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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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sible for some voters. It is not easy for many voters—sick, disabled, single parents, or citizens otherwise burdened by work and family duties—to register, get an application for an absentee bal-

lot, get to the polls during voting hours, and take the time to stand in line for hours while wondering whether the children are all right, and cast a ballot.

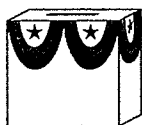
2. The decline of political parties as a major force in campaigns has also led to a decline in turnout. Parties once could turn out large numbers of their voters through party loyalty. Now many campaigns work apart from a political party, and rarely can one campaign stimulate high voter turnout.

3. The public is generally satisfied with the way its government is run, and those who don't vote don't see a need to change things. So, they don't bother voting.

4. The public doesn't believe that one individual vote can make a difference (see sidebar, below, for elections where one vote made a difference) and thus doesn't bother going to the polls.

5. Apathy, ignorance, and cynicism. "Who cares?" "What difference does it make?" And, "If voting could change the system, wouldn't they have made it illegal?"

## *What Difference Can a Few Votes Make?*



Ask Lonnie Revels what difference a few votes can make. Ask, and sit down while Revels, a Greensboro businessman, Native American, and Republican Party activist tells you about the heartbreaking elections of 1972. And 1974. And 1983.

In 1972, Revels ran for the state House of Representatives. He lost by a handful of votes in the primary, but when the Guilford County Board of Elections members sat down to certify the results, they found an error—and certified Revels as a primary winner. In the fall general elections, Revels won his race by a handful of votes, but when the local board certified the results, it found another error, and Revels had lost—by 27 votes.

For months after that loss, Revels replayed the election again and again. "I'd walk into a room of people and I'd count them until I'd reach 27 and I'd say to myself, those could have

been the 27 votes you didn't get. Maybe those 27 could have put you in," Revels recalls nearly 20 years later.

Two years after that first defeat, Revels tried again for one of the seven at-large House seats from Guilford County. This time he lost narrowly again—by 107 votes. That loss—by less than a tenth of 1 percent of the votes cast—was so devastating that Revels quit running for nearly a decade.

But he was well-known in the community, served on a lot of boards, knew a lot of the voters, and felt he had something to offer. So in 1983, Revels ran for the Greensboro City Council. Revels lost again, this time by 100 votes. And it stung worse than ever.

"You relive it over and over again. If it was a wipeout, you can say, 'Well, I gave it a good shot but it wasn't meant to be,'" Revels says. "But you come that close, you replay it over and over in your mind—'If I had only attended one

6. There are too many names on the ballot to make an informed choice, and the voting public is so overwhelmed with frequent elections and the long ballot that it doesn't enjoy the voting process.

7. Potential voters do not regard the electoral process as a civic duty anymore, and thus do not exercise the right to vote. Potential new voters (those in middle- and high school) are not often taught how important voting can be.

8. Political campaigns have become so negative that the key message potential voters receive is: Don't vote. They don't.

9. Watergate in the 1970s, the Keating Five savings and loan scandals of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and other scandals involving publicly elected officials have persuaded some potential voters that politicians are crooks, and voters don't want to elect more of those. The news media have done a thorough job of uncovering these scandals, but one message the media may give to voters is that politics and government are dirty businesses.

10. All of the above.

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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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## What Can Be Done?

**T**he decline in voter participation is matched only by the increase in the number of prescriptions to cure the ailment, and governments increasingly are trying a number of programs to reverse the trend. In fact, North Carolina has un-

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more meeting, if only I had made another one of those phone calls, maybe if my supporters had worked just a little bit harder.' You just say, 'What if? What if?'"

Two years later, Revels tried again. And he won. By 10 votes. The headlines in the paper called him "Landslide Lonnie," but in Revels' mind, those 10 votes that put him on the city council were "just as good as 10,000 votes."

Revels doesn't think he's ever missed voting in an election, and he loves to tell people his story. "I can attest that every vote does count," Revels says. He especially likes to tell young voters who may be apathetic how much a vote can count. He tells them about the 27 votes he lost his first general election by, and the 10 votes he won his first city council election by, and he tells them, "Close isn't enough. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades."

Revels is hardly the only case where elections have been tight in North Carolina. They happen every year. State Sen. Bob Shaw (R-Guilford) lost out to former state Sen. Walt Cockerham (R-Guilford) by only two dozen votes in an election in the 1980s. And on North Carolina's coast, the mayoral election at Top-

sail Beach was tied three times in 30 years. But the contestants usually settle the race amicably—they flip a coin, and the winner becomes mayor.

Close votes occasionally decide questions of much more moment. For instance, there was the close U.S. Senate vote in 1868 when Andrew Johnson—the North Carolina native who was Abraham Lincoln's vice president and successor—was impeached. One vote—delivered by a senator who was brought in from his sickbed—saved Johnson from conviction by the Senate and ouster from the presidency.

And a few other notable votes:

In 1645, Oliver Cromwell gained control of England by a single vote.

In 1875, one vote was enough to refashion France from a monarchy into a republic.

In 1923, Adolf Hitler took over leadership of the National Socialist Party—the Nazis—by one vote.

In 1960, an average of one vote per precinct gave the presidency to John F. Kennedy and ended—temporarily—the political career of Richard Nixon.

—Jack Betts