

Your Vote is Your Voice:

Ways to Improve Voter Turnout in Salisbury City Elections

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Note: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute for Public Affairs and Civic engagement.

Introduction

More than a year ago, the principal author of this report, Harry Basehart, had a conversation with Salisbury mayor, Barrie Tilghman, during an event at Salisbury University. She voiced her concern over low voter turnout in the spring 2007 city council election and commented, “Let’s get together and see if something can be done about increasing voter turnout in Salisbury.” After an initial meeting and discussion, PACE decided to form the Local Voter Turnout Project that would review the academic literature on voter turnout in local elections and develop recommendations for improving turnout in Salisbury elections. Harry Basehart agreed to direct the study and recruit students to participate in the project for four-hours of academic credit. The four students, Hannah Long, Kathleen Kerner, Christy Koontz and John Swanson, are political science majors who have worked in various PACE programs over the past couple of years. These students were joined at the start of spring semester 2008 by Samantha Gibbes, a geography major specializing in geographic information science (GIS), who mapped alternative polling places under the supervision of Michael Scott, an associate professor in Salisbury University’s Department of Geography and Geosciences.

In addition to reviewing the academic literature, the members of the project team interviewed Mayor Tilghman, Greg Bassett, Executive Editor, *The Daily Times*, and Anthony Gutierrez, Election Director, Wicomico County Board of Elections. An overview of our findings was presented to Mayor Tilghman and John Pick, City Administrator, on April 24, 2008.

Finally, a word about the recommendations presented in this report. It was clear in early project meetings that a number of factors can influence voter turnout, including the

extent of controversy surrounding issues and candidates, the ability of candidates to address issues and mobilize voters, the quantity and quality of media coverage of the campaign, citizen attitudes toward voting and the accountability of their elected leaders, and the structures and practices that form the context for voting on Election Day. As we thought about it, we decided to focus our research on the factor that might be the easiest, relatively speaking, to change. We settled on Election Day structures and practices.

City of Salisbury Elections

Citizens of Salisbury elect a mayor and five city council members to four-year terms. The city is divided into two Council Districts: District 1 has one council member and District 2 has four council members. Council terms are staggered with elections held every two years: the four-year cycle has an election of the mayor and two city council members, followed two years later with the election of three council members. These nonpartisan elections are held in the spring of odd-numbered years with a March primary election and an April general election. These dates do not coincide with State of Maryland and Wicomico County election schedules.

The most recent cycle of Salisbury elections elected the mayor and two council members in 2005, and three council members in 2007. (The next cycle is 2009 and 2011.) The council members by district were elected as follows: 2005 - one from District 1 and one from District 2; 2007 - three from District 2. Three polling places were available to voters in the 2005 election, one in District 1 and two in District 2. In 2007, District 2 had two polling places.

Voter Turnout in Salisbury Elections

Much has been written about low voter turnout in the United States, from presidential to local elections. At both levels, turnout can be calculated in a number of different ways and this frequently leads to confusion as to the actual level of turnout because each method results in a different percentage. The most common methods are discussed below¹:

1. The actual number of ballots cast divided by the actual number of registered voters is the usual method of reporting voter turnout in local and state elections. It

- yields the highest voter turnout percentage of the three methods, in part, because non-registered voters are not included in the denominator. Registered voter totals are available from state and county boards of elections.
2. The actual number of ballots cast divided by the voting eligible population (VEP). The definition of VEP has been refined by Michael McDonald, a political scientist at George Mason University. To calculate VEP, he starts with U.S. Census Bureau's estimates of the voting age population (VAP) and then makes a number of adjustments including the subtraction of the number of non-citizens and ineligible felons. Registered and non-registered voters are included in the VEP and VAP. In any particular election, this method will yield a turnout percentage that is lower than the first method's, but probably not as high as the third method, which is discussed below.
 3. Survey of voters, whether done by the U.S. Census Bureau or the best academic research institutes, will yield higher turnout percentages because of inescapable problems in sampling and occasional inaccurate reporting from respondents. This method is frequently used for estimates of national election turnout and occasionally for turnout in statewide elections, but rarely for local elections.

