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Local elections are broken. What's the fix?



[David Riley](#), @rilzd 11:07 a.m. EST January 11, 2016



(Photo: AP)

If voter participation is a way to measure the health of civic life in Monroe County, the diagnosis is clear: We're sick.

A small minority of voters elected local politicians who took office across the county this month. Just under one in three registered voters turned out in November [to elect County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo](#), 29 county lawmakers, four state Supreme Court justices and a slew of other regional, city and town officials.

These are leaders who make important decisions about property taxes, city school policies, [red light cameras](#), tax breaks for developers and other major issues that directly affect local people.

And clearly, the public can get fired up about these issues.

When the League of Women Voters of the Rochester Metropolitan Area asks local high school students which civic issues are important to them, they tend to bring up things like police body cameras — matters decided at the local level, said Virginia Busack, the league's director of voter services.

But that interest doesn't always translate at the polls.

"We say to them, 'Who do you think makes these decisions?'" Busack said recently. "It's not the president of the United States. It's all these local people that nobody gets out and votes for."

Studies suggest that low turnout has an effect: It can leave portions of the community under-represented in the halls of power, or gives politicians a skewed idea of what the public wants.

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[Forum asks: Why don't we vote?](#)

With the presidency up for grabs, turnout in this year's general election promises to be different. In the 2008 presidential election, for example, more than 80 percent of Monroe County voters showed up at the polls.

But this year's election calendar also features a confusing mishmash of other dates that could bring their own turnout challenges. Village elections are March 15; the presidential primary is April 19; a congressional primary is June 28; and a state and local primary is Sept. 13.

There are plenty of theories about the sickness underlying the symptom of poor turnout: A lack of competition in election districts dominated by one party, dull candidates, inconvenient or confusing poll times, a lack of education about what exactly local government does, public officials who have more incentive to engage donors than constituents, plain old disillusionment and apathy.

But what's the cure? What steps might make government and elections more accessible to regular citizens, and make those citizens want to participate?

As we enter another major election cycle, here are a few ideas gathered since November.



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Will Sahmel casts his vote Tuesday as election inspector Pat Scheg waits to give him a sticker at a Fairport polling location. (Photo: CARLOS ORTIZ, staff photographer)

Voting reforms

It's 2016. We do much of our shopping, work and socializing online.

So why are we still voting in person, on paper ballots?



Timothy Kneeland, a political professor at Nazareth College, weighs in on Cheryl Dinolfo's first year. (Photo: Provided)

It's time to seriously consider Internet voting, said [Timothy Kneeland](#), history and political science chairman and director of the Center for Public History at Nazareth College.

There clearly are still concerns to iron out on security, accuracy and reliability, but the idea's time has come if we really want more people involved, he said recently.

“Come up with some kind of discrete code that people can use ... some kind of verifiable system, where people only vote once,” Kneeland said.

Online voting may still be a way off. But there are more immediate voting reforms that might simplify voting or make it more convenient, according to both Kneeland and voting rights advocates.

Moving or consolidating local contests to coincide with state and national elections could help. So could holding elections on weekends, Kneeland said.

Others have proposed declaring Election Day a holiday.

Another option: Same-day registration, or allowing people to sign up to vote until Election Day. In New York, the deadline to register in time for the April 19 presidential primary is March 25 — more than three weeks before voters go to the polls.

And if you were already registered and wanted to change parties before the presidential primary, the deadline already passed — way back in October.

Early voting, an option in other states, allows people to cast ballots in person during a designated period leading up to the formal Election Day. In a handful of western states, all eligible voters receive a ballot by mail in the lead-up to an election.

Kneeland acknowledged that these ideas might not lead to a surge in turnout, but he argued that they still might move the needle.

“I’m not saying that’s going to jack it up 50 percent,” Kneeland said. “But maybe another 10 percent? Wouldn’t that be nice?”

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[Abysmal primary turnout is the norm](#)

Running where races aren't expected

Voters like choices. So they tend to show up at the polls in smaller numbers when candidates are uncontested.

It stands to reason that more truly competitive races might help turnout. But established political parties don't necessarily have an interest in making that happen.

Local Republicans, for example, may see little to gain from running in the Democrat-dominated city, and they usually don't. Lower turnout in the city also may favor GOP candidates running for countywide office.

