



NEIGHBORHOOD & LONG TERM PLANNING, PUBLIC FACILITIES, ARTS & CELEBRATION COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE MEETING

~ AGENDA ~

Thursday, August 25, 2016

6:00 PM

Sullivan Chamber

Call of the Meeting

The Neighborhood and Long Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts and Celebrations Committee and the Civic Unity Committee will conduct a joint public hearing to discuss improving voter turnout for municipal elections in Cambridge through voter reward options, and will focus on receiving feedback from the community.

6:00-6:15: Introduction from Chairs and Other Councillors

6:15-6:45: Presentation on Voter Engagement

Nadeem Mazen, Cambridge City Councillor

6:45 - 7:45: Discussion

1. Voter Reward Lottery
2. Democracy Voucher
3. Other Voter Engagement Strategies

7:30 - 8:00: Public Comment

8pm - Adjournment

Incentivizing Voting in Cambridge Municipal Elections

Introduction

Low voter participation in municipal elections is related to disenfranchisement and inequity in our community - and low turnout represents a shortcoming in our representative democracy. Traditional attempts to increase voter participation, including reliance on the candidates for office to drive interest, have had little historic impact on voting rate and on voter diversity. However, voters respond to financial incentives to participate in the process. While vouchers and other small incentives may marginally improve turnout, the chance to receive a large cash prize may be the most effective incentive to draw voters. The City of Cambridge could create pilot program to offer a lottery prize to a random person who votes in its municipal elections in an effort to significantly increase voter participation. More importantly, and irrespective of the solution Cambridge takes up, it is up to the policy makers and stakeholders in this discussion to take increasing participation seriously. Today's committee meeting is intended to start that discussion out on a creative note.

The Growing Interest in Voting Incentives for Municipal and State Elections

In 2015, the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP) offered a \$25,000 prize to voters in the May 19 election for the Los Angeles Board of Education's district 5 seat, a contest which had previously attracted turnouts as low as 11%. Only 16% of voters who participated in that May election had heard about the prize, but those that did hear about it told researchers that they were twice as likely to vote as a result.¹ The winner of the prize was a 35 year-old security guard, who received significant media attention. His personal story became a driving share of the post-election coverage.²

In the 2015 Philadelphia mayoral election, the non-profit organization Philadelphia Citizen offered a \$10,000 prize to a random voter who participated in the election by casting a vote. The winner of the prize was a school crossing guard. Her story generated national media coverage.³

Beyond nonprofits, state and local governments have also considered piloting such incentive programs. The Los Angeles Elections Commission studied a lottery proposal to award a \$50,000 prize,⁴ and the state of Arizona considered a \$1 million prize for its state elections, though the program was rejected by voters. The money would have come from unclaimed state lottery prizes and been awarded to a randomly selected person who voted in the primary or general election.

Establishing a Cambridge Voting Incentive Reward

¹ <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-lausd-election-winner-20150717-story.html>

² <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-lausd-election-winner-20150717-story.html>

³ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/nov/4/philadelphia-woman-wins-10k-just-for-voting/>

⁴ <http://time.com/money/3117303/vote-lottery-cash-prizes/>

The City of Cambridge could establish a pilot program to reward a random Cambridge voter with a significant financial sum for their participation in municipal elections, such as a \$50,000 reward. The key to making the program work is to advertise the award so that a critical mass of registered voters becomes aware of its existence. Additionally, the award can be used as an incentive in voter registration programs. Informing people who have not registered to vote about the award may encourage them to register. The program will also create a high potential for free earned media, locally and nationally, to promote both the award and the election. This in turn will help drive turnout. Candidates for public office will also help spread the word about the award in an effort to mobilize their constituencies, which will help drive voter participation.

While we do not yet know how this voter reward system would affect turnout in Cambridge, previous attempts at this system in other cities demonstrate the tremendous potential to increase voter participation. With its history of innovative election practices, Cambridge can serve as the perfect setting to pilot this system. Additionally, Cambridge has the resources, history, and innovate spirit to make this program successful. It can be a model for the rest of the country. And if it proves unsuccessful, the program can be ended at any time without additional cost.

While lottery programs may be associated by some with gambling or poor morals, lotteries have actually been proposed to promote positive activities such as saving money, going to school, taking your prescription medications, and even things like cleaning up after your dog, paying your taxes, and driving under the speed limit.

Finally, it is important to note that any program that seeks to increase voter participation should be enacted along-side programs to increase voter education, to ensure that citizens are fully informed about the candidates and their electoral options.

