*.<sup>12</sup> Jury service is a right of citizenship guaranteed by our state and federal Constitutions.<sup>13</sup> "Based on the democratic belief that a community's collective wisdom is the best judge of the actions of others in the community, juries represent the most open kind of democratic government."<sup>14</sup>

The American Bar Association and the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C., have identified five essential virtues of America's jury system:

- the jury, because of its valuable decisionmaking process, is a fair way to resolve disputes;
- "the jury provides important protections against the abuse of power by legislatures, judges, the government, business, or other powerful entities;"
- juries bring community values to bear on the issues involved in resolving disputes;
- the jury brings common sense and fairness to the system, providing an important check on the bureaucratization and professionalization of the courts; and
- "the jury system provides a means for legitimizing the outcome of dispute resolution and facilitating public understanding and support for and confidence in our legal system."<sup>15</sup>

Serving on a jury can be enormously demanding, as the entire country witnessed in 1995 with the eight month trial of former football star O. J. Simpson. But, it usually just takes a day or less of a citizen's time, and it gives those selected firsthand experience with our judicial system.

Jury service is an easy way for Jane Citizen to perform a civic responsibility. North Carolina General Statute 9-6 states, "The General Assembly hereby declares the public policy of this State to be that jury duty is the solemn obligation of all qualified citizens. . . ."<sup>16</sup> Although failure to participate after being selected for jury service can result in a charge of contempt of court, the Buncombe County Clerk of Superior Court's office says that most people regard jury duty as their "civic responsibility," and there are very few instances of refusal to participate.

### Participation in the Census

**E**very 10 years, the federal government conducts a census to update the number of people living in the United States, determine basic demographic information on which to base economic forecasts, and learn about broad trends in the country in housing, income, and social structure. If the information is incomplete, faulty projections and decisions are made. Because census numbers are used in federal funding formulas, communities eligible for certain programs and funding before the census may suddenly become ineligible. In 1990, 33 million American households did not return their census forms. When Jane Citizen fails to return her census form, the expense of collecting the data is increased and a less accurate picture of our country results.

### Volunteering as Private Citizens

**S**ince Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman, visited the United States in the 1830s and wrote *Democracy in America*, our country has been known for its spirit of volunteerism. Americans "are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute," wrote de Tocqueville.<sup>17</sup> Volunteerism is a

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"AMERICA IS A LAND WHERE A CITIZEN WILL  
CROSS THE OCEAN TO FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY  
AND WON'T CROSS THE STREET TO VOTE IN A  
NATIONAL ELECTION."

—BILL VAUGHAN,  
AMERICAN NEWSPAPER COLUMNIST

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**Table 1. Registered Voters and Voter Turnout  
in North Carolina**

Year	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994
% of Population Registered	61	71	63	70	60	73	72
% of Registered Voters Who Voted	49	83	52	62	62	68	41
% of Voting Age Population That Voted in Presidential Elections		47.4		43.7		50.1	

*Shaded areas represent presidential election years.*

*Sources: The Book of the States 1994-95 and 1996-97, The Council of State Governments, Lexington, Ky., Vol. 30, Tables 5.8 and 5.9, pp. 225-26. Also the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, Washington, D.C., (202) 546-3221.*

way of solving community problems through citizen involvement and private donations rather than through governmental programs and public funds.

"One of the great things about America is that 48 percent of American adults volunteer an average of 4.2 hours a week," says Jane Kendall, executive director of the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits. "And, in North Carolina, 53 percent of our citizens volunteer—more than half of our entire adult population. And they look to nonprofits to provide these volunteer opportunities so they can make a difference in their communities and feel connected to their neighbors." North Carolinians also contribute more money to nonprofits than citizens do nationally.<sup>18</sup> Seventy-nine percent of North Carolinians contribute to nonprofits, compared with 73 percent nationally.

Volunteerism, as a form of civic engagement and social connection, faces challenges for several reasons: 1) the social revolution of women joining the labor force, which has reduced the time and energy they have to volunteer; 2) our society's mobility and residential instability inhibit social connection; 3) demographic changes—more divorces, fewer children, lower real wages—affect civic engagement because those most likely to be involved are married, middle-class parents; and 4) changes in technology—the introduction of televisions, cable television, and videocassette recorders—lead to leisure time alone instead of in groups. These changes make "our communities (or, rather, what we experience as our communities) wider and shallower."<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, a plethora of nonprofit as well as special interest organizations compete for the time and dollars of volunteers. For Jane Citizen the harder decision today is not whether to volunteer, but where and how to volunteer.

