

# Political Change

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## Overview

We are in the midst of deep political challenge. Partisan political polarization frames virtually every substantial policy or legislative discussion. This polarization reaches beyond national and state headlines into our local communities; nearly everyone has stories about politics affecting even long-term personal relationships. It is common to hear nostalgic recollections about a former time when there was tolerance for sharp differences in viewpoints, before this perceived era of decline in civil discourse.

Equally obvious are the multiple issues related to the impact of technology in American politics including elections (for example, voting machines and computer mapping for redistricting), advocacy and information-sharing (for example, social media). Technological innovations have promoted more advanced local knowledge of issues, feeding desire for greater local control, just at a time when many of the most critical problems are in fact national and global in scope. Technology in politics is also a key factor in its capacity to engage the public, to facilitate and ease the delivery of services, to be an avenue for connections and relationships.

In this framework of a polarizing political climate and rapid technological change, one of the key elements becomes vigorous civic engagement, a dimension that emerges so clearly in the LIFE Study data and report. The challenge of engaging people in civic roles and responsibilities becomes the central focus of this paper on the changing place of politics in our community.

## Civic Engagement

Civic Engagement can be measured in several ways. Famously, Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*, measured civic engagement by studying interconnectedness, and how those connections create social capital (in which people use their relationships to create opportunity). Civic engagement can also be measured by voter participation. Since 2000, US voter participation has remained under 65% for presidential elections (national average). Compared to other countries, our voter turnout (for presidential elections) is low.

I will focus on two key factors in civic engagement; voting and volunteerism. I will explore reasons voter turnout is robust in Green Bay for presidential elections, but is weak for local elections. I will outline the current state of voter access in Green Bay, and will describe recent changes to polling and identification. I will explore the second change factor, volunteerism, and community activism. I will describe the opportunities and challenges to maintaining a vibrant culture of volunteering and community activism in Green Bay.

## History

**1792** Until this time, voting was limited to white, Protestant men with property. The state of New Hampshire was the first to eliminate the property requirement.

**1807** Until this time, women had the right to vote in some states, but lost the right to vote in every state.

**1848** Upon acquiring New Mexico, California, Texas and Nevada as US territories, all Mexican persons were declared US citizens, but denied the right to vote based on English proficiency, literacy and property ownership.

**1869** The right to vote was extended to all male citizens regardless of “race, color or previous condition of servitude,” with the Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.

**1919** The Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution granted the right to vote to all citizens regardless of gender. (Wisconsin was the first state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.)

**1924** The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 declares all non-citizen Native Americans born in the US to be citizens with the right to vote.

**1971** The Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the US Constitution sets the national voting age to 18 years old.

**1990** The Americans with Disabilities Act ensures that election workers and polling places provide a variety of services designed to ensure access to persons with disabilities.

**1993 and 2002** Through the National Voter Registration Act and the Help America Vote Act mail-in and expanded registration services were adopted along with minimum election administration standards.

## Key Stakeholders

In voting, the key stakeholders are: voters, municipal clerks, Wisconsin Elections Commission, county clerk, poll workers, and those who manage community facilities (e.g., churches, schools, and buildings with public access). In volunteering, the key stakeholders are: current volunteers, leaders in business, government, or non-profit, and social media outlets. As one may imagine, the values and political interests of those involved in voting as well as those who volunteer and are engaged in community activism, are as diverse as we are, with one caveat. Those directly involved in voting (clerks, poll workers) are non-partisan, and carry out election laws as determined by the state legislature, ensuring the judicious management of all elections. Similarly, volunteers work together and, increasingly through social media, will work collaboratively with other groups to accomplish commonly-held goals and beliefs.

## Trends

### Voting

- More mail-in only elections (growing nationwide)
- Early voting or early in-person absentee voting (growing in Green Bay)
- Picture identification (growing nationwide)
- No uniform voting machines across states (trend is to keep the systems most familiar to voters)
- Charges of voter disenfranchisement (growing nationwide)
- Charges of voter fraud (growing nationwide)
- Green Bay voter turnout (these numbers have been steady since 2000)
  - is around 70% for Presidential Elections
  - non-President election years is between 45% and 57%
  - in April elections is under 20%

### Volunteering

- Volunteers in general (more likely upper income, with some college, but are evenly distributed among urban, rural, and suburban)
- Over 60% of Americans participate in some form of political or civic activity (such as signing a petition, contributing financially, or attending a speech or protest)
- 25% of adults are volunteers (food collection, raising money, transportation and tutoring are the activities where people volunteer the most)
- Face-to-face volunteering/community activism (most used)
- Use of the internet to engage with others (online participation outpaces offline participation)
- Charitable giving (increasing steadily, most giving is to education and human services)
- Political giving (increasing steadily)
- Corporations engaging non-profits to provide volunteer opportunities for employees (newer trend)

## **Stated Plans**

While voter turnout is robust for presidential elections, spring turnout should be increased. There are several opportunities which may maintain and improve the turnout. First, the State legislature has increased the number of days and the number of locations in which voters may cast an early in-person absentee ballot. This increased timeframe may be more conducive for younger voters. Furthermore, for example, the Green Bay clerk's office is seeking ways to directly inform citizens of various voting methods, as well as the upcoming 2018 elections, through direct mail and advertising.

## **Emerging Issues**

Social media has taken a front seat in the issue of civic engagement. Movements such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, the Women's March, the protest at Standing Rock and Unite the Right have all used social media to engage and mobilize those interested in their causes. Green Bay has seen more volunteering and community activism use social media. While most volunteers still engage with each other by meeting face-to-face, increasingly they use social media to cast a wider net for more volunteers, raise funds and gain attention from traditional media outlets. Furthermore, non-profits, government, and other seeking volunteers will use the internet to engage already-existing social networks.

## **Learning More**

*Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam

"Volunteer Trends" by Jennifer Chandler from the National Council of Non-profits

"The Current State of Civic Engagement" by Aaron Smith, Lehman Scholzman, Sidney Verba and Henry Brady, Pew Research Center

"Charitable Giving Statistics" National Philanthropic Trust

"The role of social and human capital among nascent entrepreneurs" Davisson, 2003

"All Mail Elections (aka Vote-by-Mail)" National Conference of State Legislatures