Statewide voter turnout in Maryland's 2006 gubernatorial election was 57.5 percent of registered voters (this percentage is calculated by the first method); in Wicomico County turnout was 57.4 percent.² These figures will provide a useful point of comparison for turnout in Salisbury elections.

In the last Salisbury general election (2007), there were 10,119 registered voters. In this election 2,102 voted, for a turnout of 20.7 percent which is less than half of the

turnout in Wicomico County in 2006. Figure 1 shows turnout percentages from 1986 through 2007. The highest turnout (36.5 percent) was in 2002 and the lowest (18 percent) in 2005. As is usually the case, turnout in primaries is lower than in the general elections. (See Figure 2.) The highest turnout (24.3 percent) is in 1994 and the lowest (7.1 percent) in 2005. General election average turnout is 25.2 percent and 18.2 percent in primary elections.³

How does Salisbury compare to other communities? Readily available data on turnout in local elections is random and when it is found different methods of calculating turnout have been used, making valid comparisons difficult.⁴ A recent study of mayoral elections in Iowa reported turnout (using the VAP mentioned above) ranging from 3.1 percent to 63.2 percent, with a mean of 22.3 percent.⁵ These percentages would certainly be higher, and would the mean exceed Salisbury turnout, if they were based on registered votes and not on VAP. A study of local general elections since 1983 in Pensacola, Florida reports an average turnout of 23 percent (based on registered voters).⁶ Average turnout for Salisbury is slightly higher than in Pensacola. Both of these studies support our general impression that turnout in local elections is low. Salisbury is no exception. Our educated guess is that, if a comprehensive data set was available, Salisbury would fall in the middle in a voter turnout ranking.

Reasons for Not Voting

A Current Population Survey of the 2004 presidential election, conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, provides useful information for this project even though it is a national election study, not a local one.⁷ The proportion of registered voters offering a particular reason for not voting could differ between local and national levels; however, without hard evidence to the contrary it is reasonable to use the percentages below as a general guideline for nonvoting.⁸ After examining nonvoting reasons volunteered by survey respondents, we decided that they could be collapsed into three general categories: The first category is “Circumstances,” the second is “Attitudes” and the third is “Miscellaneous.”

Circumstances –	53.3%
Too busy, conflicting schedule	19.9%
Illness or disability	15.4%
Out of town	9.0%
Forgot to vote	3.4%
Inconvenient polling place	3.0%
Transportation problems	2.1%
Bad weather conditions	0.5%
Attitudes –	20.6%
Did not like candidates or issues	9.9%
Not interested	10.7%
Miscellaneous –	26.2%
Other reason	10.9%
Don’t know/refused	8.5%
Registration problems	6.8%

The predominance of the “Circumstances” category helped us focus our research on evaluating local election structures and practices that have made the act of voting more convenient. Making voting more convenient reduces the number of registered voters who do not vote because of adverse personal circumstances on Election Day.

Other structures and practices discussed below focus on timing of elections, ways of encouraging individuals to vote, and even a way of voting that allows voters to rank candidates; these also can increase turnout or have the potential to increase turnout.

Ways to Improve Voter Turnout in Salisbury

This section reviews studies of factors that influence voter turnout. To varying degrees, all have the potential to increase turnout in Salisbury elections, however, they have been grouped into four categories or levels based on our assessment of the extent of undesirable side effects or the amount of effort required to adopt and/or implement a proposed change. In other words, Level I and Level II proposals are either not recommended or if recommended they are likely to encounter considerable difficulty in being adopted and implemented. Level III and Level IV proposals would face less difficulty.

Level I Proposals – Voter turnout would increase, but proposals would have undesirable side effects.

