

THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN RURAL AMERICA

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Mr. Speer discusses political participation in this country as it historically developed and as it exists today. This paper was presented to librarians during a Rural Libraries and the Humanities workshop on May 7, 1982. He offered up suggestions on how libraries can meet the needs of those involved in the political process.

Rural public libraries have been serving the needs of citizens involved in the political process at varying levels of quality for many years. This service has often been provided unconsciously as an adjunct to the library's general information and materials lending services.

This paper will explore political participation in rural America, identify the needs of citizens and groups who are participating, illustrate how libraries, both rural and non-rural, have been responding to those needs, and, finally, propose realistic service patterns to meet the participation needs of the 1980's.

Very little research exists to distinguish differences in political participation activities between rural and urban communities in America. By definition, differences exist in each environment. Rural living is characterized by geographic remoteness, more personalized interactions in daily living, and by deprivation in income, organized information sources, commercial facilities, health-care facilities, and educational opportunities.¹

Politics locally are more personalized in rural areas, because life is more personalized. This personalization tends to hold communities and lives

together. Rural residents are traditionally conservative (yet recent evidence shows this area changing).² Continued interaction among the same groups of people provides a comfortable cohesion to daily life. Traditional social institutions in rural America are more highly valued than in urban areas.³

Despite some basic environmental differences, there are very few identifiable differences in the way people participate in political activities. The only one which was identified in a recent literature search by this author was a slight variation in voter turnout. A higher percentage of rural registered voters turn out to vote than their urban counterparts.⁴

There does not appear to be any great difference in their politics. A major factor behind this similarity may be that through mass communication and urban-rural migration we are becoming a homogeneous population.

David Knoke and Constance Henry, in an observation of the political structure of rural America, predicted that a key trend for the future will be a move toward greater homogenization with the urban political culture. They see rural areas continuing to be exposed through mass media and interpersonal contacts to the dominant political styles from urban areas. They also see a continued urban to rural migration. They predict that the end result will be a rural population which is as heterogeneous and politically diverse as the urban centers, with all meaningful distinctions disappearing.⁵

Whenever possible, the author will focus on the rural environment, but due to the aforementioned similarities between rural and urban participation, and because of the lack of research differentiating the two, this paper will not be strictly limited to the rural community. In the final sections, the author will focus on responses which rural libraries might make to serve needs surrounding the political process.

The demographics of political participation are very similar to those of library use. Income, education and occupational status all correlate positively with individual participation.^{6,7} These are all groups which have been traditionally reached by libraries.

Political alienation has been prevalent across the United States for almost twenty years. Through the 1960's and 1970's there was a distinct drop of confidence in and respect for government.⁸ This dissatisfaction is not limited to any particular group in our society. Young and old, educated and uneducated, blue-collar and white-collar, and rich and poor, almost everyone, to some degree, lacks confidence in government at all levels. Complaining about government is often safer than complaining about the weather.

One predominant response to this dissatisfaction has been withdrawal. Traditional measures of citizen participation are on the decline: voter turnout, political party affiliation, and public confidence.⁹ Citizens are pulling out of the traditional political process.

A second, seemingly contradictory, response has been increased participation in citizen organizations and public interest groups. People are involved in a multitude of efforts to make government more accessible, accountable, and responsive.¹⁰ This public interest, or citizen action movement, emerged in the 1960's following Congressional enactment of a large body of legislation to take care of unfinished business going back to the 1930's.¹¹

President Johnson pushed through several new and significant pieces of legislation, flooding the administrative channels of the executive branch. The new laws promised services in such areas as housing, education, health, and jobs, but the government was not equipped for immediate delivery. Public

expectations were high, but the performance in administering these new laws was low. This resulted in widespread distrust and cynicism about American ideals and government. Organized constituencies began to form around issue politics, at a distance from the established political parties.¹²

During the same period when the citizen action movement was getting its start, our society was having to deal with other changes. Since before the turn of the century we have been living with the alienating conditions of modern governmental bureaucracy and the alienating consequences of mass-industrialized society. While these forces have been present in America, mediating institutions, such as the church, political parties, and fraternal organizations, have helped to reconcile individuals to them. These institutions assisted in sustaining pluralism, developing consensus, and providing social mobility.¹³

They provided a cohesion and a sense of belonging. People interacted through these groups, making decisions for their own lives and reaching consensus on issues present in the wider political arena. They were a major vehicle through which people participated in the political process. They also were a source of personal and group identity, successfully counteracting modern society's alienating forces.

