

Institute for Policy Research

Jan Schakowsky

U.S. Representative
9th District, Illinois

Distinguished Public Policy
Lecture Series
2002

"Why Citizen Activism Matters:
The View from Washington"

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Design by Valerie Lorimer
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Foreword



U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky was an ideal choice to give the 2002 Distinguished Public Policy Lecture of Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research. IPR's theme for the year was "Citizenship and Public Policy," a subject encapsulated in Representative Schakowsky's distinguished record of public service.

Throughout her career, Jan Schakowsky has demonstrated how citizenship means taking responsibility for one's community — in her case, recognizing a public concern, analyzing possible solutions, organizing and empowering fellow citizens, and bringing about policy change. As a housewife, she organized a movement that forced manufacturers to record freshness data on food. Later, she carried her experience into state and federal government where she has been a powerful voice for citizens, especially those who are most in need of help — the elderly, persons with disabilities, victims of abuse, low-income people, and consumers.

In her lecture, Representative Schakowsky addresses the disconnect many Americans feel between government and their personal lives, and the inherent dangers that can arise from citizen disconnectedness from government. "There are many examples of where citizen activism has made a difference," she says, "but unless political participation increases, the American tradition of government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people' will change into government 'of the few, by the few, and for the few.' "

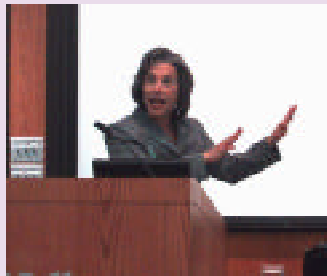
This lecture challenges researchers to study the impact of different levels of citizen participation on democratic governance. It also challenges citizens to exercise their rights —especially their right to vote — and, by example, to face their responsibilities as citizens.

Fay Lomax Cook
IPR Director



Jan Schakowsky

Jan Schakowsky represents Chicago's North Side and suburbs. She was elected to represent Illinois' 9th Congressional District in November 1998. Well-known in the Chicago area for her advocacy on behalf of the elderly, consumers, and



other citizens, she serves as chief deputy whip to Democratic Whip Nancy Pelosi.

Schakowsky serves on a number of congressional committees and task forces, including the House Financial Services and Government Reform committees and the Healthcare, Medicare, and Homeland Security

task forces.

Schakowsky is vice chair of the House Democratic Caucus Special Committee on Election Reform and the author of comprehensive legislation to protect consumers from predatory lenders and to safeguard the rights of victims of identity theft.

She has won a number of legislative victories to increase federal assistance for abused women and children, expand housing opportunities for low-income people, and assist small business owners and farmers.

Before being elected to Congress, Schakowsky served for eight years in the Illinois State Assembly and prior to that was a consumer advocate who began the fight that put freshness dates on products sold in the supermarket. She also served as program director of Illinois Public Action, the state's largest public interest organization.

**“Why Citizen Activism Matters:
The View from Washington”**

**Jan Schakowsky
U.S. Representative, 9th District
Illinois**

I am extremely honored to have been invited to give the Distinguished Public Policy Lecture at the very distinguished and prestigious Institute for Policy Research. My more normal venue when I'm in the district, this being an election year, is a Bingo Hall, parade, or fundraiser. I am very proud to be included among individuals I greatly admire like Paul Simon, John Porter, and Rebecca Blank, who have been previous speakers, and I am grateful for the luxurious opportunity to speak for longer than one minute, the usual allotted time on the floor of the U.S. House.

My route here to this podium as well as to the United States Congress began in the grocery store 33 years ago almost to this date. I tell you this story because it is one of connectedness—how I made the connection between my life and politics, because for the next few minutes I want to discuss, mainly by way of examples, the questions surrounding political engagement and how it affects public policy.

In 1969 I was a young housewife with two little children. Grocery shopping and food were a big part of my life. When the butcher at my local supermarket refused to tell me how old the meat was that I was considering purchasing, I got mad. At that time everything in the store was code dated. The four numbers at the top of the milk carton were disguised. You had to add the outer two numbers for the month, the inner two were the date, and the color of the twist on the end of the bread indicated its age. I got together with a small group of women who were determined to know how old our food was. There were six of us, including Lynne Heidt, now a realtor here in Evanston, and we modestly called our group the National Consumers Union. We were convinced that if we cared, all American women cared, and



we were right. Our very sophisticated, high-tech strategy for cracking the codes was to push stock boys against the shelves and demand that they tell us how they knew how to rotate the old product to the front. Eventually we collected hundreds of food codes and printed this book, the NCU Codebook. We sold 25,000 of these out of our recreation rooms for \$.50 apiece.



Our tactic was the store inspection. We would go into stores in twos and threes with a clipboard — a very subversive thing to do and one that would provoke the calling of security and even occasionally the police — dump outdated items in the shopping cart, things that were days, weeks, months, and even years beyond the date the manufacturer said they

could be sold. We'd push the cart up to the store manager and demand that he get rid of them. Sometimes we'd invite the news media to join us.

