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## CIVIC PARTICIPATION AMONG LITHUANIAN-AMERICANS

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Political behavior has been investigated extensively by numerous social researchers. Investigations have studied in depth the determinants of voter turnout such as attitudes toward political events (Campbell, 1976; Almond and Verba, 1963; Rokeach and Kliejunas, 1972; and Kitt and Gleicher, 1954). The relationship of a variety of demographic variables, such as age, sex, and dwelling area have also been found to affect voting behavior (Dietz, 1977). In addition, behavioral predictors of voter turnout have been assessed. Some of the most important predictors appear to be past political activity and frequency of past voting (Campbell, 1976 and Dietz, 1977).

An important phenomenon that has not been adequately taken into consideration in these studies is civic participation in the ethnic communities. In the summer of 1980 the Ethnic Community Services (ECS) organization of Chicago undertook the task of attempting to determine the extent of political involvement in the Lithuanian community and to assess the factors which may influence civic participation among members of that group. Lithuanians residing in the selected area of Marquette Park on Chicago's southwest side are known to be quite active in cultural, social, and political organizations within the community. It was hoped that the ECS study would provide information about the degree of political involvement outside the Lithuanian community and serve as an indicator of the problems in civic participation that need to be remedied.

### SURVEY METHOD

The type of information that was collected from the respondents during the ECS study can be categorized into three general factors: 1.) demographic variables which describe the respondents, 2.) attitudes, and 3.) civic behavior. The measures in the survey were primarily based on measures used in previous studies which were found to be important indices of civic participation. Questions were also included to determine the extent of citizenship and percentage of voter registration among Lithuanians.

The questionnaire was designed to include multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Lithuanians living in the postal zip code area of 60629 were selected for interviewing using a multi-stage sampling method (Moser and Kalton, 1971). Of 84 individuals approached, 77 agreed to participate in the survey; thus, the response rate was at a high rate of 92%. The length of each interview session was approximately 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted by a group of social science students, hired for the study during the months of August and September of 1980. The survey sessions were held in the privacy of the respondents' homes.

### RESULTS

#### I. Demographic variables.

The average age of the interviewed individuals was 64 years. The median age was 68, and the range was 21 to 90. Thus, the sample represented a skewed distribution in the population, where half of the people are 68 years of age or above. 64% were female, 36% — male. 55% were married, 30% were widows or widowers, 11% — single, and 4% — divorced. 26% had never completed high school, 36% were high school graduates, 11% had attended a university of technical school, 15% had completed the university, and 12% had completed a professional school. These data indicate a wide diversity of educational background. At the time of the study only 29% were employed.

72% were willing to report their annual income. A large proportion of these, specifically 45%, receive an annual income below \$5,000. The low income level is not surprising in light of the fact that the majority of the interviewed individuals were retired. 22% receive an income between 20 and 30 thousand dollars annually.

A significant majority, 85%, were born in Lithuania, 10% in the U.S., and 5% elsewhere. 88% of those who were born outside the U.S. responded to the question "When did you arrive to the U.S.?" Of these, 7% arrived before 1915, 1% in 1940, 71% between 1948 and 1954, 21% after 1959. These data indicate that the majority of Lithuanians in this particular community were political refugees who left Lithuania during World War II. 7% of the respondents have lived in Chicago for at least 51 years, 44% for 30 to 36 years, 26% for 20 to 29 years, and 23% for less than 18 years. Thus, this information suggests a high level of residential stability among the Lithuanians. This is confirmed by the fact that only 5% reported that they do not plan to remain in Chicago. 75% of all the interviewed people are home-owners, 25% are renters.

It appears that the majority of Lithuanians in the Marquette Part area have been able to acculturate sufficiently to be able to communicate in English. 66% reported that they have at least some reading knowledge of English, and 88% are able to converse in English. However, a significant majority, 78% of these individuals still regard Lithuania as their homeland, whereas 20% reported the U.S. as their homeland. 2% said they have two homelands, one of which is Lithuania.

The following list indicates the names and frequency of newspapers read:

	Every day	Almost every day	Seldom	Never
Chicago Sun-Time	29%	10%	16%	45%
Chicago Tribune	21%	8%	23%	48%
Draugas	81%	4%	6%	9%
Naujienos	24%	7%	17%	52%

The Lithuanians who were interviewed are much more involved in Lithuanian organizations than in non-Lithuanian: 61% belong to one or more Lithuanian organizations, 32% belong to none, 7% did not respond to the question. In contrast, only 7% belong to non-Lithuanian organizations, 91% do not belong to any non-Lithuanian organization and 2% did not respond.

## II. Attitudes

How well do you think you understand the nation's problems?

Understand well	31%
Understand somehow	62%
Do not understand	2%
No response	5%

How well do you think you understand the city's problems?