In the recent past, the influence of these mediating institutions has declined significantly, leading to an erosion in the traditional sources of consensus making. As a result, it is now difficult to build a political consensus during a period in which many critical choices must be made. Active citizen participation in groups is an alternative means to build consensus. At this point it is an experimental alternative to compensate for the decline in traditional consensus making.¹⁴

One must also be aware that not all participation has been citizen-initiated. On the local, state, and federal level there exists a widespread practice of mandating citizen participation.¹⁵

Population growth, technology, and affluence have created a complex set of problems which have led to immense regulatory and service demands being placed upon all levels of government. This has resulted in an enormous growth of government bureaucracy with tremendous discretionary power, resulting in civil service becoming a fourth branch of government.¹⁶

This development has created two needs, first, there is the danger that administrative agencies may abuse their power. Legislatures have the responsibility for regulating the agencies, but due to the amount of legislative work and the size of the bureaucracy, they cannot do this. Citizen participation has developed as an alternative means of monitoring government agencies.¹⁷

Also, government agencies are not entirely comfortable with their discretionary power. Knowing they are paid by taxpayers and overseen by elected officials, they are reluctant to make unpopular and controversial decisions. Often they cannot be avoided and, as a result, justification and support for difficult decisions becomes a matter of crucial importance to them. They often use citizen participation as a means of improving, justifying, and developing support of decisions.¹⁸

Participation, both within and outside the system, is part of our consciousness in the 1980's. Every month we see groups locally (or hear about them through the media) which participate and make a difference in local issues. Whether fighting a community school closing, developing improved health-care services and facilities, or searching for a solution to waste disposal problems, people are coming to realize that channeling alienation into participation works.

CATEGORIES OF PARTICIPATION

In an essay prepared as background information for the National Conference on Citizen Participation (held in September 1978), Stuart Langton identified four categories of citizen participation.¹⁹ A quick look at these categories is essential for understanding the entire scope of political participation in America. It will also provide a helpful foundation upon which to discuss local library services to meet information needs in this area.

The four categories identified by Langton are: obligatory participation, electoral participation, citizen involvement, and citizen action.²⁰ Table A outlines the major characteristics of each category.

Obligatory participation refers to activities which are compulsory. There are ways in which everyone must participate. Paying taxes, signing up for the draft, and serving on jury duty are three classic examples.

Activities connected with the election process are defined as electoral participation. Some examples include voting and working for a political party or candidate.

Langton's third category, citizen involvement, refers to activities initiated and controlled by government. In most instances, citizen involvement is a group activity, such as advisory councils and long-range planning committees, but it can also include individual participation as in testifying at a public hearing. Each instance of citizen involvement also serves one of two purposes. It can provide a monitoring function, watching over the activities of government agencies. It can also serve as a vehicle for input, providing government with information and ideas to assist with and improve decision-making.

	Citizen Action	Citizen Involvement	Electoral Participation	Obligatory Participation
Major distinguishing feature	Refers to activities initiated and controlled by citizens for some purpose	Refers to activities initiated and controlled by government for administrative purpose	Refers to activities to nominate and elect representatives or to vote on pertinent issues on a regularly scheduled basis established by law	Refers to activities in which participation is compulsory according to law
Major purpose	To influence decisions of government officials or voters	To improve decision making and services and develop consensus and support for decisions	To provide stability, continuity of leadership, and a workable consensus for government	To provide sufficient support for government to perform its legal functions
Examples of activities	Lobbying; public education; protest; public advocacy; civil disobedience; class-action suits	Advisory committees; public hearings; goals programs; surveys; hot lines; volunteer programs	Voting; running for office; working for a candidate; volunteering to help a political party	Paying taxes; doing military service; jury duty
Dominant concerns	Organizing effectively; obtaining appropriate information; developing support; raising funds; making maximum political and public impact	Involving more citizens informing citizens better; broadening the range of citizen representation; maintaining citizen interest; effective utilization of citizen involvement in decision making; obtaining necessary funds	Increasing voter turnout; raising funds for a party or candidate	Increasing public understanding of the obligations of citizenship; attracting and retaining capable jurors and military personnel
Typically interested	Neighborhood and community action groups; public-interest and consumer groups; community agencies; individual citizens	Legislative committees; administrative agencies; regulatory agencies	Elected officials; political parties; political candidates	Judges; court officers; military leaders; tax officials