One person bucking that dynamic is Republican Anna Valeria-Iseman.

Some within the local GOP are looking to recruit candidates for city-based state Assembly and Senate districts where the party usually gives Democrats little competition, according to Valeria-Iseman, president of the Monroe County Republican Women’s Club.

“We’re looking to target one or two of those races and specifically work on increasing the Republican vote in the city parts of those districts,” she said.

It may be a smart political move for the party to only run races they know they’ll win, but it should value civic engagement, too, Valeria-Iseman said. And by getting out and talking about issues that matter to people — solutions to poverty, for example — more voters hopefully will get involved, she said.

“Republicans know how to tackle these issues, and I think it’s our job to communicate that as best we can,” she said.

Democrats also sought to buck one-party control in a handful of suburbs last year, with limited success.

Two Democrats won seats on the Town Board in Sweden for the first time in decades. But a resurgent Henrietta Democratic Committee did not pick up any seats.

Changes in how officials are elected

There are more ways to decide an election than by a simple majority of votes.

Proponents say that alternatives might help to break up single-party control, allow minority and third parties to gain more of a voice and offer voters better ways to show support for candidates.

Instant runoff voting, for example, would allow voters to rank their choices when they're deciding on a field of more than two candidates, said Alex White, co-chairman of the Green Party of Monroe County.



Alex White (Photo: Provided photo)

If no one emerges as the top choice of more than half of voters, the bottom-ranking candidate is eliminated. Ballots that listed that candidate as a voter's top choice would then be retallied, based on whomever is ranked as the second choice. The process continues until a winner emerges.

[Several cities](#) across the U.S. already use instant runoff voting.

Another option is proportional voting, White said. In one version of this system, seats in a body like the County Legislature would be allocated by the proportion of votes that each party gets. If about 60 percent of people voted Republican, for example, roughly 60 percent of the legislature's seats would be chosen from a list of GOP candidates.

Why would these changes be improvements? "I think that one, it would encourage more people to run," White said.

It also stands to benefit parties in places where they now struggle, he argued. "The Republicans might actually have a chance (in the city) ... the Democrats might have a better chance in the towns," White said.

Other options: Nonpartisan elections, where candidates aren't aligned with a party on the ballot, in an effort to force candidates to run on their own merits; and open primaries, in which voters unregistered with a party can participate.

Another more fundamental change: Changing how campaigns are financed.

Good government groups are pushing to close a loophole in New York that allows big donors to skirt contribution caps by donating through LLCs, [as well as other reforms](#) meant to reduce the influence of money in state politics.

Proponents argue such steps ultimately could empower regular voters, too.

Voter education

Busack, with the League of Women Voters, recalled meeting a man who came to the U.S. from Eastern Europe and hadn't missed a single election since becoming a naturalized citizen.

"He said, 'People don't understand the privilege that we have,'" she said. "He looked at me and he raised his hands and he asked, 'Where is the passion here?'"

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James Norman, president and CEO of Action for a Better Community (Photo: Staff file photo)

Busack thinks it starts with education and showing children and young people why voting is relevant. The league works in city schools to try to better educate students about voting rights, with a focus on neighborhoods marked by poverty.

"That's what it's going to take," she said.

James Norman, president and CEO of Action for a Better Community, said without strong voter education, people will typically follow the examples of their families. And if their families don't vote, they probably won't either.

"At least a few years before one is eligible to vote, one has to be educated about how our society is supposed to work and how individual actions — in this case, voting — can make a difference," he said.

It's hard to counter cynicism about politics or the notion that big money or well-connected interests shape government decisions, Norman acknowledged.

But people can still choose who makes decisions that directly affect their neighborhoods, he said.



Iman Abid is a Woman to Watch. (Photo: Thomas Morrisey)

"It circumscribes your choices," Norman said of money in politics. "It doesn't nullify your impact."

White, of the Green Party, sees a need for news media to do a better job of educating adult voters on the issues, too.

[Iman Abid, western region vice president for New York State Young Democrats](#), hopes to launch a nonpartisan social media campaign to help people learn about what local government does and how it functions.

"I just don't think too many people are familiar with the process," Abid said. "I'm not just talking young adults. I'm talking everybody."

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