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St. Thomas Voter Apathy Linked to Politicians' Lack of Connection, Say Residents

With voter turnout in St. Thomas at just under 23% this election cycle, residents point to a disconnect between politicians and the community, citing a lack of grassroots engagement and dwindling campaign presence as key factors driving voter apathy

Election / **Published On November 11, 2024 07:38 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS — The difference was stark. Between early voting and ballots cast on Election Day, over half of St. Croix's registered voters participated in the democratic process. In contrast, just under 23% of those registered to vote on St. Thomas cast their ballots - nearly four out of every five St. Thomians who could vote, did not.

Additionally, St. Thomas did not field a full slate of candidates for the Sixth Constitutional Convention, with only four named candidates running for seven seats. The boards of Election and Education are [similarly undermanned](#).

When Consortium journalists asked several St. Thomians what they believe is behind the lack of voter participation, many spoke of youth apathy, a lack of faith in the system, and national trends. However, one factor was consistent among those who responded to our question – the lack of engagement by local politicians during campaign season.

"I don't think that people who are looking for office are connected to the voters anymore," said Glenn Nelthropp, the manager of Bushwackers in Crown Bay. He contended that residents in communities that are less densely populated are overlooked by politicians, a sentiment echoed by a woman sitting nearby who overheard the conversation.

Although she did not wish to be identified, the woman said her consistent voting behavior is because she grew up on the mainland with a grandmother who – before the Civil Rights Act was passed – was unable to vote, as was a large swathe of her Black counterparts. This personal and national family history, the woman said, was why she made sure to always vote.

However, she too believes that the candidates are not putting enough energy into their campaigning, and that is showing in the lackluster turnout. "My neighbor was a candidate, and he never knock on my door," the woman said, laughingly declining to confirm whether or not she included him on her ballot. She longed for the return of large community fish fries, and said that candidates need to spend more time on retail politics – meeting the voters where they are and discussing how they were going to work on pressing issues.

Eldrige Blake agreed. The longtime educator and top-ranked athlete said that on St. Croix, "they got on the street and they went to neighborhoods and they lobbied." Not so on St. Thomas anymore, he opined, especially in less densely-populated communities. "I don't live in town and I don't live in the projects... I didn't hear the rhetoric and the meetings," he said. All he saw were posters. It is no surprise therefore, Mr. Blake says, that the incumbents who sought reelection were successful.

Younger residents agreed. Another woman, who declined to be identified, shrugged off the question of voting by saying that no candidate had given her a reason to vote for them. She was more interested, she said, in being able to live a good life and be a good aunt to her nieces on St. Croix. Voting, she felt, was not an avenue for change.

Mr. Nelthropp vehemently disagreed with that sentiment. He advised younger residents to familiarize themselves with the issues faced by St. Thomians, and with the candidates seeking to address those issues via representation. "Be familiar with who's running, what they're offering, their background, what they have done or have not done – very important," he advised. He warned against choosing candidates based on popularity and not experience.

He, and others, also advocated for a return to more traditional campaigning methods, with prospective candidates engaging the voting public at the grocery store or post office and getting them energized and excited about the voting process.

Otherwise, St. Thomas risks having a minority of voters continue to dictate the trajectory of the island's political future.