In: Langton, Stuart, ed. Citizen Participation in America. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1978, p. 22.

The final category, citizen action, also is primarily a group participation method. It is characterized by activities which are initiated and controlled by citizens. Examples include lobbying, public education programs, and class-action suits.²¹

RURAL RESPONSE

The 1970's saw a vast increase in the overall amount of political participation and there are no apparent trends in the future that would suggest any reversals. Although forecasting trends is often speculative, in the interest of planning library services for the rural community of the 1980's and beyond, a few general observations can be made.

In the next several years we are likely to see a further increase in participation in action groups in rural areas. We will witness a delayed rural response to the changes which have spurred the growth of these groups in the urban environment.

One theory presented earlier suggests that increased involvement in citizen action groups is an experimental attempt to regain some of the social benefits which in the past were provided through more traditional mediating institutions, e.g., the church, political parties, and fraternal organizations.²² Many have observed that these traditional institutions have suffered less of a decline in rural than in urban areas.²³ This implies that one of the motivating forces behind participation in citizen action groups is not as prevalent in rural areas as in urban areas.

The relative strength of these mediating institutions has held due to the inherent conservatism of the rural resident and also due to the geographic

isolation of rural communities, but it is very likely that these institutions and their influence will continue to decline. The migration of urban and suburban residents with their values and political ideas, combined with the increased communication with urban areas, cannot help but to erode away at the strength of these traditional institutions.

Citizen action groups will increase in rural areas due to the migration of people and ideas. This will happen directly through the adoption of urban political action patterns to correct specific social ills and it will be spurred indirectly as people search for institutions to help develop the consensus and to provide the social mobility which was obtained in the past through other institutions.

Another trend which will increase the amount of local political activity was identified by Kirkpatrick Sale in his recent book, Human Scale. He is one of many observers who sees a trend towards increased local control over government financing, activities, and services. Sale predicts that as worldwide resources diminish, we will be forced to curtail the role of the federal government, compelling local communities to assume new burdens.²⁴ Each of our communities will have to rely on its own capacities and resources.

This increase in local reliance will result in a direct increase in local political activity to make decisions on handling these new challenges. The increased local activity will have concomitant needs for a wide variety of information.

Sale's predictions are not far off from the current situation in the United States. President Reagan, the Libertarian Party, and many citizens would like to disentangle the federal government from several areas of current involvement.

A final general trend which will further contribute to the growth of citizen participation is the rise in influence of the mass media. More information is available to the public today than ever before in our history. Any abuse of power, error, or poor performance by government agencies is quickly communicated to the public.²⁵

This has stimulated citizen participation by making more people aware of more problems. Given the dominance of media in our society and the growing number of problems that government must address, it is unlikely that the impulse for involvement among citizens will abate.²⁶

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Citizen participation in the political process is a fact of life in rural and urban areas and the level of that participation is very likely to grow in the next decade. So just how does the rural public library make an effective response to citizen needs in this area? There is no one correct answer to this question. Appropriate effective responses will vary from community to community. Libraries must be willing to take an objective look at their community needs and plan their responses around those needs.

For many of us, the best response we could make in this area would be little or no response at all. Most rural public libraries are functioning with very limited resources. There may be several other higher-priority community needs which the library could address. The number of people in our communities who are actively involved in the political process is probably very small. Therefore, it is essential that a library go through a total systematic planning process before developing services in this or any other area.