1. Change the timing of elections so it coincides with state and/or national elections.

Holding local elections concurrently with presidential elections or with midterm congressional elections increases turnout by 25 percentage points or more.⁹ Also, fewer elections reduce the cost of election administration.

Assessment: Not recommended. Although turnout will increase, we give weight to the traditional argument that national and state campaigns will overshadow local issues and candidates, causing the later not to receive the proper attention of voters and the media. (This position makes intuitive

sense; unfortunately, there is little in the way of recent research that examines this question.)

2. Change from nonpartisan elections to partisan elections.

Nonpartisan elections decrease municipal voter turnout by 2 to 10 percentage points.¹⁰ In partisan elections, voters know the partisan affiliations of the candidates and this information makes it easier to decide for whom they should vote. Parties also help mobilize voters to support their parties' candidates. Both contribute to higher voter turnout.

Assessment: Not recommended. Salisbury recently changed from partisan to nonpartisan elections to remove the partisan edge to campaigns that appeared to turn many people off. It would be untimely to re-open this question.

Level II – Voter turnout would increase, but proposals would create significant controversy that would require skilled consensus building by community leaders and city officials.

3. Vote By Mail (VBM)

Ballots are mailed to registered voters who fill out the ballot and return it by mail to the county elections office. Traditional polling places are not used and all of the ballots are counted at the county elections office on Election Day. The State of Oregon has adopted Vote By Mail for all elections and it is used in local elections in several states. Oregon's Secretary of State describes the voting process this way:

If your registration is current, your ballot packet will automatically be mailed to you. Inside the packet you will find the ballot, a secrecy envelope and a return envelope. Once you vote the ballot, place it in the secrecy envelope and seal it in the pre-addressed return envelope. Be sure to sign the return envelope on the

appropriate line. After verifying that the return envelope has your name and current address, simply return the ballot either by mail or at a designated drop site.¹¹

In Oregon, a comprehensive study found that voter turnout increased by almost 5 percentage points in presidential elections; the effect in other statewide races was less.¹² Anecdotal evidence from the local level has larger increases, ten percentage points or more. For example, in 2007, Helena, Montana held its first VBM election and reported a record turnout of 61.5 percent, 30 points higher than in the previous election. Counties in the state of Washington have moved to VBM over the past few years and turnout has increased approximately 5 percentage points.¹³

Assessment: Recommended for consideration. VBM makes voting as convenient as it can possibly be; however, at this time it is not an alternative for Salisbury because the Maryland Court of Appeals ruled in 2006 that early voting (VBM is a form of early voting) violates the Constitution of Maryland.¹⁴ A referendum to amend the constitution to allow for early voting, and overturn this decision, is on the November 2008 ballot. If it is approved by Maryland voters, VBM could be considered by Salisbury's citizens. The Board of Elections would have to adopt procedures to ensure up-to-date mailing addresses and to preserve the integrity of the mail-ballots; plenty of jurisdictions have used VBM so best practices are available.¹⁵

4. Instant Runoff Voting

IRV eliminates the need for a primary election. IRV is a unique way of voting because voters rank all candidates in order of their preferences,

from their first choice to the one they prefer least. For example, if a mayoral race has four candidates, voters would rank the candidates from 1 to 4. If a candidate has a majority when voters' first preferences are counted, that candidate is declared the winner and the counting is over. If no one has a majority, the candidate receiving the least number of first preferences (the candidate who ranked lowest overall) is taken out of the race and those votes are re-directed to the voters' second choice candidate and ballots are counted again to see if any candidate has a majority.