Understand well	31%
Understand somehow	57%
Do not understand	4%
No response	8%

How interested are you in the upcoming presidential elections?

Very interested	64%
A little interested	23%
Not interested	6%
No response	7%

How important is it to you which particular candidate will be elected president?

Very important	53%
Somewhat important	19%
Not at all important	13%
Don't know	8%
No response	7%

The next four questions were based on a measure of general political attitude used by Campbell (1976).

How regularly do you follow American government and political events?

Regularly	62%
Time to time	26%
Never	9%
No response	3%

Government officials don't really care what people think.

Strongly agree	31%
Somewhat agree	21%
Neither agree nor disagree	22%
Somewhat disagree	5%
Strongly disagree	16%
No response	5%

Voting is the best way to influence governmental decisions.

Strongly agree	77%
Somewhat agree	13%
Neither agree nor disagree	1%
Somewhat disagree	1%
Strongly disagree	3%
No response	5%

It isn't so important to vote when you believe that the more desirable candidate will not win.

Strongly agree	10%
Somewhat agree	8%
Neither agree nor disagree	27%
Somewhat disagree	10%
Strongly disagree	38%
No response	7%

How much do you think that the activities and decisions of the federal government have on your day-to-day life?

Large effect	31%
Some effect	40%
No effect	18%
Don't know	4%
No response	7%

The following two questions are based on a measure of national pride used by Almond and Verba (1963).

In general, what do you like best about this country? (Individuals were asked to freely name three things. The following items were named.)

	Frequency item mentioned
Opportunities for advancement	49
Freedom	65
Environment	3
Government	5
Entertainment opportunities	2
Welcome extended to immigrants	1

In general what three things do you dislike the most about this country?

Government	23
Law and order	49
Social problems	20
Health system	5
Unequal opportunities	3
Economic situation	8

Since Kitt and Gleicher (1954) found that attitude toward the community can be a determinant of political activity, the following question was asked:

In general, how often do you like living in this area?

It's a good idea	88%
It's fair	9%
It's a bad idea	1%
No response	2%

The next four questions were based on a measure of civic competence used by Almond and Verba (1963):

Let's say that the government was considering a regulation that you considered very unjust or harmful. What would you do?

Mention something	60%
Nothing	29%
Don't know	3%
No response	8%

Those who mentioned something were asked the following question:

How likely is it that you would succeed in changing this regulation?

Probably would succeed	7%
Maybe successful, maybe not	32%
Probably not successful	18%
Don't know	22%
No response	21%

Everyone was asked the following question:

If such a case arose, how likely is it that you would try to do something about it?

Probably would do what I can	43%
I might do something	4%
Probably would not do anything	17%
Don't know	12%
No response	24%

Have you ever tried to influence a governmental decision?

Yes	12%
No	75%
Don't know	3%
No response	10%

### III. Civic behavior

Those who were born outside of the U.S. were asked the following question:

Do you have U.S. citizenship?

Yes	71%
No	29%

The 29% who did not have U.S. citizenship were asked the following:

Which country's citizenship do you have?

Lithuania's	90%
Canada's	10%

Those who had obtained U.S. citizenship were asked the following:

How long did you reside in the U.S. before obtaining American citizenship?

Less than 7 years	53%
8 to 11 years	29%
19 to 27 years	11%
No response	6%

All citizens were asked the following: Are you registered to vote?

Yes	90%
No	10%

(Those who were registered to vote were asked the following:)

In which election do you usually vote?

	Presidential	Illinois state	Chicago city	Primaries
Yes	98%	90%	86%	69%
No	2%	10%	12%	25%
Don't know	-	-	-	4%
No response	-	-	2%	2%

Did you vote in the last presidential election?

Yes	92%
No	8%

Did you vote in the last city elections?

Yes	78%
No	22%

In general do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?

Republican	27%
Democrat	29%
Independent	26%
Don't know	6%
No response	12%

The following five questions are based on Campbell's (1976) measure of political activity:

Do you ever discuss U.S. elections or politics with others?

Yes	66%
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No	31%
No response	3%

Did you ever participate at an American political meeting or dinner?

Yes	12%
No	87%
No response	1%

Did you ever work for any American political party or for any political candidate at election time?

Yes	1%
No	99%

Did you ever contribute money to support a political candidate or party?

Yes	23%
No	75%
No response	2%

Did you ever send a letter or telegram to a government official?