We knew nothing about public relations or even organizing. But we were the real thing, authentic suburban housewives, and our campaign drew wide attention. We even purchased one share of stock in the National Tea Company, a chain now defunct. At the stockholders meeting, when we raised the issue of food dating, the infuriated company president accused us of being either Communists or spies from Jewel. That made it on the Huntley-Brinkley Report that evening.

The rest is history. Jewel was the first to put dates on its house brands and advertise the virtues of freshness dating. Oscar Meyer started dating its packaged meat products. Now dates are pretty much universal. And while this victory didn't change the world in a fundamental way — although I must admit that on those days when the legislative process seems gridlocked, I do like to hang out in the dairy section of my Jewel and watch people check dates, just to prove that change can happen — this experience did change my life. It changed my perception of

myself from being an ordinary housewife to being an ordinary housewife who could make a difference. It was empowering in a fundamental and enduring way, enduring enough to take me through the steps necessary to arrive here today.

I am always a bit mystified by the disinterest and even disdain toward elected officials and government.

Every election I spend a great deal of time at el stops. In my first campaign for Congress, I established quotas for everyone working in the campaign and my quota was to touch 200 new people per day. Since it wouldn't look good to chase them down the street, I needed to be where there were lots of people; thus el stops every morning. I would greet people as they came in: "Good morning. I'm Jan Schakowsky, running for Congress. I hope you'll consider voting for me," and I would hand them a small flyer about me. That's it. And as an aside, as a result of that tiny encounter, I often see people later who tell me they "met" me at the Howard or Main Street el stops. The fact that they consider that interaction as having met me made me realize just how important it is to be there.

Invariably, however, there are people who notice me from far away and quite obviously make a wide swath around me — they don't want to get in the politician's space. And often they audibly and a bit smugly mutter something like "I'm not interested!" And I am always tempted to say, "Come back here for a minute and tell me what part of your life you're not interested in, because, like it or not, I am rather intimately involved in most of it."

If it's a young woman, and often it is a younger person, always a white person, I would ask her if she realized that I could be the individual who casts the deciding vote on whether she must carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. I would say to a fit young man, "You look like you probably go running or swimming. I make decisions about whether the air outside is fit to breathe or Lake Michigan water fit to swim in." Others I would ask if they have good health insurance, or diabetes and would appreciate stem cell research to cure it, or can afford a college education for their kids, or worry about terrorism or their mother affording prescription medicine, or want overhanging

stoplights along Ridge Ave (I can get pretty parochial myself).

In a way it's surprising that the vast majority of el stop riders seem so receptive to me considering that one out of three people eligible to vote are not registered; nearly 95% of potentially eligible voters 18 to 24 years old are not registered, plus 36% of all African Americans, 69% of persons with disabilities, 66% of Hispanics.

When I was making trouble in the grocery store, civic involvement was intense. Not only was the Viet Nam protest movement gearing up, but Ralph Nader had appeared as a spokesperson for the emerging consumer movement. Survey data going back to 1974 has tracked a steady decline in Americans' interest in politics and current affairs. The fraction of Americans who care about public affairs has dropped by roughly 20% over the past 25 years. The fraction of people who write their member of Congress in any given year or who sign a petition has declined by more than 20%. And the fraction of Americans who volunteer for a political party — never high to begin with — has dropped by more than half since the early 1970s; the number who attended a political rally or speech has fallen by more than a third as has those who attended a public meeting at which town or school affairs were discussed.

This data comes from a report of the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America, whose Director is Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*. The report is *Better Together*¹ and is described as the “distillation of a fruitful multi-year conversation around strategies for rebuilding our nation's stock of social capital — the community connections of trust and reciprocity that help make our schools work better, our neighborhoods safer, our residents happier and healthier, our economies more productive, and our public institutions of government more responsive.”

At a dinner I shared with Robert Putnam a few weeks ago, he reemphasized some chilling projections he has been making. Unless there is an intentional effort to increase civic participa-

¹*Better Together*. Report of the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Cambridge, 2000.

tion, the levels will only get worse. These young disconnected Americans will never vote in the numbers that their elders do today without implementing an aggressive strategy to engage them.

I don't pretend to know all of the factors that contribute to lack of participation or the certain ways to overcome barriers, but I offer a few suggestions and examples.

Clearly, the people at the el station who won't talk to me don't see enough of a connection between their lives and politics to make voting a priority. According to a 1998 Census Bureau study,² 21.5% of those who were registered but did not vote in 1996 said they didn't do so "because they could not take time off of work or school" or "because they were too busy." For those who name school or work as a problem, enlisting the cooperation or even requiring employers and school administrators to allow time for voting, even to encourage time for voting, could help. Twenty-six states require that private sector workers be given time off to vote. Illinois, like most of those, provides up to two hours. Twenty states give state workers time off. In Illinois, Election Day is a holiday for state employees.

