

Primer on local government kicks off 20th year

The League of Women Voters began Civics 101 in 1997

Course offers an introduction to local government

It comes as trust in government, politics hits new lows



Jennifer Roberts John D. Simmons jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

i

Jennifer Roberts John D. Simmons jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

By Jim Morrill

jmorrill@charlotteobserver.com

Over the last 20 years, politics has become a tarnished brand. Some might say more tarnished.

Voter turnout has declined. Political parties have become more polarized. Trust in government is near an all-time low. Even the number of political science majors has dropped.

Twenty years after the Charlotte-Mecklenburg League of Women Voters launched Civics 101, a program designed to foster understanding about local government, the league is kicking off its latest edition.

[Registration starts](#) Tuesday for Civics 101, which runs through five sessions from Feb. 2 through March 1. The \$60 registration fee includes dinner on the final night.

Several people who've taken the course have gone on to hold public office, including Charlotte Mayor Jennifer Roberts.

"It helps citizens understand better how to be more effective in their community," said Roberts, a Democrat who took the course a decade ago. "It's terrific for citizen engagement and involvement. It also helps people understand how complex the governing system is."

Over the course of two decades, the class has helped hundreds of people learn the players and flow charts of local government in a county with scores of public officials and dozens of overlapping voting districts.

It's also been a time when by some measures, civic participation has fallen.

When Roberts was elected in November, for example, city turnout was less than 15 percent. In 1995, shortly before the first Civics 101 (and the year Republican Pat McCrory was first elected mayor) turnout was 33 percent.

Turnout isn't just dropping in Charlotte. National turnout in the 2014 off-year election was 36.3 percent. That was the lowest in 72 years.

"We see higher turnout when people are feeling hopeful and inspired," said Sunshine Hillygus, a political scientist at Duke University. "Unfortunately, there's so much polarization and distrust in government right now there's a sense that you can change the party in control but it's not going to have a fundamental impact."

While numerous studies show the nation is more polarized, political campaigns are dominated by negative ads and personal attacks.

"As the current (presidential) campaign shows, it now becomes an exchange of insults rather than civil discourse," said Susan Roberts, a political scientist at Davidson College.

Civics 101 will introduce participants to local government – city and county governments, Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools and state courts – as well as the media that cover them. While nobody sees it as an antidote to all that ails attitudes toward government and politics, some say it's a way to foster healthier debate.

“One of the challenges we have with the 140-character Twitter feed and sound bites on TV is a lot of issues get crystallized into a more simple decision to do this or not to do this,” said Jennifer Roberts.

“It’s much more complicated. I think Civics 101 helps people see that, especially about local government.”

Jim Morrill: 704-358-5059, @jimmorrill

CIVICS 101

Registration opens Tuesday for the latest edition of Civics 101, an introduction to local government sponsored by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg League of Women Voters.

Register at <http://goleaguego.org/Civics.html>. Participation will be on a first-come, first-served basis up to a maximum of 60 people. Cost is \$60.

The first class, on local courts, starts Feb. 2.

LWVC-M <http://goleaguego.org/>

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/politics-government/article52985965.html>