

ECONOMIC BRIEF NO. 12

The Costs of Political Participation

This series of economic briefs explores fundamental concepts in economics and community and economic development.

Economists have an explanation for why so many people do not bother to vote and why politics seems to be dominated by special interests. At the root of that explanation is the observation that political participation is not costless.

Consider the simple act of voting. Going to the polls entails costs. Sometimes the costs are quite significant, as when a physician takes time away from her practice and forgoes the fees that otherwise would have been earned. For many others, the

satisfaction in knowing one has done her civic duty.

But if the benefits are reckoned in terms of discernible improvements in one's personal or family well-being, it may not be unreasonable to expect that well-being will not be much affected by the outcome of an election. This is particularly true for the average person in a country where the differences between political parties and candidates are perceived to be relatively small.

For a physician, and other highly paid professionals, it may actually be less costly and more effective to contribute to the American Medical Association's lobbying fund (or that of a similar organization) than to go vote.

Lobbying is an example of intense political participation. Generally, the greater the intensity, the greater the costs. It follows, therefore, that one would expect that those who engage in intense political participation are those who can foresee significant benefits from achieving certain desired policy outcomes.

Most political lobbies represent relatively narrow interests because it is less costly to organize a small group with narrow

interests than a large group with broad interests. Moreover, the benefits to each member of the interest group are likely to be much greater if the group is seeking some exclusive privilege. Consumers, for example, who might together realize billions of dollars in benefits from certain political reforms, are unlikely to organize and lobby for those reforms because the benefits to each individual consumer would be too small to justify becoming politically active.

The economic perspective on political participation suggests that if one wishes to increase participation, it is necessary to lower participation costs or to increase perceived individual benefits, or both.

There is no clear, straightforward approach to increased perceptions about benefits of participation. Hence, most policy effort is directed at lowering costs. The so-called Motor-Voter Act passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton earlier this year is an example of an attempt to lower participation costs. It seems probable that additional efforts to lower the costs of political participation are the only viable way to reduce the influence of special interests on political decision making.

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costs are much less, but they are still greater than zero. Opportunities must be forgone, even if it is only the opportunity to lie on the couch and snooze. If we stipulate that the potential voter must also invest some time in becoming informed about the choices, the opportunities that must be forgone increase.

It is a basic postulate of economics that a rational person does not voluntarily incur costs unless she believes benefits to be gained are at least equal to the costs. The benefits from political participation simply may be self-