Planning is a valuable activity for any organization. It offers a chance to step back and look at the entire picture, analyze existing needs and available resources, and plot the most effective course of action. Lack of planning is irresponsible for any agency dealing with public funds.

ALA's recent planning document, A Planning Process for Public Libraries, provides librarians with the tools to engage in effective planning. One of the beauties of this document is its adaptability and flexibility. It is a blueprint for designing and tailoring a planning process to fit individual local libraries and library systems. Total planning, whether done in a very limited or in a comprehensive fashion, is necessary before developing any new services.

While involved in overall planning there are a few factors concerning the political process which need to be considered in the light of individual local circumstances. Depending on the local situation, these factors may either enhance or detract from the case for designing services specifically for individuals and groups involved in this area.

The first of these factors is the total number of people who actively engage in the political process and also the characteristics of these individuals. There is a general agreement among sociologists that active participants in the political process are few in number and unrepresentative of the population overall.²⁷

We are talking about a group that represents 5-7% of our population.²⁸ They are the social elite--higher income brackets, better educated, and working in jobs with a higher occupational status. They are also probably already library users.

In one study of community groups involved in the political process, it was found that among the most active members, 82% were library users. This compares with a Gallup Poll survey done in the same time period which identified 51% of the general population as library users. (In this same study it was found that although 82% were library users, they generally did not use the library as an information sources for their citizen group activities.)²⁹

How do these factors affect the planning of services in this area? In planning, one must look at the people participating in their community. How many are participating? To what degree do they participate? What is the practice of local government; do they involve citizens in decision-making activities? How many citizen action groups exist locally; what are their sizes?

If participation is abnormally high, you should definitely develop services in this area, but even if the level of participation is typically low, there may be other factors present which will justify the application of library resources to this area.

"Even through politically involved individuals do not use the library for information concerning political activities, they are already library users." Is this true of your community? Who are the politically active people? Are they library users? If so, what library services do they use?

If this group is already using your library for political information there is no need to concentrate any further resources in this area. If they are not, they should be a group which are easily reached. Most likely, they are either already users of the library or are people with a background such

that they would not feel uncomfortable using the library. A limited effort on the library's part could reach a large number of potential users of information services.

A second factor to be considered is the social responsibility which the public library has to provide access to information to every individual in the community.

Only those at the lower end of the social hierarchy need to actively participate in order to generate power. Large corporate interests, for example, have ample power without any "participation." They can usually promote their self-interest successfully through the use of corporate resources and without the sacrifice of much personal time or energy. On the other hand, individual citizens often have to participate at considerable personal sacrifice.³⁰

This also applies to access to information. Money and other resources can buy this access. Public libraries have a responsibility to actively create a more equitable access for all individuals and groups who are to participate.

A third factor to consider is the two-fold way in which citizen participation groups deal with information. They not only are consumers of information, but they also disseminate information to a wide spectrum of the community on a broad range of public policy issues.³¹

Despite the fact that most citizen groups are only interested in promoting their own viewpoint, they are all in the business of informing the public. Government-initiated citizen involvement groups have this same goal, a goal which is also shared by public libraries.

Although only 5-7% of the population is actively involved in political participation, there is another sub-group of approximately 60% that play spectator roles.³² These spectators want to keep informed, making the citizen action and citizen involvement groups, because of their information-generating activities, valuable allies of the library.

The final two factors which should be considered when planning services in this area are political in nature. The first of these involves the attitude of local governments toward participation and the other concerns the development of long-term community support for the library program.

The growth of citizen participation to meet the two needs of a growing bureaucracy is characterized by a significant polarity in the meaning of participation. In one sense, participation is a control mechanism when citizens perform a monitoring function. On the other hand, it is an assistance function regarding agency decisions. Ironically, participation may represent either a threat to or a way of reducing threats to an agency. Many government officials are ambivalent about it.³³

This factor should never determine what services are or are not provided, but it may alter the manner in which the services are delivered. If local governmental attitudes are decidedly anti-participation, promotion of any library services in this area might be kept rather low-key.