Yes	66%
No	31%
No response	3%

## DISCUSSION

The information collected by the ECS survey indicates that, in general, the Lithuanian-Americans in the Marquette Park area are highly interested in civic affairs, especially as seen by their stated attitudes. An attitude of concern is reflected by the fact that a majority of the respondents said they understand the problems of the nation and of the city. Most respondents regularly follow American government and political events and also revealed a strong interest in the upcoming presidential elections. Although approximately half of the respondents expressed some cynicism about government officials, most of those surveyed still believe that it is important to vote during elections. Attempting to influence government decisions seems particularly important when the governments' decisions are perceived as having an effect on everyday life. However, the attempt to influence government decisions appears to be limited to voting, as seen in the results of the civic competence measure. Most respondents expressed a desire to try to change unacceptable regulations, yet their reports show a lack of initiative in actually attempting to change the regulation.

Thus, it seems that the Lithuanians that were surveyed doubt their ability to influence government decisions other than by voting.

For the surveyed group, the most attractive aspects of America are freedom and the opportunities for socio-economic advancement. However, in contrast, they are most critical of those aspects which would tend to limit freedom and socio-economic advancement, namely law and order and weaknesses in government authority.

In summary, then, the respondents expressed much displeasure with the government. However, they are satisfied with what they have gained in the U.S. and still believe that voting is an opportunity to change the situation for the better.

Despite the reported high level of interest in civic affairs, the actual civic participation is not consistent in corroborating the reported attitudes. 29% of those who were born outside the U.S. never attained U.S. citizenship. That means that approximately one out of every four Lithuanians who were interviewed are not U.S. citizens and cannot fully participate in the American political system. Since a high proportion of those without U.S. citizenship have retained their Lithuanian citizenship, it may be possible that these people are reluctant to forfeit their original citizenship because of a strong sense of loyalty to Lithuania. The fact that so many respondents still regard Lithuania as their homeland seems to support that notion. An additional factor may be the perceived complexity of the citizenship process.

Those who are U.S. citizens, i.e., 76%, showed a high rate of active participation in civic activities. 90% of those with U.S. citizenship reported that they were registered to vote and 88% had voted in the last presidential election. This means that 68% of all the Lithuanians surveyed were registered to vote and 67% of the total actually voted in the presidential election. These data highly contrast the markedly low level of interest in political affairs among the general public. Paul Recer in *U.S. News & World Report* (1980) reported that in 1976, more than 46% of total Americans of voting age chose not to vote. One of the problems he cited was difficulty in registering. The present study shows that once Lithuanians have taken the steps to become U.S. citizens, they highly utilize their rights to register for the vote and to actually vote in

presidential elections. A lower percentage of respondents reported that they usually vote in Illinois state, Chicago city, and in the primaries. However, the numbers indicate that still proportionately more Lithuanians vote in each of these elections than do Americans nationwide in the presidential elections.

Although a high proportion of Lithuanians utilize their voting rights, the data indicate that their political activities seem to be limited to discussion of U.S. elections or politics with others, writing letters or sending telegrams to government officials, and participating in elections. These findings are similar to those found by Campbell (1976), which indicated that political activities are restricted to those that require a minimum amount of effort. A large number of Lithuanians, though, make an effort to directly inform government officials of their concern about certain issues.

Kornhauser (1959) has noted that individuals and groups who are isolated from the larger society show a disproportionate amount of political detachment and irregularity. Campbell (1966) has defined social detachment as the failure to achieve a sense of belonging in the dispersed social body within which political affairs take place. Campbell claims that individuals characterized by such detachment and who do not belong to any of the social organizations which characterize American urban life are likely to care little about political matters.

The results of the present study show that although most Lithuanians do not belong to any non-Lithuanian organizations, over 60% belong to at least one organization within the Lithuanian community. Given the high level of interest in civic affairs, a sense of social attachment may actually be averted by the network of social support that the community provides for its members. It is possible that the Lithuanians in the surveyed area have a high level of underlying social awareness that is expressed by active participation in social, cultural, and political affairs. Another possibility may be that membership in social groups acts as an impetus for becoming involved in civic activities.

## CONCLUSION

The ECS study merely explored the various attributes of civic participation among ethnic Lithuanians in the Marquette Park area. Given the present description of political activity, attitudes toward political issues, and demographic variables, additional investigations could directly assess the relationship between the different factors, such as attitudes toward government officials and voting behavior. Such studies would help elucidate the determinants of political activity among Lithuanian Americans and point out the ways that participation in the American political process could be further strengthened.

Finally, it should be noted that the respondents in this survey were not a representative sample of all Lithuanian Americans, since the average age of the Lithuanians residing in the Marquette Park is high, as seen in the results of this survey. A number of younger families, especially those who are upwardly mobile, have left the city for the outlying suburbs. Although Marquette Park has one of the highest concentrations of Lithuanians of any community in North America, the results of the present study may not necessarily be a valid description of all Lithuanian Americans. Further investigations would provide a more complete picture of civic participation among members of this ethnic group.

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