Assessment: Recommended for consideration.¹⁶ In the past few years, a number of municipalities have switched to IRV, including San Francisco, California and Burlington, Vermont. It is scheduled for use in upcoming elections in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and several cities in North Carolina. The only Maryland city to use IRV is Takoma Park, which recently adopted it. Generally, early reports are positive, although they are frequently from IRV enthusiasts, more objective analysis should be available soon. It is possible turnout could increase because voters can focus on one election and they may feel that their votes are less likely to be "wasted" because they can rank their preferences and their second choice could be counted and help elect a winner in a second round of balloting. Nevertheless, solid evidence on this point is not yet available and what is noted is mostly anecdotal; a few elections have seen lower turnout. IRV for multimember city council districts is feasible, but it is

easier for voters to understand this way of voting in single-member council districts.

Level III Proposals – Voter turnout would increase, but proposals would require strong volunteer efforts.

5. Nonpartisan canvassing, phone calls and leafleting.

Canvassing involves face-to-face contact by nonpartisan volunteers or paid workers going throughout local neighborhoods to remind citizens of their duty to vote, answering questions about polling places and procedures and/or giving out a written reminder of the upcoming election. As the name implies, the *phone call* technique has volunteers use a script and talk with the voter or leave a voice mail message that reminds the voter of the upcoming election and appeals to the voter to go to the polls and vote. *Leafleting* does not attempt personal contact with voters, rather reminder cards or flyers that contain an appeal to vote are left at the homes of registered voters. No attempt is made to contact residents face-to-face. All three techniques are documented as ways of increasing turnout. Canvassing, which is the only one that has face-to-face contact, is the most effective, raising turnout by 2 to 13 percentage points.¹⁷ Phone calling and leafleting also increase turnout, but not as much as canvassing.

Assessment: Recommended for consideration. A nonpartisan Get-Out-the-Vote effort using a large number of volunteers is an exciting and attractive option. It would be grassroots democracy at its best; however, many citizens already are stretched thin with family, work and current community activities and it would take substantial leadership efforts from

community groups to be successful in recruiting the required volunteers. Use of a professional phone bank service would reduce the number of volunteers needed, but would increase dollar costs.

6. Nonpartisan Voter Festivals

On Election Day, the city or a community group hosts a nonpartisan festival on the premises of polling locations to entice the community to participate in the election, as well as foster a sense of community pride. The only study of voter festivals reports that voter turnout increased by as much as 6.5 percentage points.¹⁸

Assessment: Recommended for consideration. Voter festivals would require organization, volunteers, prep work, and advertising. To avoid charges of “playing politics,” it would seem advisable to have them sponsored by a nonpolitical or bipartisan community group rather than the City of Salisbury. An important plus is that it would take less time and fewer volunteers than canvassing.

Level IV Proposals – Voter turnout would increase, but proposals would create only moderate controversy that would require a normal amount of consensus building by community leaders and city officials.

7. Election Day Vote Centers (EDVCs)

Voting centers are centrally located polling places unlinked to specific voting precincts or election districts. These centers are geographically positioned for maximum voter convenience. The idea is that EDVCs will be placed so that “they are near to workplaces, schools, shopping areas, or major transportation routes so that they are more accessible to individuals throughout the day.”¹⁹ Any voter, regardless of district or precinct, may

visit any center to cast his/her vote. Voters are given ballots with the correct contests and candidates for their district. A study of voting centers in Indiana found a median voter turnout increase of almost 5 percentage points.²⁰ And one study suggests the accessibility of EDVCs increases turnout among infrequent voters.²¹

Assessment: Recommended for consideration. In a city the size of Salisbury, voting at a single, well-known location with ample parking space such as the Civic Center could be an attractive alternative to two or three locations that are not as well-known. It's a good guess that a vast majority of voters drive rather than walk to the polls, although a voting center would undoubtedly require most voters to drive farther than they do now. Administrative costs of an election could be reduced; however, the Wicomico County Board of Elections would need the capability to give voters from different election districts the proper ballot for their district, that is, it would have to have the correct city council races for voters in District 1 and District 2. (Even without EDVCs, the idea of allowing voters to obtain a ballot that has the candidates for their district at any voting place is a good one, assuming that the recording of a person voting could be communicated through a computer network to all voting places.)