The final consideration when determining to what extent the library should provide support for activities of people engaged in the political process involves looking at the value of developing support relationships with all organizations in the community. Edward Howard, in the publication, Local Power and the Community Library, suggests that it should be the goal of every

public library administrator to develop positive sanctional relationships with all organizations in the community. He feels that this should be accomplished by making personal contacts with community organizations.³⁴ This is a very desirable goal and, because of the fact that they all are consumers of information, it should be easily obtainable with citizen action, citizen involvement and traditional political party groups.

SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

After looking at political participation in America and considering systematic planning for total library services, let us now look at the various services and programs public libraries are currently providing to meet the needs in this area and also look at services and programs we might provide to meet the needs through the 1980's. For the purpose of looking at the various needs in this area, we will refer back to Langton's categories of citizen participation.

Obligatory participation is the one type of political involvement that no one avoids--the participation which is compulsory by law.

The major support which libraries can provide in this area is to make available information to increase public understanding of these obligations of citizenship. Basic legal information is essential: information to aid citizens in understanding and interpreting the laws to facilitate informed compliance. Access to sources of in-depth information should be provided: interlibrary contacts with law libraries should be developed and nurtured, lists of the nearest law libraries which are open to the public should be kept, and access to associations providing specialized information should be made available.

Public programs are one way of disseminating information in this area. The most popular topic presented is on preparing the individual tax return. Firms which prepare taxes for a fee will usually provide a qualified speaker at no charge, just for the exposure which they receive.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has been distributing a set of reproduceable federal tax forms to most public libraries over the last couple years. The availability of these forms should be promoted widely through the local media.

Depending on local needs, libraries may wish to become a sponsoring agency for the IRS's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. The IRS will train volunteers to assist individuals with the completion of tax return forms.

Another need connected with obligatory participation is one of prospective jurors. They are often asked to sit for long hours awaiting jury selection. Escape from extreme boredom is a dire need of these people. Many would love to have access to a variety of magazines, paperbacks, and other materials, which could be provided by the library along with promotional flyers. This would be a perfect opportunity for a county library system to reach a wide geographic and socioeconomic cross-section of people.

Langton's second category of political participation is electoral participation. This refers to our entire process of electing representatives and leaders. Although the percentage of the voting age population which is actually voting has been declining since 1962, more people participate in this manner than in the final two categories.

The information needs of those involved in electoral participation fall into three categories: those of the political parties, those concerning voter registration and those connected with understanding specific issues and/or candidates. Political parties provide the substance around which our electoral system revolves, but because they are comprised of complex local groups, with a wide variety of information needs, we will look at their needs when we discuss citizen involvement and citizen action groups.

Voter registration information is basically legal information, not unlike that concerning obligatory participation. Thanks to the movement towards universal suffrage and the elimination of most barriers to registration, in many states it simply involves completing a form and mailing it in. These forms are often provided by the library.

Once registered to vote, people need to understand issues and candidates in order to make informed decisions. This need has been a focus of programming in many public libraries. Issues have been presented, analyzed and debated. Candidates have been exposed to voters in a variety of settings, ranging from a structured debate to an informal tea.

Decisions have to be made locally on whether election-type programming is worth the effort. It involves a great deal of staff time in planning, publicizing, and staging the event. A couple questions which may help one reach a decision include: What is the level of public interest in the issue/election? and What other alternatives do citizens have for obtaining the information?

Besides providing a forum for voters to become informed, an election program may have the added benefit of making new friends of the library. One

of those candidates will win the election and she is likely to remember the valuable program presented by the library.

The entire electoral process is kept viable by the political parties. They nominate the candidates, decide on the issues, raise money for the campaign, and conduct the election. Political parties, old and new, work within the established electoral framework, yet they are groups with characteristics and information needs very similar to the citizen action and citizen involvement groups which make up Langton's final two categories of participation. All of these groups have the final goal of influencing the actions of government. They all organize people and seek, process, and disseminate information.

The major differences between the three are found in the roots of their organizing. Political parties exist to sustain and work within the electoral process. Citizen involvement groups are initiated and controlled by government for specific administrative functions. As stated earlier, these functions fall into one of two categories: to provide increased citizen involvement to improve decision-making or to monitor the actions of an administrative agency. Citizen involvement groups of rural local government will almost always fall into the former, positive input category.

