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# Civic Participation in Vermont

A qualitative study of Vermonters'  
experiences and attitudes regarding  
public life.

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June 1, 2000

*"Vermont has always preferred to ask many of its  
citizens each to contribute a little to the process,  
rather than to ask a few to contribute a lot."*

*Our pride in Vermont and its history is one of our strengths...it is an  
exceptional quality which encourages Vermonters to seek to do  
more than might otherwise seem possible."*

**- Governor Richard A. Snelling**

# Snelling Center for Government Civic Participation Focus Groups

## Introduction

During the Spring of 2000, The Snelling Center for Government conducted a series of focus groups with Vermont citizens from around the state. The purpose of this research is to better understand the experiences and attitudes Vermont citizens bring to the table when they choose whether or not - and how - they will participate in the public life of their communities. The findings of this study are hypotheses based on a qualitative analysis of the focus groups.

## Summary

*"I think there's a lot of people who want to be involved."*

Participants in the focus groups yearn to be connected in meaningful ways with others in their communities. Neighborliness, volunteering, and community celebrations are highly valued while more formal avenues of public participation are largely disregarded. In fact, there is a profound sense of distrust and frustration toward citizens who are officeholders in their communities. Many participants feel that local and state officials don't listen to the concerns of citizens and don't have the community's best interests at heart.

Participants view citizen involvement as an important aspect of health and well-being for individuals and communities alike. However, many barriers to citizen involvement exist. These include a lack of confidence, feelings of powerlessness, the desire to avoid conflict, fear of commitment, and difficult economic circumstances. At first blush, lack of time seems like a major barrier as well. Lack of time, while very real for lower income citizens, may actually be a smokescreen for an underlying sense that "one person can't make a difference."

Participants view better communication (informal, personal, and one to one) among fellow citizens and officeholders as key to engaging more people in Vermont's public life.

Several dilemmas emerge from the focus groups. First, compensation for officeholders is seen as problematic. Participants acknowledge that providing adequate pay levels the playing field and allows everyone to participate. At the same time there is a strong sense that citizens shouldn't be in public service for the money. Another dilemma is the tension between native Vermonters and

newer residents. While focus group participants (especially in rural areas) are disturbed by the influence of newer residents they also appreciate some of the skills newer residents bring to community matters.

Not surprisingly, Vermont's small size is seen by many participants as a great advantage. Participants say our state's size makes it more possible for one person to make a difference, and for citizens to feel a greater sense of responsibility to "give back" to their communities.

## Findings

What does public participation mean for Vermont citizens?

- For most people<sup>1</sup>, community participation and politics are not connected.

In all of the focus groups, a broad array of activities came up when participants were asked to list ways people participate in their communities. While formal acts of involvement, such as voting and running for office, are mentioned in every group, people are much more focused on informal activities such as helping neighbors and volunteering.

*"I want to be involved in the community, but less involved in politics." Woman from Burlington*

*"I'm surprised I didn't think of holding town office. I'm surprised I didn't even think of it...I'm just not very politically active." Man from Newport*

- Neighborliness is highly prized

"Neighbor helping neighbor" sums up the key idea that focus group participants think of when they talk about community involvement. People talk with pride about the way they, and others in their community are always available to lend a helping hand. In many discussions, volunteering for a variety of organizations seems to be closely connected with neighborliness.

*"I couldn't imagine not knowing my neighbors and not being able to rely on them if I needed a hand." man from St. Albans*

*"There still is a sense of community...I can't imagine that kind of thing happening where a car dealer sends a person out to help somebody get their groceries... but this is happening all over Vermont all the time and in very quiet ways we still help each other out. I just thank God I'm here." Woman from St. Albans*

*"When I moved to a rural area what I found was I needed to rely on other people to pull me out of snow banks and to...help me chop some wood...there was a time my kid would*

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, focus group participants are referred to as "people" or "participants."

*take the car to school and I would walk home every day... I would never have to walk farther than... a quarter of a mile before...someone would pull over and give me a ride"*  
*Man from Montpelier*

- Community celebrations are important

Community celebrations such as parades, festivals, and picnics (along with weddings and funerals in smaller communities) are seen as important opportunities for citizens to build relationships with each others and with community leaders.

Why do Vermont citizens get involved in public life?

Focus group participants described two distinct motivations for community involvement

- Personal reasons

Many participants have a sense that community involvement is necessary for an individual's health and well-being. In addition to simply "feeling good about yourself," many participants speak about community involvement as an antidote to boredom, depression and excessive self-concern. On the other hand, participants also acknowledge that for some people, becoming involved is an ego-feeding, self-serving proposition.