We should eliminate the more obvious barriers to voter participation. Making all polling places handicapped accessible, allowing for provisional voting for people whose names don't appear on the polling lists, educating voters about the actual physical process, improving the voting machines themselves, perhaps making election day a holiday or changing the date to the weekend and allowing voters to register on election day, and expanding absentee and mail ballots are all changes that should be explored fully. In the 2000 election, six million Americans were denied the right to vote because they were turned away from the polls, unable to get to the polls because of accessibility issues, or had their ballots thrown out because of hanging chads, dimples, etc. There is a concerted effort in the Congress to pass meaningful election reform, and that is all to the good.

²Casper, Lynne M., and Loretta E. Bass. Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996. Current Population Reports, P20-504. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, 1998.



waitressing, working in a nursing home, and with a house cleaning service. Her conclusion was that one really can't live on those wages, even with the advantages that she had — being healthy and having no children to take care of. Her book was



written during the 2000 campaign for President, and one of my colleagues asked her what her co-workers had to say about the election. Her answer was truly chilling to me. She said it never came up. These hardworking, low-income people, people who had the

most at stake, the most to gain from a government that would be more sensitive to them, never even thought about the election, at least not enough to talk about it at work, and probably not enough to vote either. As a Democrat, I worry about that a lot, since they would likely be our voters. And as a progressive Congresswoman, I see the consequences of their absence in policy decisions such as the reauthorization of the welfare act [the House] passed two weeks ago, which will make the lives of poor women even more difficult. If they were involved, we might have a real program to develop affordable housing or a national health care program. Anything could happen.

People don't get involved, even people who care, because they don't believe that they can influence the outcome of policy decisions. Given the role of money in politics, there is some reality to that, but as a former organizer turned politician, I know that people power still trumps the money any day of the week. Let me give you an example of how a group of 200 senior citizens got a bill repealed. It was 1989 and the Catastrophic Health Care bill had been signed into law, which would provide seniors with insurance for major illnesses, but at a very high price. At the time, I was Director of the Illinois State Council of Senior Citizens, and my organization did not like the measure

[REDACTED]

jumped in the car, and off they went, seniors scattering.

It was quite a scene. I knew immediately that this would be national news and, of course, it was. Rostenkowski's former press secretary told me that the Congressman asked him if he thought this story would go away in a few days. He told him (so he says), "Let me put it this way, Congressman. When you die, they will play this clip on television."

Suddenly every member of Congress felt vulnerable. If the powerful Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee could be chased by seniors, then surely no one was safe. And it wasn't long before the bill was repealed, which, by the way, is the hardest of all legislative moves. It is easiest to stop a bill, harder to pass one, and most difficult to repeal. This story has become legend and, by the way, is a card that I now hold among my colleagues. As a freshman, I was invited to a meeting of the leaders and White House when the President was considering adjusting Medicare benefits based on income, called means-testing. My job was to tell the story of the chase and suggest that it would be unfortunate if Democratic members or Al Gore were chased down the street. The White House called to say the idea had been scrapped. A small number of people can make a difference. What did Margaret Mead say? "Never doubt that a small group of dedicated people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Campaign finance reform passed over the objections of the National Rifle Association and many other moneyed interests just a few months ago, because ordinary people made it clear that they wanted it, particularly after the Enron scandal. Environmental legislation, AIDS funding, civil rights laws were all a result of good old-fashioned and creative organizing.

[Northwestern University] President Bienen referred to my experience in the long, long line that used to form at the Immigration and Naturalization Service each morning — immigrants waiting for various services for which they paid dearly both in dollars and loss of dignity due to the shabby treatment by the INS officers. I went down to the line without identifying myself as a member of Congress, talked to people there and after two



and one half hours, from 8 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., made it to the front of the line. Suddenly an INS officer came out and announced that no one else would be served that day, and everyone should leave. I apparently didn't leave quickly enough, because she barked at me, "Move or go to jail." My first reaction was to say a quiet thank you to her, because when one is in a battle, it is always fortuitous when your opponent does the wrong thing and at the right time, but I responded, "I don't appreciate being talked to that way." She said, "Well, who are you?" I said, "First, I'm a human being and you shouldn't talk to anyone that way. Second, I'm a member of the United States Congress." She sputtered back, "That's not fair."



This set off a chain of events that has led to major improvements in customer service and efficiency at the Chicago District office of the INS, including the disappearance of the line within three weeks of the incident. Through all of this, I worked closely with the immigration rights advocacy groups. Though much remains to be done, we all feel proud of our accomplishment.

One of the reasons that people don't participate is that they are not invited. If they're not invited to the party, most people won't come, and that's true of political parties too. Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, in his analysis of the 2000 Presidential election, states, "The good news is essentially two-fold — voter turnout went up and it went up because of the intensive grassroots mobilization campaigns that were run in battleground states by the political parties and various groups across the political spectrum. If that signals a return to an emphasis on grassroots activities in political campaigns, it is something devoutly to be wished." Similarly, Robert Putnam's group concluded, "In recent years, there is some evidence that the local political parties have begun reviving the

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