Democracy Voucher

An alternative to a large cash prize would be a smaller incentive given to every voter in the form of a voucher or gift card. As traditional methods to increase voter turnout in municipal elections have had little impact on voter participation in Cambridge, a voucher system would bring attention to local elections and act as a compensation for wage loss, transportation costs, and other expenses that voters suffer from when they take time to participate. While a voucher incentive may not have the dramatic results of a large cash prize given to one random voter, studies show that a smaller cash prize for all voters does create a significant increase in voter turnout in municipal elections. With more participants in this democratic process, the City of Cambridge can represent more of its population and work for all of us.

The Effect of Voting Incentives on Voter Turnout

The decline of voter participation in recent years can be seen across the country, and Cambridge is no exception to this trend. With around about 17,959 votes cast in the 2015 Cambridge City Council election last November, only 16.7% of Cambridge's population voted.⁵ Similar percentages can be seen for the 2015 School Committee election, as well.⁶

This problem is one that political scientist and elections expert, Costas Panagopoulos, of Fordham University studies everyday. Panagopoulos asks the question: what motivates voters and what is the impact of extrinsic rewards on voting behavior? In his study, voters in Gilroy, California, were randomly assigned to receive a postcard mailing with either a simple reminder to vote or an offer to receive a financial reward randomly varied to be \$2, \$10, or \$25 for participating in the November 2007 election.

The results of the experiments reveal that the postcard reminders failed to effectively raise turnout in elections while non-trivial monetary incentives elevated electoral participation. Table 1 shows that a \$25 incentive resulted in a 3.6% increase to the voter turnout rate in a trial in Gilroy and a 4.3% increase in Lancaster.⁷

⁵<http://www.cambridgema.gov/election2015/ccouncil/15CouncFinal%20Round.htm>

⁶ <http://www.cambridgema.gov/election2015/schoolcommittee/15schoolfinal%20round.htm>

⁷ http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.1017/s0022381612001016.pdf?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Experimental Group	N	Turnout (%)	Intent to Treat Effect (ITT)
<i>Gilroy (November 2007)</i>			
Postcard reminder (no incentive)	993	20.6	-0.3 (1.4)
\$2 Incentive	496	18.7	-2.2 (1.9)
\$10 Incentive	100	23.0	+2.1 (4.1)
\$25 Incentive	49	24.5	-3.6 (5.8)
Control	5,754	20.9	
<i>Lancaster (April 2010) (Payment by Mail)</i>			
Postcard reminder (no incentive)	1,000	14.0	-0.9 (1.2)
\$2 Incentive	1,000	15.5	-0.6 (1.7)
\$10 Incentive	500	17.6	+2.7 (1.6)
\$25 Incentive	500	19.2	+4.3 (1.6)
Control	18,690	14.9	

Table 1

Establishing a Cambridge Voter Incentive

Panagopoulos's study demonstrates that a small financial incentive can significantly increase voter turnout in municipal elections. The City of Cambridge could establish a pilot program that offers voters a \$25 voucher to each voter. One method of doing so is to have these vouchers act as gift card to redeemable at local Cambridge businesses. This system would promote both voter participation and awareness of local politics, while simulating local vibrancy. Additionally, this voter reward system would bring broader awareness of Cambridge elections to the public and may draw in those who have not registered to vote or who have not participated in previous elections. Cambridge is well known for being a leader in innovation problem solving in many fields and should take this opportunity to look at how this nation-wide dilemma is affecting us here.

Re: Council Order #170 on Rewards for Voting

ATTACHMENT C

Rewards for voting is an extreme idea. For a long time, City residents have been treated as clients whom the City government must satisfy. Far beyond the benefits it gives resident property owners, the City has used its affluence to supply good public services for all. But isn't rewarding participation with money exactly wrong? Despite all the City's investment in "public process" they seem to have missed the mysterious insight that people are most inclined to act when they know they what they do makes a difference.

Ironically, the latest benefit the City has incorporated--the Participatory Budgeting Project (PB)--could have been used to build responsibility in an engaged citizenry, if structured differently. As originally conceived, participatory budgeting was an opportunity for Portuguese and Brazilian cities to train citizens to take on some of the responsibility for allocating a large portion of city budgets. In the US, implementation has centered on big city wards and used to guide spending dependent on the ward's alderman. In Cambridge, the process has depended on the work of City staff and hired specialists, engaging resident volunteers in an ephemeral structure not connected with permanent activities in the City or the usual process for voting for elected officials.

When I worked with the first Cambridge PB round, I was impressed with the motives of volunteer budget delegates. Many were fairly new residents seeking a way to connect with their fellow citizens. The orientation to serving the general interest was not needed by them. They were already good citizens who wanted to use their skills to help the general welfare. They enjoyed the process, but most of them did not sign up for the next PB round.

