



Idaho Standards and Applications for 12th Grade Civics and Government

Civic Participation: The Essence of Democracy

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Citizen participation is the very essence of democracy. Voting is the most common form of democratic participation. And as this country has evolved, that right has expanded to include Afro-Americans (15th amendment and 1965 Voting Rights Act), women (19th amendment) and 18 year olds (26th amendment).

Most Idahoans vote – but just barely, and the trend is not promising. Prominent within the Idaho political culture is a sense of civic obligation. Idaho voter turnout rates are typically above the national average. But these numbers are relative. The fact is that huge pluralities of eligible voters do not participate. Fifty-three percent of Idahoans participated in the 2000 presidential election; 47% did not. Participation has been declining since the 1960s. Adding to this number has been younger voters whose turnout has declined from a high in 1972. Only 32% of persons aged 18-24 voted in the 2000 election.

Why? It is easier to vote in Idaho than most states. Idaho is among a handful of states that allows new voters to register and vote at the polls (Election Day Registration).

Idaho election officials also offer online registration services. Idaho is a national leader in “digital democracy” according to the Center for Digital Democracy. Scoring is based



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upon the extent to which election and other public policy information is accessible to the public.

Under the 2002 federal law, Help America Vote Act, Idaho is implementing programs that will allow greater accessibility for persons with disabilities and will encourage voter outreach and education programs. In the 2004 legislative session, legislation was enacted to allow 17 year olds to serve on election boards. ([Reference to House Bill 562, 2004](#))

Turnout is worse for the primary elections – about half the general election rate. In a state where one party dominates, the primary is often Idaho’s real election. For instance, almost half of Idaho’s 105 legislative seats had no Democratic candidate on the ballot in 2004. So nearly half of Idaho’s Legislature was virtually elected May 25.

Yet Idaho’s primary election is still a very open process as opposed to many other states. Voters may select the party ballot in the privacy of the polling booth and do not have to publicly declare their party affiliation. Parties have little control over the entrance of candidates into their nominating procedures. Such openness provides significant opportunities for new voters who can help change historic voting patterns.



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Turnout for local elections usually is even lower than for primaries. Though turnout rates vary significantly among Idaho's many local governments. The typical pattern is low turnout, 10 to 30 percent. The Idaho Legislature approved consolidation of most local government elections in the 1990s with the intent – or hope – of increasing voter turnout. Prior to passage of this legislation, local elections could be held on almost any day of the calendar year.

Voting is not the only form of participation and not always the most effective. If you want to be heard, you have to make a commitment of more time and resources. The more that is required, the less people participate. The power of one sincere letter, for instance, to a member of Congress, legislator, or city council member can, on certain issues, influence how that official votes. It takes time to develop a position and compose a letter.

Citizens who display yard signs, bumper stickers, or who make campaign contributions often have more influence in the selection of candidates, and in getting access to them once they are elected, than those who only satisfy their civic obligation through voting. Participating in a legislative hearing or emailing a state official can be very influential. Testifying at a city or county planning and zoning hearing can help shape the future of one's community. In some local governments, youth serve on city committees or on planning and zoning commissions. There are plenty of opportunities to be heard because



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there are so many levels of government in our federal system. Idaho has over 1,000 governments (counties, cities, school districts to mosquito abatement districts).

Write your own laws. Idaho gives people initiative and referendum powers. Voters bypass the legislature and pass their own initiatives – their own laws. Recent initiatives have had major policy impacts: the one percent initiative (property tax limitation measure) in 1978, “The Sunshine Act” (campaign disclosure) of 1974, the homeowners’ exemption (property tax relief) in 1982, and the term limits measure of 1994.

Don’t like what the Legislature is doing? Repeal their actions through a referendum. Such measures were involved in Idaho’s right to work law in the mid-1980s and the 2002 repeal of Idaho’s term limits law.

Join the party. Idaho remains a relatively “easy entry” state for participating in partisan politics. Both political parties often are on the lookout for party and campaign workers -- and often candidates as well. Access may be tougher on the Republican side, but that often means an ambitious candidate simply needs to put in a few more years working in the party structure or helping with campaigns. Many elected officials in Idaho work their way up the system in that fashion.



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Political parties play an important representative role in American democracy. They recruit and nominate candidates; educate the public about the candidates and the issues; and help organize the government. For example, members of the legislature voting through their party caucuses determine the composition of legislative leadership. Parties encourage participation and help legitimize the process and in a real sense, simplify the process by providing cues to the voters as to which party or candidate to support.

State law largely determines state party structure. Every organizational aspect is set forth in the Idaho Code -- from the precinct organization to the state party hierarchy.

In addition to the two major parties, there are third parties who also provide participation opportunities. In Idaho, third party presidential candidate Ross Perot received almost as many votes as Bill Clinton in 1992. Reform, Libertarian, Green, Natural Law and other party candidates have run for state and local offices.

Idaho is divided into about 900 voting precincts, the exact number and boundaries determined by county clerks and commissions. Precinct workers often contribute the hours that are required to circulate the party's message throughout their neighborhoods. They are the party foot soldiers; they are key players in the get out of the vote effort.



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Granted that there are many avenues for participation and young and old alike participate in many ways, especially in volunteering for community and neighborhood activities.

But the decline in voter participation, especially among younger voters is troubling. It should be the goal of every citizen to restore our once robust citizen life and encourage the full participation of all age groups.