*"You feel good about yourself when you're involved and helping others."* Woman from St. Albans

*"...you spend all your time taking it out, soon there's nothing left, you've got to give back."* Man from Brattleboro

*"If people will get out and help others it can lift them up out of themselves."* Woman from Arlington

*"Some people have mixed motives... there's nothing wrong with that if they want to do something for themselves and others at the same time."* Man from Burlington

- Public reasons

The sense that they can make a difference is a key reason people choose to participate. Concern about a particular issue also causes people to become involved. In rural communities a sense of responsibility to the community is a central reason for being involved (in the Burlington focus groups, this notion of "needing to give back" to the community was much less apparent.) Participants also acknowledge that at times people get involved for less than noble reasons, for example, in order to affect the outcome of an issue in a way that is personally advantageous.

*"Some [people] are compelled by an issue...and they feel like they need to take a leadership role." Man from Newport*

*"I think in a smaller town or a smaller city there is a bigger sense of responsibility." Man from Montpelier*

*"Helping a homeless person get back on his or her feet is a long term process, pulling a tree off someone's truck during an ice-storm, I can do that in an hour and immediately feel the reward of having helped someone...." Man from Burlington*

What do people value about citizen involvement?

- Necessary to maintain local control

Many participants express concern that control is shifting away from their local area. This concern dovetails with participant's perception that politicians have their own agenda which is not connected to the interests of the community.

*"Can't really have effective local control without...participation." Man from Arlington*

*"[Local participation] keeps us from having Uncle Sam tell us what to do." Woman from Arlington*

*"By not being involved... we risk having legislation rammed down our throats that we don't like" Man from Burlington*

- Broad involvement leads to new ideas and accountability

Focus group participants also believe it is important to have a diversity of ideas. There is a feeling that it is dangerous to have too small a group of people making decisions for the whole community. More community involvement is seen as a way to make sure community leaders are more accountable.

*"The more people know about what's going on and the more people are in on it and agree with it the easier it is...if it's perceived as just four or five people working behind the scenes we're in trouble from the get go." Man from St. Albans*

When asked for their vision of a community with lots of participation from a variety of community members, the words peace, harmony, and safety came up frequently. People imagine a community where there is a lot of face to face communication and cooperation among citizens.

Several groups mentioned the importance of the "right" people being involved. The right people are described as being honest, not self-serving, having a positive attitude and having the ability to move from talk to action and "get things done."

## Barriers to public involvement

- Lack of time

Many people talked about being too busy to participate. However, pure lack of time could be less of a barrier than it appears for many people. Lack of time seems to be closely related to two distinct ideas: feelings of powerlessness and the economic pressures faced by lower income Vermonters. Several people mention being busy in the very same sentence as the phrase: "I can't make a difference so why bother." Several focus group participants also express annoyance with the quantity of structured activities they observe many children participating in. Their thought is that many children's activities are excessive and add to the parents lack of time for community involvement (however, other participants disagree saying that structured activities are important for keeping kids out of trouble.)

*"They either don't think they have the time or they don't want to make the time...Whatever I'm going to do won't make a difference so why bother." Woman from Brattleboro*

*"The only thing I had down here is no time, basically, people know they're not going to be able to change things..." Man from Brattleboro*

*"You just make the time [for activities related to your kids], but would I take on a civic responsibility, no because my time is too short." Woman from St. Albans*

- Lack of confidence

Another prevalent concern is people's apprehension about whether they have the skills, education or experience needed to participate. Participants speak of this concern as an unfounded perception, but a real barrier to participation.

*"A lot of people around here are afraid of being found lacking in some way when they join volunteer things, educationally, socially, financially, their lack of experience. I was one of those people myself... I've gone on... done a lot of self-betterment things and I think I can hold my own now with just about anybody but it wasn't easy." Woman from Arlington*

- Feeling that one person can't make a difference

This is a major barrier that seems to be closely tied with people's perception that politicians do not listen and have their own agenda; an agenda that is not influenced by citizens, but only by votes and money (in urban areas this idea is tied to party politics.)

