Did You Vote Last Week?

Last week, voters in the City of Los Angeles went to the polls to pare down candidates for mayor, elect members of the city council, and various other citywide offices. At least some voters, anyway.

The results show that only 22 percent of registered voters made their choices last week. That's less than 15 percent of eligible voters in the entire city.

Drilling down even further, one of the mayoral candidates could have been elected with a majority of the votes cast, meaning that if one of them had garnered a little over 200,000 votes, he would have been elected. That would have amounted to being elected mayor of the second largest city in America with only 7 percent of the electorate!

It is a sad commentary when so few people determine the outcome of elections. And it is getting worse. The turnout last week of 400,000 voters was 100,000 less than in the last citywide mayoral primary election in 2001.

Many say that this is because it is so difficult for candidates to break through the media overload in Los Angeles. It is true that the headlines in the media tend to focus on the sensational, and there is certainly nothing sensational about elections.

There are those who say that there are so many things that compete for people's attention in L.A., making voting a low priority. There are many other reasons people give for this phenomenon in Los Angeles. But it is not only in Los Angeles.

On the same day last week, a special election in Sacramento to fill a vacancy in Congress resulting from the death of a popular congressmember attracted barely 25 percent of voters.

It is an epidemic that is not just an L.A. issue.

The civics answer is to get more people involved in the process. It is one that suggests that we should do more outreach. We should insist that the media provide better coverage. Candidates should make a better effort to make their campaigns relevant to voters. Lots of things can be done.

But there are other things we can do to improve the system as well. We should look at holding elections on weekends so that people do not have to choose between voting and working.

We should explore voting on more than one single day, so if something prevents people from voting--such as an emergency--on election day, there are other options.

We should no longer use the "absentee voter" term. It suggests that the people who do it are absent from the process. Perhaps "vote by mail" (as it is called in Oregon) or "early voting" (as in Texas) would attract more people to using it. And they are using it; in the special congressional election in Sacramento last week, more people voted absentee than those who showed up on Election Day.

More importantly, we in the business community must do a better job of communicating the importance of elections to our co-workers, our employees and our customers.

With 3.8 million people, L.A. is the second-largest city in the nation. With the largest seaport in the nation, L.A. is driving the national economy. With some of the highest business taxes in the nation, our business climate ranks lower than other big cities in America.

Elections matter.

Candidates can help stimulate more participation in the process by talking about the issues that are relevant to people, making their voices and their votes count.

And that's The Business Perspective.