

November 23, 2010

Dear Editor,

During this season, one blessing that merits our attention is our nation's unwavering commitment to democratic values, including our individual freedoms, for nearly two and a half centuries. While we give thanks, the 2010 Illinois Civic Health Index will be released. It documents Illinoisans' attitudes about politics and their behaviors reflecting civic participation. Unfortunately, the report suggests that we live in a democracy in theory: the citizenry utterly fail to utilize the First Amendment and other freedoms and are not active participants in the democratic process. For example, despite an intense Presidential campaign season that included Illinois' own Barack Obama, Illinois ranked 33rd among all states by voter registration rate, at 70.9%. While comparable to the national rate of 71.0%, it is disquieting that having a candidate from Illinois on the ballot was not enough to generally increase the voter registration turnout rate beyond the national average.

In examining why Illinoisans did not participate in the election, the most popular excuses for not voting were being too busy and not being interested in the election. These percentages are notably higher than the national averages, indicating the infectious nature of the Illinois' public corruption epidemic that results in anti-democratic practices and policies that deter or prevent citizen participation. For example, participation in various political acts are rare: only 14.1% showed support for a particular candidate or party, only 10.8% bought or boycotted a product as a political act, only 9.6% attended a public meeting, and a mere 3.1% participated in a march, rally, or protest.

While there are reforms that would increase government accessibility, transparency, and accountability, a healthy democracy mandates having meaningful, hands-on civic education that informs youth of their civic responsibility and the paths by which they may influence government decision-making. Real civic education, which has been institutionally neglected in Illinois for decades, is an insurance policy for ensuring that youth develop healthy civic habits that are carried into adulthood, and it will result in an engaged and knowledgeable democracy. This requires a commitment by our state leaders to improve our state's civic health.

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