It seems a waste to attract Cambridge residents to such an activity, but not retain their connection to City affairs.. In the case of public school students, the teachers involved will serve as a core to rebuild from. But the adult groups processing ideas were all ad hoc and temporary. Given that the ideas considered mostly relate to amenities in shared outdoor space, could not the process be translated into a more permanent structure by resting certain responsibilities with permanent bodies representing Cambridge neighborhoods. Cambridge doesn't have wards in which New York or Chicago base their PB, but we do (or did) have permanent neighborhood groupings. Fifty years ago, these were the 13 planning teams whose origin perhaps relates to LBJ's Great Society plans. Couldn't such groups, standing permanently, serve as the locus for collecting and refining ideas--among other responsibilities? This could save the city some of the expense and time now devoted to the PB process. Further, neighborhood groups might take on some of the review of other projects relating to public space that now takes up time for City officials. Further, new people attracted by PB would be introduced to existing gatherings for interested citizens with which they might become involved on a long term basis.

And possibly the voting of PB could be somehow be merged with city voting for elected officials, to the benefit of both causes. Further, strengthening neighborhood groups with more citizen volunteers would help address the needs of climate change mitigation and adaptation. What will be required to adequately communicate with all residents and help them meet emergencies is well beyond the capacity of City workers. The City needs strong neighborhood groups to partner with.

The City treats these neighborhood divisions as given for some purposes such as parking and trash collection.. But the citizen assemblies in various neighborhoods have had different histories. A few have survived as originally constituted. Others have not. And new ad hoc groups have assembled to take on some of the issues that neighborhood planning teams originally dealt with--especially related to development. The City may not appreciate the stance of some of these groups, but they do take on issues the City is hesitant to touch. My neighborhood planning team in the late 1960's objected to Harvard acquiring real estate in the neighborhood. Then Harvard turned to acquiring real estate in Allston, so maybe our efforts had some value. Isn't it reasonable to delegate to residents the capacity to speak to their own interests? And would this not help to encourage resident participation in their government?

Joanna Herlihy
410 Norfolk Street

From: Caroline Mak <makyaroli@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, August 25, 2016 7:15 PM
To: Crane, Paula
Subject: Public Comment Record

I personally am against pay-to-vote incentives without pairing with some kind of education voter program. I think the funds and resources dedicated to this would be ineffective and not address the issues that I outline below.

Possible Issues and Ideas for local municipal elections:

Lack of information about local elections and barrier learning

- > better website, publicize url
- > modernize sandwich boards layout
- > google docs meeting notes/live stream/ hangouts (expand public comment)
- > voter guide

Getting involved in local politics is not obvious

- > better publicize committees (issues are relevant and interesting, have more boards or also put it on the website)
- > more meet and greet city councillor dinners/meetings

Lack of Excitement

- > creative ideas like early voting dinners
- > more flyers on issues and things that cambridge just did
- > get more college students involved, publicize committees

Lack of Energy and Funds

- > public funding of elections
- > better information
- > same day registration
- > educating about city hall
- > mail-in voting

A committee to work on these ideas and do a survey of why people don't vote and pick one of these things at a time and help schedule.

Thank you,
Caroline Mak
69 Chestnut St

Crane, Paula

ATTACHMENT E.

From: Lopez, Donna
Sent: Tuesday, August 23, 2016 9:05 AM
To: Crane, Paula
Subject: Fwd: voter rewards

For your hearing.

Donna

Sent from my iPhone

Begin forwarded message:

From: Bjorn Poonen <bjornpoonen@gmail.com>
Date: August 23, 2016 at 12:38:07 AM EDT
To: council@cambridgema.gov, "Lopez, Donna" <dlopez@cambridgema.gov>
Subject: voter rewards

(Dear Donna Lopez: Please add the letter below to the public comment for the August 25 meeting. Thank you.)

Dear Cambridge City Council:

I'm writing regarding Policy Order POR 2016 #170 about a voter reward program, which I have heard is to be discussed at the August 25 meeting (which I am unable to attend).

I think that the best idea for increasing voter turnout is simply to further publicize the options for early voting; I think many Cambridge residents currently are unaware that this is a possibility. Expanding the early voting locations may help too.

On the other hand, for the following reasons I do not feel that rewarding voters for voting is something that we should be doing. First, this sends the message that voting is a chore, instead of an activity that people should be proud to be a part of. Second, I worry that if people are being compensated for voting, it may skew things by increasing the number of people who vote without thinking seriously about the issues involved. Finally, I strongly object to the idea of a lottery system that pays a large sum to one voter: ultimately, it is the citizens of Cambridge who would be paying for this program, so this would be effectively the same as requiring the citizens to buy tickets for a mandatory City lottery.

Bjorn Poonen
303 3rd St Unit 416, Cambridge, MA