### Volunteering as Corporate Citizens

Corporations also have responsibilities as citizens in our democracy. Governments charter corporations with the expectation that they will be good corporate citizens. "In exchange for the charter," write Richard Grossman and Frank Adams in *Taking Care of Business: Citizenship and the Charter of Incorporation*, "a corporation [is] obligated to obey all laws, to serve the common good, and to cause no harm."<sup>20</sup> But how is corporate citizenship valuable to a democracy?

"[C]orporations must be capable of citizenship on a local level," writes Daniel Kemmis in *Community and the Politics of Place*. "This must be more than a public-relations variety of citizenship; it must be the kind of citizenship that is real enough to inspire trust. Above all, such citizenship must demonstrate a genuine and reliable responsiveness to the place, a full-fledged participation in the human project of living well in that place."<sup>21</sup>

As the debate rages over where the responsibility lies to solve community problems—with individuals, families, nonprofits, churches, corporations, or government—there has been a growth in "public-private partnerships." Such cooperative efforts bring together governmental entities with

program experience and technical expertise, the business community with its financial resources and entrepreneurial approaches, and citizens who have an interest in solutions to community problems. The term public-private partnership was popularized by the book, *Reinventing Government*, which also looked at other means of restructuring bureaucracies to make them more innovative and responsive.<sup>22</sup> If Congress succeeds in moving decisionmaking from Washington to the local level, new approaches must be developed, and more citizen involvement will be required.

There has also been a growth in "regionalism" as communities or groups within communities have come together to solve problems. Regionalizing water authorities, landfills, and jails are all examples of how resources can be shared for the benefit of more people at less expense. Through the actions of corporations and these regional groups, citizens

have another opportunity to participate in our democracy.

## Conclusion

Organizations must work to reinvolve individual and corporate citizens in our democracy. A 1995 open letter from Becky Cain, President of the League of Women Voters of the United States, to all members of the League, calls for the organization to take the "lead in renewing American democracy—how it works, how citizens participate, how citizens think about democracy." She states that we must "rediscover what binds us together as a nation if we are to succeed in finding shared solutions to the many complex problems that confront our communities today." To quote one of the League's most familiar slogans: "Democracy is not a spectator sport." Citizens must participate

## *Fancy Clothes and Overalls*

A LITTLE BOY AND HIS FATHER walk into a firehouse. He smiles at people standing outside. Some hand pamphlets to his father. They stand in line. Finally, they go into a small booth, pull the curtain closed, and vote. His father holds the boy up and shows him which levers to move.

"We're ready, Wade, pull the big lever now."

With both hands, the boy pulls the lever. There it is: the sound of voting. The curtain opens. The boy smiles at an old woman leaving another booth and at a mother and daughter getting into line. He is not certain exactly what they have done. He only knows that he and his father have done something important. They have voted.

This scene takes place all over the country.

"Pull the lever, Yolanda."

"Drop the ballot in the box for me, Pedro."

Wades, Yolandas, Pedros, Nikitas, and Chuis all over the United States are learning the same lesson: the satisfaction, pride, importance, and habit of voting. I have always gone with my parents to vote. Sometimes the lines are long. There are faces of old people and young people, voices of native North Carolinians in southern drawls and voices of naturalized citizens with their foreign accents. There are people in fancy clothes and others dressed in overalls. Each has exactly the same one vote. Each has exactly the same say in the election. There is no place in America where equality means as much as in the voting booth.

My father took me that day to the firehouse. Soon I will be voting. It is a responsibility and a right. It is also an exciting national experience. Voters have different backgrounds, dreams, and experience, but that is the whole point of voting. Different voices will be heard.

As I get close to the time I can register and vote, it is exciting. I become one of the voices. I know I will vote in every election. I know that someday I will bring my son with me and introduce him to one of the great American experiences: voting.

—Wade Edwards

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*Wade Edwards, who was an honor student at Broughton High School, won the National Endowment for the Humanities and Voice of America national essay contest for this essay.*

more, setting examples not only for one another but for future generations, if we are to preserve our democratic system and make it truly representative.

Individuals and corporations in North Carolina should work to become active and responsible citizens. To paraphrase Margaret Meade, an American anthropologist: Small groups of thoughtful committed Jane Citizens are the only thing that has ever changed the world. 

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "What Makes Democracy Work?" *National Civic Review*, Spring 1993, pp. 101-07.

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Jan. 1995, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Noelle McAfee, "A Deliberate Nation," *Kettering Review*, Summer 1994, pp. 8-16.