In contrast to citizen involvement groups, citizen action groups are initiated and controlled by the citizens themselves, usually to achieve some specific purpose. These groups use lobbying, public education, protest, public advocacy, etc., to achieve their ends.

All three types of groups deal with a wide variety of public policy issues, including: education, recreation, land use and zoning, the environment, energy use, development and redevelopment, transportation, employment,

the aging, housing, and the delivery of health and other public services. Citizen action groups usually exist to promote a specific aspect of these issues, while citizen involvement groups and political parties must concern themselves with the entire issue. (Although, in reality, citizen involvement groups and political parties are often dealing with or reacting to a specific aspect, while citizen action groups must remain aware of the overall issue.)

All citizen groups share some basic organization information needs, completely divorced from the issue-related information with which they must deal. These needs include effective organizing, administrative management, internal communication, public relations, fund-raising, and research and information-gathering techniques.^{35,36,37,38} These information needs are often not even recognized by the group or their leaders, who are primarily concerned with the issues.

All of these groups are organized for the purpose of processing information. The group members begin by seeking information, both locally and beyond. They then manipulate this information in various ways, depending on the group's organizational patterns and objectives. They finally disseminate this information to members of their own group, members of related groups, the general public, the media, and/or decision-makers. It is disseminated through a variety of channels, including personal and telephone contacts, meetings, letters, newsletters, flyers, and press releases.³⁹ The final goal is to influence the actions of government.

LIBRARY SERVICE TO GROUPS

Groups connected with the political process represent only a fraction of all the organizations in a rural community. It is the variety and interaction

of all organizations which provides a community with one distinctive characteristic. This pattern of organizations is a major facet of any given community, yet the public library literature on service to organizations is extremely sparse.

Edward Howard's theory of organizational sanction was referred to earlier. He feels that community organizations give sanction, either approval or disapproval, to library programs. He suggests that a major goal for public library administrators should be to develop positive sanctional relationships with all organizations in the community. Although admitting that this goal can never be reached, he feels that it is possible through planned, purposeful action to decrease the number of organizations that are in opposition and to increase the number that are neutral or supportive.⁴⁰

Howard states that organizations are a convenience for the public library, because they offer multiple receivers for each instance of library service.⁴¹ Another person who typifies this attitude is Jerry Kidd. In an essay published in ALA's Information for the Community, he suggests that in order to provide better community information services, public libraries need to become more orientated towards serving organizations.⁴² Roger Greer and Martha Hale, in their Community Analysis Institutes (held across the country in the late 1970's), advocated that it was the role of the public library to serve as a special library for community organizations.

There are many local instances of serving organizations, which have, unfortunately, never been shared in the professional literature. It is an area of service which should be provided in some degree by public libraries of all sizes, rural as well as urban.

Citizen action groups are easy to serve because of their nature--formation around a specific aspect of an issue. Group members and leaders are making an active statement of their interest just by becoming involved. The leaders, especially of a newly-formed group, have immediate information needs which should be capitalized on and filled quickly by the public library. They will find a source for their information needs, and, if left to their own instincts and practices, that source will probably not be the library.

Service to citizen involvement groups may not be as easy. Members usually have been asked to serve, therefore their information needs might not seem as pressing. Yet, they still need information to accomplish their task. The public library that can provide information to meet the actual needs of this group has the added benefit of increasing the value of the library in the eyes of the local government officials who are working with the citizen group.

Information services to agencies of local government, although not directly connected with the theme of this topic, can be extremely valuable, especially for rural county system service to local municipal officials and staff. Not only can practical and needed information be delivered, but how could the library better communicate its value as an information provider than by proving it through action. Communicating this value to the people who control the purse strings can be extremely beneficial.