8. Polling Place Locations

An alternative to a voting center is the proper placement of existing polling places. Common sense tells us that locating polling places at or near the population center of a voting district would make voting more convenient for most voters. One study of three Maryland suburban

counties on the Western Shore finds that turnout increases when polling places are closer to voters and have fewer driving hindrances such as heavier traffic and more complex traffic networks.²²

Assessment: Recommended for consideration. Accessibility should be thought of as not only distance and time of travel to the polls but should also include a well-known and easily identifiable building with adequate parking. GIS capabilities at Salisbury University's Department of Geography and Geosciences can assist in determining ideal locations; finding an appropriate building with ample parking near the best location may be more of a challenge.

Four sample maps that identify potential polling locations based on average population centers are included in Figures 3-6. (Currently, District 1 has one polling place at St. James AME Church on Mack Avenue; District 2 has two polling places, one at the Wicomico Presbyterian Church on Broad Street and a second one at the Harvest Baptist Church on South Boulevard.) Figure 3 depicts two polling places, one at the population center for District 1 and one at the population center for District 2. Figure 4 has two polling places for District 2 and Figure 5 has three polling places. Figure 6 shows the ideal location for one polling place for voters, combining both District 1 and 2.

Please note that this approach to accessibility is somewhat different from that in the literature on EDVCs, which emphasizes locating polling places near major transportation routes and places where people tend to go during

the day. For example, in Figure 4, the Civic Center could be a good choice because of parking, and it is still reasonably close to Rt. 12 (Snow Hill Rd.) and Buena Vista Ave.

Conclusion

The project team members did not come to a consensus on a single recommendation; rather each had a particular favorite ranging from voter festivals to Instant Runoff Voting. The closest to a consensus was on these two points: (1) the accessibility of current polling place locations should be improved; (2) today's technology should allow voters to vote in at any polling place regardless of where they live. Both of these actions have the potential to improve turnout.

Vote By Mail, if Maryland voters approve the November referendum, is an attractive alternative to identifying more accessible locations for polling places. VBM eliminates this problem because voters receive their ballots in the mail. (On the other hand, it eliminates what many consider to be an important ritual of democracy: citizens of a community going to the polls on Election Day. Unfortunately, it is a ritual that only a minority of registered voters participates in today.)

In addition, the project team gave some support, but not a consensus, to two more recommendations: (1) a nonpartisan get-out-the-vote effort, whether in the form of leafleting or voter festivals; (2) eliminate primary elections by adopting Instant Runoff Voting.²³

NOTES

¹Methods of calculating voter turnout are discussed on Michael P. McDonald's web page, http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm. Also, see Mark Hugo Lopez, Emily Kirby, Jared Sagoff, Chris Herbst, *The Youth Vote 2004 With a Historical Look at Youth Voting Patterns, 1972-2004*, Circle Working Paper 35 (2005), <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP35CIRCLE.pdf> and *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, (2002), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p20-542.pdf>.

²http://www.elections.state.md.us/elections/2006/turnout/general/county_wide.html.

³<http://www.ci.salisbury.md.us/Departments/CityClerk/tabid/81/Default.aspx>.

⁴We requested by email to city clerks recent election results of a number of Maryland cities and received no responses. It probably would take more personal contact to obtain this information; it may be a project that PACE could work in the near future.

⁵Tom Rice and Hillary Schleuter, "Turnout in Small Elections: An Examination of Voter Turnout in Iowa Mayoral Races," presented at the 2004 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill. April 15, 8.

⁶James A. Robinson, Clarence C. Elebash and Andrea C. Hatcher, *Pensacola Votes by Mail: A Report on Pensacola's January 2001 Referendum*, (University of West Florida, Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development, 2001), 6, <http://www.haas.uwf.edu>.