*"One of the problems is disillusionment...you get motivated to do something, you think its going to make an impact or a change and it doesn't and so you feel as if you wasted your time..." Man from Montpelier*

*"If you want people to be involved you need to give them a sense of value for what they do." Woman from Montpelier*

*"If you can't deliver votes or money, you're ignored." Man from Brattleboro*

*"I've seen it happen time and time again...a lot of things I've seen voted down over the years have been slipped in underneath. What difference does it matter if I vote or don't vote if they're going to do whatever they want to do anyways." Woman from Arlington*



- Fear of commitment

Fear of commitment also keeps people from participating. There is the sense that a small group of people is continually asked to take on more and more responsibility in the community until they finally burn out. At the same time many focus group participants describe their sense that there is a small elitist group who are always involved, and this precludes the involvement of other community members.

*"Most of the people I know who are already involved in something - do you want something done, those are the people they call again, and those are the people they call again...until they burnout." Woman from Arlington*

*"Time constraints and the fear of being sucked in have kept me from getting involved in some things. I could go once or twice but I know its going to become this huge commitment I can't take on." Man from Montpelier*

*"Somehow make it, like, commitment-free. You can come and ...participate for just this amount of time and you don't have to do anything more." Man from Burlington*

- Economic situation

Focus group participants agree that a challenging economic situation makes it difficult to become involved. Participants describe lower income individuals as needing to work long hours and more than one job just to meet the basic necessities of life. Lack of time is a very real barrier for these folks. In addition, several groups speak about the financial cost of community work. They acknowledge that some people don't have the financial resources to pay for gas, child care and other costs associated with community service.

*"Some people can't even afford the gasoline to get in their car and drive to a place where they might volunteer." Woman from Arlington*

*"I think some people spend so much time earning money simply to live that it limits their availability for community involvement." Woman from Montpelier*

- Presence of conflict in public life

Several focus group participants describe what they see as a misunderstanding about the nature of conflict in community life. Participants see fellow citizens

shying away from conflict; however, they acknowledge that conflict can be both necessary and healthy.

*"People think that conflict is unhealthy. Conflict isn't unhealthy its just how you resolve it. There's going to be conflict in a community because there's going to be diversity."*  
Man from Montpelier

*"If you don't have some controversy then other ideas don't come out."* Man from Arlington

*"Sometimes when people do volunteer or get involved in committee work....they experience conflict that goes on in that sort of group and get frustrated with it and view conflict as counterproductive but really its just part of democracy."* Woman from Montpelier

A few participants mention exposure to liability for those in public service as a barrier, but this does not emerge as a major concern.

## Barriers to formal community involvement<sup>2</sup>

- Perceptions of officeholders and government

People are especially reluctant to participate in formal ways. There is a pervasive perception that local and state "politicians" lack integrity, honesty, and proper motives. Politicians are seen as other, "alien." Once they are in an elected position they are seen as no longer representing the community. Focus group participants describe them as having a shift - they may have cared about the community prior to their election, but once elected, their only concern is in furthering their political career.

*"The people in office don't want citizen participation. They don't want people gumming up the gears."* Man from Brattleboro

*"Once you're a politician you don't count anymore. You've been removed from the process and you don't think like a normal person anymore.... A politician has one job, to get elected....and that's where most of the effort goes."* Man from Brattleboro

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<sup>2</sup> **Informal** refers to volunteering time for community projects, mentoring, attending meetings to discuss public issues, etc. **Formal** refers to traditional structures for community involvement such as holding public office or serving on a board or a committee for a government or private organization that serves the public.

*"By definition a politician is a person who can no longer think about public service. He has to think about continuing his career I mean unless he's independently wealthy [and] somebody independently wealthy doesn't seem like he's going to have my interests at heart." Woman from Burlington*

*"They're looking for a long term solution that doesn't involve government, even, that just involves other organizations and people.... They seem to be stagnating in city government..." Woman from Newport*

*"I think to create an honest politician you would probably have to start with a test tube and keep them completely separate." Man from Newport*

- Fear of criticism/inadequacy

Focus group participants are concerned about representing people who may have more education than the representative has. There is also a concern, especially in rural areas, about being scrutinized by others in the community. While volunteering is seen as a gift you give the community with no strings attached, holding a public office is seen as more of a commitment, you are more accountable for the success or failure of your actions. This is an interesting paradox since focus group participants also say that officeholders are not accountable enough, and in most cases much less accountable to their community than others who participate in less formal ways (see above).