A search of the literature does not identify any formal rural public library services aimed at serving the needs of groups involved in the political process. Formal services are in existence at the Dallas Public Library, the Seattle Public Library, and the Tulsa City-County Library System. Each of these programs have individual differences, but they share

many similarities. All three serve both citizen involvement and citizen action groups, providing needed information on issues of public policy. In Seattle and Tulsa the services were developed through the cooperation of other community organizations and the provision of service relies on the continued assistance of these organizations. A volunteer or graduate student is assigned to the citizen group in a consulting relationship. The service at Tulsa also involves the presentation of organizational skills workshops for citizen groups.⁴³

The limited literature on service to citizen groups does agree on steps which public libraries should take to initiate this service. The first of these steps involves having available current information on citizen groups. This information can be obtained by reading newspapers, attending group meetings, reading citizen group publications (newsletters, flyers, brochures, and reports), and by maintaining community information files.⁴⁴ However, the maintenance of complete information files on community organizations may involve cost or staff time demands which outweigh the benefits. Other local needs may prohibit the keeping of comprehensive, current files.⁴⁵

Step number two is promotion. In developing this service, continual, indirect communication must be maintained with citizen groups. This involves the whole spectrum of public relations similar to that which would be used for promoting other services. Brochures, feature stories in local newspapers, direct mailings, and public service announcements are all valuable.^{46,47}

The next step concerns direct contact with citizen groups. This should involve attending open meetings and conducting in-depth interviews with group leaders.^{48,49}

This direct contact is very time-consuming and probably will have to be limited to a couple demonstration projects at first.⁵⁰ Only one liaison person should be developed in each group, eliminating unnecessary duplication of effort. The interview with the liaison should be conducted in-depth to identify specific goals, objectives, activities, and information needs of the group.

Attending group meetings can also be valuable. Not only can one learn about the group, but library support can be offered for the group's efforts. It will enable group members to expand their concept of the library and think of the library's services in terms of their political group activities.

The final step, obviously, is to deliver to the liaison, practical information and materials to meet his identified needs. No expense should be spared in locating and obtaining valuable information as quickly as possible. The liaison will satisfy his information need in some manner and if the library cannot meet his time demands, he will go elsewhere.

Just how should the average rural public library attempt to serve the needs of individuals and groups in the political process? Obviously, there is no simple answer to this question, but there are several conclusions which can be drawn and effective service responses which can be identified.

As stated earlier, planning for total library service is essential. Each library should know exactly in what direction they are going to serve their overall community before they consider providing any new services.

Assuming that your library's plan includes providing reference and information services, establish an image as an information center. Use the media, distribute flyers, talk up your information service, and, most important, provide every person who walks in or telephones with the information they need or a referral to another source which can provide it.

All elements of participation have very definite information needs. Firmly establishing the image of the public library as a quality information source is the single most effective step one can take toward meeting the information needs connected with the political process.

It has been pointed out that most areas of participation involve public policy issues. To participate, citizens need information in this field. All public library collections should provide basic public policy information in all areas, but especially reflecting local concerns. Librarians must read local newspapers, identify emerging issues, and acquire information and materials on those issues before the requests come over the desk.

The need of general organizational information by citizen groups has been discussed. Library collections should include practical information in this area, covering effective organizing, public relations, fund-raising, and other related topics. The success of a citizen action group may depend more on their organizational skills than on the issues.

When developing a total plan for the library, serious consideration should be given to serving the needs of the community through direct service to groups and organizations. Contacts should be made with community organizations on a regular basis. The purpose of these contacts would be to learn about the goals and activities of the organization, to inform the organization of the goals and services of the library, and to identify needs of the organization which can be met by the library. Citizen participation groups should be included in the contacts.

Finally, remain sensitive to local needs. If there is widespread misunderstanding concerning some future tax law, plan a program to provide the

needed information. If a major issue arises around a local election campaign, design a display with materials to enable citizens to make an informed decision. And if a parents group forms to fight a proposed school closing, contact the leader and provide her with information to support their effort.

As long as rural libraries in America are suffering under the strain of inadequate funding, serving the needs of the political process will never be a primary goal. Other, more immediate library and information needs will be given higher priorities. As rural libraries continue to improve their services in all areas, many will find that through limited effort they can meet most of the information needs of individuals and groups participating in the political process.

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