


**Figure 2: 2004 United States non-partisan "Get out the Vote" poster, sponsored by AIGA.** Photo courtesy Peter Esko, AIGA Baltimore

**Sociality and Electoral Practice** Reform increasingly attempts to erase and remove social mechanisms from the electoral process. Ignoring and erasing sociality from electoral practice and interpretation not only does us an analytical disservice, but also leads to reforms that further contribute to voter disenchantment. Through such reforms electoral systems become more efficient, but also increasingly distant from the complexity of social existence. Electoral reforms leading up to the US presidential election of 2008, like so many others, are focused on increasing access and reducing error, equating more specific codification with accuracy in capturing the will of voters. Our voting system is not structured to take into account or understand the irreducible engagement between sociality and technology or the detrimental effects of flattening voters' nuanced and complex desires, values and perspectives.

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## Citizenship and Social Participation



### Voting for People with Psychiatric Disabilities

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The US presidential election presents a unique opportunity to engage historically marginalized groups in public discourse. Presidential elections, and this election in particular, are often able to spark interest in the political process among groups who are typically civically unaware, unengaged or disenfranchised, but we need not restrict our sights to only some underrepresented groups. There is potential to engage individuals experiencing any form of social marginalization, including the stigma of mental illness.

I am conducting a pilot study on voting, political participation and citizenship among individuals with psychiatric disability through the NIH-funded Center to Study Recovery in Social Contexts in collaboration with the Albany, NY-based Mental Health Empowerment Project, using a community-based participatory research framework. One of the goals of the Center to Study Recovery in Social Contexts is to ensure increased and sustained social participation for individuals with psychiatric disability. With the opportunity presented by the upcoming election, we are investigating the role of voting as potential entrée to political and social citizenship. Our immediate study will investigate attitudes, behaviors, activism and means to alleviate barriers to participation. Ultimately, this project is meant to explore many facets of citizenship, starting with voting as a central issue in national and international politics.

#### Stigma and the Vote

The stigma of mental illness underlies taken-for-granted assumptions about some citizens' ability to participate in the electoral process. Public discourse about disability in general, and psychiatric disability in particular, often retains historically-conditioned, biologized models of deviance and moral worth, questioning whether these individuals deserve to participate politically. Such assumptions share their origins with rhetoric that has accompanied many other social barriers to voting

throughout the history of the US. Whether enforced by law or by informal practice, racial, ethnic, religious, economic and gender differences have been used as justifications for exclusion. A number of social factors continue to disproportionately impact the legal voting rights of particular groups, such as state-specific regulations barring individuals with felony convictions from voting, which disproportionately impact African American men and those with psychiatric disability. Lack of home address often makes registration difficult for the homeless electorate, a group also disproportionately suffering from psychiatric disability. Additionally, nursing home, group home and hospital staff often make unsystematic or convenience-based decisions about whether eligible voters with psychiatric disability actually will have access to polling places or absentee ballots.

At a recent lecture at Columbia University Medical Center ("The Capacity to Vote of Persons with Mental Illnesses" delivered September 9, 2008), Appelbaum and Raud reported preliminary findings of a study of capacity to vote among individuals with serious mental illness. Using a test specifically geared toward assessing cognitive capacity to vote, they found

understand and address the social constraints that stand between individuals with psychiatric disability and the ballot?

#### Political Participation in a Capabilities Framework

With this study, we are reaching out to an often ignored population that is at high risk for marginalization and disenfranchisement, but has strong interests in the country's policies on health care and disability rights. This project takes the question of political participation and voting for individuals with psychiatric disability and reconceptualizes it within a capabilities framework (see Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* 2001 and *Inequality Reexamined* 1992). This framework, long applied to international development and poverty, emphasizes equal access to substantial freedoms, or "capabilities." Drawing upon recent work on social recovery (Hopper, "Rethinking Social Recovery in Schizophrenia," *Social Science & Medicine* 65:868-79; Ware et al, "Connectedness and Citizenship," *Psychiatric Services* 58:469-74), the objective of this study is to apply this framework to psychiatric disability, with a focus on political participation and voting as capabilities of citizenship.

### COMMENTARY

that well over 90% of individuals scored at the top levels of understanding and ability. This suggests that pervasive concerns about relevant cognitive capacity in this population are often misguided, and the few individuals with difficulty in areas impeding their ability to vote might best evaluated on a case-by-case basis. In other words, blanket misgivings about individuals with psychiatric disability at the voting booth are clearly unfounded. Taken-for-granted concerns about "capacity" to vote may well tell us more about societal levels of stigma than about individual neurological deficiency. Diminished capacity, in this sense, is a product of social constraints rather than individual disability. This conclusion begs the question: How can we pinpoint,

One pillar of citizenship in a democratic society is political franchise: the right and ability to participate in the election of representative government through the vote. Unfortunately, for many recipients of mental health services, structural barriers impede or discourage the exercise of that right, which prevents adequate representation and participation in this process. This not only disenfranchises these individuals and denies them a political voice, it also puts our political system at risk as an elected government that is not representative of its constituents. Barriers to participation can be multiple in nature: from systematic disadvantage related to institutional bureaucracies and logistics, to social

See *Citizenship* on page 8

**Citizenship**

*continued from page 7*

stigma and exclusion (noted above), to legislative barriers (Appelbaum, "I Vote. I Count," *Psychiatric Services* 51[7]:849-63; Belluck, "States Face Decisions on Who Is Mentally Fit to Vote," *New York Times* June 19, 2007). In addition to being a fundamental exercise of social membership, political participation is also an essential venue for social action and the ability to raise awareness, lobby for change or seek governmental funding for programs. It is a critical component of full equality and participatory parity. Just as health disparities have become an important focus of research in the United States, disability-linked disparities in social and political participation should also be brought to the attention of policymakers and researchers.

Political participation provides opportunities for participatory empowerment in several ways. Voting or preparing to vote may represent a first step in engagement with a broader social system; this contact may lead to lowering psychological and informational barriers as well as changing expectations for what level of participation should and can be attained. It may be seen as a possibility-enhancing experience and individuals who have participated can subsequently become inspirational examples for others. Opening up the "realm of the possible" is key in the capa-

bilities approach, and peer support related to voting and participation could fit well into this model.

Voting and participation can also have substantial effects on actual political power, which can be used to provide voice to the concerns of people with psychiatric disability, both health-related and in general. A common conceptualization of this power involves the assertion, "I vote, therefore elected officials listen to me, and they have to listen to me if they want my vote again." That one vote counts as much as any other is an empowering component of democratic equality. Consequently, as addressing structural barriers to participation through political influence and activism becomes more possible, a positive cycle of civic engagement can develop. Voting can lead to broader arenas of participation, organization and activism, such as running for office. Increased presence in political arenas for individuals with psychiatric disability is likely to increase social awareness and perhaps lower social barriers and stigma. Finally, as individuals with psychiatric disability increasingly participate in the political system, their increased expectations for full participation can extend to other life domains.

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**Hope**

*continued from page 5*

supporters. It is a much more general "we." It is this conscious conflation of the personal and the general that defines Obama's hope and that invites us all to replicate it as our own personal and specific hope. As I have argued elsewhere (*The Method of Hope* 2004), the power of hope resides in its capacity to replicate itself interactively from one person to another and from one moment to another. What makes this process of replication powerful is precisely the kind of substantive reorientation it generates in a specific person in a particular situ-

ation. It is the possibility of such replicative reorientation that has given Obama's campaign a hint of novelty, a hint of a new kind of relationality and solidarity across familiar social categories and boundaries.

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