⁷U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004* Current Population Reports, P20-556 (2006): 14-15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>

⁸We recognize that registered voters, if asked about local elections rather than presidential elections, might have additional reasons for not voting or might select responses in different percentages than those reported in the Census Bureau's survey. One could argue that the consistent pattern of much lower turnout in local elections than national elections points to something unique about local elections that depresses turnout. The only way to know for sure is to replicate the Census Bureau's survey at the local level.

⁹Zoltan Hajnal and Paul Lewis, "Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections," *Urban Affairs Review* 38 (2003): 656.

¹⁰Brian Schaffner, et. al., "Teams without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections," *Political Research Quarterly* 54 (March 2001): 25.

¹¹Oregon Secretary of State, “Vote by Mail Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.sos.state.or.us/executive/votemail/faq.html>.

¹²Paul Gronke, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum and Peter A. Miller, “Early Voting and Turnout” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, (2003): 643.

¹³Common Cause, *Getting it Straight for 2008: What We Know About Vote by Mail and How to Conduct Them Well*, Election Reform Brief (Washington, D.C.: 2008), 3-4. A comprehensive look at how one city (Pensacola, Fla.) implemented mail ballots for a referendum election is in Robinson, Elebash and Hatcher, *Pensacola Votes by Mail*.

¹⁴Steve Vogel and Ernesto Londono, “Court Rejects Perez Bid, Early Voting Law in Md.” *Washington Post*, August 26, A01, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/2006/08/25>. The court’s decision is in *Linda H. Lamone, et al. v. Marirose Joan Capozzi, et al.* December 11, 2006, <http://mdcourts.gov/opinions/coa/2006/143a05.pdf>

¹⁵See the Common Cause report, *Getting it Straight for 2008*.

¹⁶The major advocacy group for Instant Runoff Voting is FairVote in Takoma Park, Maryland, <http://www.fairvote.org/irv/>.

¹⁷Here a plethora of studies exist. See Alan Gerber and Donald Green, “The Effect of a Nonpartisan Get-Out-the-Vote Drive: An Experimental Study of Leafletting,” *Journal of Politics* 62 (August 2000): 850; Gerber, Alan and Donald Green, “Do Phone Calls Increase Voter Turnout? A Field Experiment,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65 (2001): 80; Niven, David, “The Mobilization Solution? Face-to-Face Contact and Voter Turnout in a Municipal Election,” *Journal of Politics* 66 (2004): 876.

¹⁸Elizabeth Addonizio, Donald Green and James Glaser, “Putting the Party Back in Politics: An Experiment Testing Whether Election Day Festivals Increase Voter Turnout,” *American Political Science Association* (2007): 723.

¹⁹Robert M. Stein and Greg Vonnahme, “Engaging the Unengaged Voter: Vote Centers and Voter Turnout,” *Journal of Politics*, (2008): 490.

²⁰Robert M. Stein and Greg Vonnahme, “Election Day Vote Centers and Voter Turnouts,” presented at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill. April 20-23, <http://www3.brookings.edu/gs/projects/electionreform/20060418Stein.pdf>; Indiana Secretary of State, *A Study of Vote Centers and Their Applicability to the Hoosier Election Process*, (Indianapolis, Ind.: 2005), <http://electionupdates.caltech.edu/VCRFinalV2.pdf>. Vote centers require careful advance planning, as can be see by problems in Denver, Colorado elections in 2006, Monte Whaley and Joey Bunch, “Vote Centers ‘a Total Fiasco,’” *Denver Post*, November 9, 2006, http://www.denverpost.com/election/ci_4627496.

²¹Stein and Vonnahme, "Election Day Vote Centers," 489.

²²James G. Gimpel and Jasin E. Schuknecht, "Political Participation and the Accessibility of the Ballot Box," *Political Geography* (2003), 5, and 9.

²³An alternative to IRV is a two-round system, with the second election being a run off. If a candidate has a majority of votes in the first election, a second election is not held. If no candidate has a majority, a second election (runoff) is held between the top two vote getters in the first round.

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