



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Boston Globe

## A civics lesson for the state

December 9, 2006

NOT EVERY NEW governor has a transition team focusing on civic engagement. But one of Deval Patrick's campaign themes was to inspire people who had checked out of public life to "check back in," and he now has commissioned a high-powered task force to imbed that principle in his administration.

It is a worthy goal. The need is apparent from the widespread alienation that hobbles civic life at all levels. As an example, Patrick's campaign succeeded in organizing grassroots support to a degree not seen in Massachusetts probably since 1982, but the overall voter turnout last month of 56.2 percent, while slightly above the 2002 figure, showed that three out of seven potential voters still didn't bother to cast a ballot.

In hearings this week around the state, the 15 members of the working group heard numerous pleas for voting reforms, including same-day registration and tallying mechanisms that are easy to use and tamper-proof.

But the members also heard suggestions for many other initiatives, such as: efforts to encourage mentors for the 10,000 young people looking for them, a civic "welcome wagon" when new people move to town, creation of a state ombudsman or a 311 phone line for problems with state and local services, the use of volunteers to do everything from tutoring MCAS students to clearing park trails, far better efforts to help ex-convicts become productive citizens, encouraging more diversity among young people who participate in student government day, and others.

Patrick acknowledged yesterday in a telephone interview that one goal of this initiative is political -- to be able to call upon organized groups of citizens to support his legislative proposals, for instance. But the larger goal, he said, is to create a two-way street in which government listens to and responds to its citizens far better, while at the same time challenging the citizens to become more involved in solving their own problems: "to get people to take greater responsibility." Patrick said he has in mind creating a central office of civic engagement within his office of public liaison at the State House.

Since the time of the late Senator Paul Tsongas, there have been few attempts by political leaders in Massachusetts to add concrete results to the rhetoric of civic engagement. This is odd, because Boston is without question a center of social entrepreneurship. And Patrick has recruited some of the lions from that world onto his task force, including Ron Bell from Dunk the Vote, Alan Khazei from City Year, Gail Snowden from the Boston Foundation, David Kravitz from the blog BlueMassGroup, Eric Schwartz from Citizen Schools, and Tripp Jones from the Mentor Network.

There is potential here for a basic improvement in the relationship of the government to its citizens -- if Patrick and his team can provide effective leadership. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2006 The New York Times Company