*"People who don't have a masters degree, or whatever, it makes them a little nervous to think they're going to represent the lawyer down the street or the doctor across town."  
Woman from St. Albans*

*"There's a public face to the volunteerism [when formal] and there's a community looking at you and knowing how you function." Woman from Newport*

*"I'd rather get poked in the eye with a stick than run for the school board." Man from Montpelier*

- People want to participate on their own terms

Participants do not like the idea of being beholden to constituents or a political party. They would rather participate in a less formal setting where they won't have to compromise their beliefs. Participants also want to have control over the amount of time they commit to the community.

*"I would much rather be free to do my own thing, help people you know, with my sense of what's right as opposed to constantly have to negotiate and compromise." Man from Burlington*

*"I like to be involved when its myself...I don't want to have to represent others...its more of a personal thing." Woman from Brattleboro*

*"What keeps me from running for public office is I don't want to be held up on the street everywhere I go by ten people who want me to do something for them. I want to have a private life and yet I've always said more people should get involved." Man from Montpelier*

What would have to be different for Vermonters to become more involved?

- Improved Communication

Communication is the key idea focus group participants talk about. There are two kinds of communication people are interested in.

- \* Better information

One is the availability of more information. Participants want to know exactly what kind of help is needed in their communities. They are interested in knowing what's involved in the position and what kind of training is necessary to do the job. They want this information to be available at places where they are such as the grocery store, the post office, etc. Posting a small notice in the back of the town report or newspaper is seen as inadequate. Participants also want leaders to gather information to help leaders better understand the concerns of citizens.

*"Almost everything we've talked about this evening boils down to education and communication." Man from St. Albans*

*"I think a lot of people will come through if the needs are communicated." Man from Arlington*

*"There was a vacancy...and I was thinking, well what do they even do...I think that would really help to have a description of what is involved...what do I need to know to consider whether I'm even suited for this." woman from St. Albans*

*"Don't slip a little ad in the corner of the paper saying we're having town meeting."  
Man from Newport*

\* Improved Relationships

The other kind of communication that focus group participants seem to yearn for has to do with building relationships. They are looking for one to one contact with their leaders, with each other, and with the young people of the community. People want to be invited to participate - not by letter or a survey, but by a person. Most groups talk about the importance of community celebrations such as parades, festivals, and picnics. These informal get together are suggested time and again as venues for encouraging more community participation. Several focus groups discussed the idea of a community service fair, similar to job or health fairs where people could learn more about the needs of the community. Once again the emphasis is on person to person encounters.

*"The thing of it is to get people together, to get people to know one another." Man from Brattleboro*

*"I think there's a lot of people who want to be involved." Man from Montpelier*

*"I got involved when a guy I know called me up and asked me to be on the planning commission and I thought it was a great opportunity." Man from Montpelier*

- Improved relationships with and perception of officeholders

Many focus group participants are pleased at the accessibility of local and statewide elected officials. They appreciate the fact that they can easily communicate with leaders by phone or letter and receive a response. While some people speak favorably about the nature of their encounters with Vermont's local and state officials, the majority of participants are deeply distressed by their perception that public officials do not listen to citizens. This feeling of not being listened to seems to be closely linked to people's feeling of distrust toward officeholders, and their feeling that participation isn't effective.

*"What would have to be different [for me to be involved]? Probably somebody telling the truth...once in awhile." Man from Brattleboro*

*"They say, 'yeah yeah we'll do that' and then you wait to see something happen...and six months later ...it hasn't even come up." Woman from Montpelier*

*"How do you bridge that gap between community and politics... there is a genuine distrust of politicians and politics in general." Woman from Burlington*

*"How many issues are already decided by the time they send out the information?" Man from Burlington*

*"I think if people get up and speak at town meeting they want to be listened to which doesn't happen a lot at any of them in this area...even though they take the time to go and to...give their opinion, a lot of times its cut short ...or glossed over...." Woman from Newport*

These sentiments were confirmed by several focus group participants who had served in local government themselves and admit that in their own experience public input isn't valued or listened to.

*"My experience [on city council] was that it was very rare that somebody speaking from the public would actually change any votes. People have their minds made up before the vote." Man from Burlington*

*"Having worked on the selectboard...I know that after all the committees give their recommendations [the selectboard members] turn around and do what they want anyway. People get sick of it." Woman from Newport*

- Incentives to participate

The idea of providing incentives (such as food, adequate recognition, gifts or money in the form of a tax break) was raised at most of the focus groups. This seems to be much more important in the Burlington and Brattleboro focus groups than in smaller communities. Smaller communities feel more of a sense of responsibility to the community and a duty to "give back" to the community. The Burlington focus groups look on community service largely as a personal choice that needs to be encouraged by immediate gratification and tangible incentives.