<sup>4</sup> Sunshine laws protect the rights of citizens to observe government meetings and decision making. "The concept of 'open meetings' is historically fundamental, arising out of the colonial town meeting approach to determining laws and policies. It is also politically essential, crucial to the satisfaction of every person's 'right to be able to know' not just what government has done, but also what government is doing." Fred Harwell, *The Right to Be Able to Know: Public Access to Public Information*, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., 1978, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Putnam, note 1 above, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*, MacMillan Publishing Co., New York, N.Y., 1993, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam, note 2 above, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenstone and Hansen, see note 6 above, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> According to the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, commissioners in Mecklenburg County are paid the most (\$13,050 salary and \$5,080 for travel) and commissioners in Washington County are paid the least (\$30 per meeting and 29 cents a mile).

<sup>10</sup> In 1992, candidates for seats in the state House of Representatives and Senate spent on average \$14,244 and \$21,127, respectively. Kim Kechsull Otten and Tom Mather, *The Cost of Running for the North Carolina Legislature*, The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., Sept. 1993, pp. 8-9. In 1994, it cost Worth Hill \$16,965.24 to win the race for sheriff in Durham County. Julia White, "Election winner outspends incumbents," *Herald Sun*, Durham, N.C., Feb. 2, 1995, p. C1. The same year, Tom Bowman spent a record \$43,000 to win a seat on the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners. Staff Report, "Spending record set in Wilkes race," *Winston-Salem Journal*, Winston-Salem, N.C., Jan. 31, 1995, p. B1.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Vartabedian, "Nonfilers soaring, to IRS' dismay," *News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., April 14, 1996, p. 5A.

<sup>12</sup> National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law, *When Justice Is Up To You*, Association of Trial Lawyers of America, Washington D.C., 1992, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> N.C. Constitution, Article I, Section 26. "Jury Service. No person shall be excluded from jury service on account of sex, race, color, religion, or national origin." U.S. Constitution, Amendment VI guarantees a defendant the right to jury trial in criminal cases and Amendment VII preserves the right to trial by jury in civil cases.

<sup>14</sup> National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law, note 12 above, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Charting a Future for the Civil Jury System*, Report from the American Bar Association and the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1992, pp. 8-11.

<sup>16</sup> See N.C.G.S. §9-3 for qualifications of prospective jurors.

<sup>17</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.J., 1969, p. 513.

<sup>18</sup> "In North Carolina, 79 percent [of respondents to a poll] said they had made a voluntary contribution of money, property or other items to a private, not-for-profit organization in the past 12 months. Nationally, 73 percent reported donating [in a Gallup poll commissioned by the Independent Sector in October 1994]." "North Carolinians Value Nonprofits," *Common Ground*, N.C. Center for Nonprofits, 4601 Six Forks Road, Suite 506, Raleigh, N.C., 27609-5210, Vol. IV, No. 3, May-June 1995, pp. 1 and 7. The North Carolina poll was conducted by FGI, a marketing and research firm in Chapel Hill, N.C. Between April 20-23, 608 North Carolina adults were interviewed by telephone. The margin of error was plus or minus 4 percentage points.

<sup>19</sup> Putnam, note 2 above, p. 74-75.

<sup>20</sup> Richard L. Grossman and Frank T. Adams, *Taking Care of Business: Citizenship and the Charter of Incorporation*, Charter, Ink., Cambridge, Mass., 1993, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990, p. 133.

<sup>22</sup> David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Boston, Mass., 1992.



## IN THE MAIL

### Vol. 16, No.3

#### State and Local Government Relations in North Carolina

Thanks for the fine series of articles. These issues are very hard to grasp for most people, and your treatment was very enlightening. I have one bone to pick on the historical perspective of state-local finance: the article on mandates characterizes the \$1.8 billion from the state in FY 1995-96 as "tax aid," or revenue sharing from the state. This way of looking at it ignores the historical reality. Over the years, the state took for itself (to the exclusion of local government) previously available local government revenue sources (ABC taxes, utility franchise taxes); or directly repealed out from under local government other existing revenue sources (intangibles tax, inventory tax, property tax on household furnishings, homestead exemption). The "Powell Bill" money simply reflects the cities' long-standing responsibility to maintain their part of the road system. And, of course, local sales tax revenues are locally levied and are merely collected by the state for efficiency.

The "tax aid" from the state merely represents a partial reimbursement (hard fought for and undependable) to local government for the involuntary dismantling of its former tax bases.

— Fred Baggett  
City Attorney, High Point, N.C.  
Former General Counsel,  
N.C. League of Municipalities