- Reaching out to young people

Several of the focus groups discuss the importance of reaching out to young people and helping them "develop the habit of volunteering." Parents and community leaders are seen as important role models who can let young people know the ins and outs of community work.

*"I think it would be good for involving young people to have community type people go into the schools and talk about what they're doing. I was student body president of my whole high school. Do I have a clue about anything about civics in my whole town? Not really!"* Woman from St. Albans

## Dilemmas

- Compensation

Focus group participants acknowledge the fact that many local officials in Vermont get little or no pay. They realize that this precludes many citizens from public service. Participants want a level playing field so all who wish to can hold public office. Participants also agree that the level of pay should correspond with the level of responsibility the job entails (for example, people responsible for large sums of the community's money are seen as having a significant responsibility which warrants adequate pay.) At the same time participants are very concerned about paying so much that being an officeholder becomes someone's occupation. Focus group participants don't want citizens "doing it for the money."

*"I wonder if the spirit of the community might be lost....I'm nervous about it."* Man from St. Albans

*"There's a built in class bias here because who can afford to do this?"* Woman from St. Albans

*"How are you going to get more of the community involved if you only have representation from the people that can afford to do it with no money."* Man from Burlington

*"If you're a farmer, or simply dedicated, if you could somehow afford to, maybe get tax credit to serve, then you have your farm to go back to.....we have a army navy all the other reserves, maybe we should a political reserve."* Woman from Burlington

*"I don't want to think that somebody that's making the decisions for my child and my school is only there because they're getting paid." Man from Newport*

- Native Vermonters and Recent Residents

There is a tension between native Vermonters and newer residents. Especially in rural areas, focus group participants have concerns that people who made their money elsewhere and who are well-educated, come to Vermont and get involved in setting the direction for the community. At the same time, many participants acknowledge that new people also possess skills and knowledge that could be beneficial to the community. Lack of education and self-confidence on the part of long time Vermonters is seen as a barrier to participating together with newer residents. The disparity in financial situations among many in these two groups is also seen as a barrier.

*"I notice there's a distinct difference between native and implants. Many of the people that move here from someplace else already made their money some place else so they come in here and want certain things, but at the same time they have a wealth of information to offer everybody." Woman from Arlington*

*"They have more money....they came in and bought that 400 acre farm that no one in this community could afford, their kids go to the best schools....so, we're intimidated by that and where we would otherwise be involved perhaps we've just....let them win without ever throwing a punch." Man from Newport*

## Is Vermont different?

Vermont's small size is seen as a great asset when it comes to citizens being engaged in their communities. There is a sense that maybe one person can make a difference, and that people are much more likely to become involved when they know their neighbors and community members. Focus group participants place high value on the personal connections among friends and neighbors. These informal relationships are seen as the basis for creating a strong sense of compassion and responsibility towards each other and the community as a whole.

*"We deliberately came back to Vermont....it doesn't have anything to do with the leadership in Vermont but it might have something to do with how we....carve out a place to live in our community." Woman from Brattleboro*



*"What makes it all workable for me is the numbers....if you're in a big city and something happens you're saying 'how can I make an impact....' what I think works generally is the ability for a single person to make an impact without being an extraordinary person...."*  
*Man from Montpelier*

*"I think people's sense of responsibility is wholly affected here because its more difficult to be anonymous here. You're not just a face in the crowd."* *Woman from Montpelier*

## Methodology

Seven focus groups were held with a diverse group of Vermonters during April and May 2000. Each of the two hour discussions provided an opportunity for in-depth conversation and reflection with a small group of citizens. Participants were recruited by Snelling Center staff with technical assistance provided by Macro International. The findings of this study are hypotheses based on a qualitative analysis of the focus groups.

### Focus Group Locations & Dates

Burlington  
March 14, 2000

Arlington  
April 11, 2000

Burlington  
March 15, 2000

Newport  
April 12, 2000

Montpelier  
March 23, 2000

Brattleboro  
May 1, 2000

St Albans  
April 6, 2000

### Focus Group Demographics

Sex		Age				Education		Income				Years Lived in Vt.		
F	M	18-34	35-44	45-54	55-70	Some college or less	College grad or more	under 20K	20K-44K	45K-64K	over 65K	over 20 yrs	5-20 yrs	less than 4 yrs
18	18	6	13	11	6	17	19	7	14	7	6	20	12	4

*Prepared for The Snelling Center for Government  
by Susan McCormack  
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