

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF N. C. LIBRARIANS

by

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North Carolina librarians as a group are well-educated. They are typically college graduates, often with advanced, professional degrees in librarianship.<sup>1</sup> In their respective communities in the state, the librarians can easily be among the best-educated citizens.

People who have an educational background equal to that of a professional librarian are particularly eligible for leadership in public affairs. Political scientists find that "political participation of all sorts increases with improvement in education, occupation, and social status: the more educated and the more highly placed a person is in the social structure, the more likely he is to take an active part in the political process."<sup>2</sup>

Jerome Cushman writes that librarians are subtle opinion leaders in their communities and can "speak (out) in terms of public policy" with the weight of educated opinion.<sup>3</sup> He says, "Our acceptance of social and political responsibilities as a group puts us in the vanguard of those organizations which are in tune with the times and ahead of those whose sense of public welfare belongs to another age."<sup>4</sup>

If librarians are potential public affairs leaders in their communities because of education or occupation, are they active in local politics? Little empirical evidence exists on the question of the political participation of librarians. In a classic report for the Public Library Inquiry, *The Public Librarian*, Alice I. Bryan, says that 90 percent of librarians vote regularly, but only 6 percent of librarians belong to political associations or hold offices in community organizations.<sup>5</sup>

Oliver Garceau, who researched the role of the public library in the political process for the Public Library Inquiry in 1949, says that public librarians "lack political acumen" to understand the changing political patterns in their communities, but he indicates a high percentage of the librarians are members of the League of Women Voters.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Phillip Money Penny, professor of political science at the University of Illinois, writes, "Librarians . . . are unaccustomed to seeing themselves as competitors for public funds and have not equipped themselves to enter the competition."<sup>7</sup>

### Objectives Of Questionnaire

This paper compares political participation of North Carolina librarians with levels of political activity among the Southern white population. A survey of the political participation of the librarians was made November 4-6, 1965, at the North Carolina Library Association biennial conference in Winston-Salem. Questionnaires were distributed to Tar Heel librarians attending the three-day conference. The questionnaire had four basic objectives. The first section was a measure of the political knowledge of the librarians. It included such questions as: How long a term does a U. S. Senator serve? The second section attempted to measure the level of political participation of the librarians. The third section was a measure of the librarians' attitudes toward participating in politics. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed

or disagreed to such statements as: A librarian should participate in political campaigns. A final section of the questionnaire concerned socio-economic data.

The study assumed that those librarians attending the conference do not participate in politics less than those librarians who did not attend. On the contrary, it was probable that those librarians attending the conference have a greater tendency to participate than those who did not attend. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed at the conference. Thirty-four percent, or 169, of the questionnaires were returned.

The data gathered by the questionnaires were compared with selected results of an extensive study by two political scientists of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, who researched the political participation of the Southern Negro as compared with the Southern white population. Matthews and Prothro use a five-point hierarchy of political participation as their measurement. The first level is that of no political participation. The second is talking about political candidates or issues with family, friends, or fellow workers. Voting in elections is the third level on the hierarchy. The fourth is participating in political campaigns, broadly defined as attending rallies or conventions or giving money to a political party. The fifth level of political activity is belonging to political groups or holding an elected political office.<sup>8</sup>

## RESULTS

## Political Knowledge Test

Five questions on general political knowledge were asked. As expected, the librarians do much better than the sample of Southern whites. The most frequently missed questions are the length of a term of office for a U. S. Senator and the number of members on the U. S. Supreme Court. Sixty percent of the librarians correctly answered these two questions. On the same two questions 20 percent of the Southern white population in the Matthews and Prothro study answered correctly. (See table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
DISTRIBUTION OF NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIANS  
AND SOUTHERN WHITES CORRECTLY ANSWERING POLITICAL  
KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

Questions	N. C. Librarians (N=169)	Southern Whites (Matthews and Prothro sample)*
	%	%
1. Last two states in the Union	91	79
2. Who is governor	99	90
3. Length of governor's term	83	67
4. Length of U. S. Senator's term	60	20
5. Number of members on U. S. Supreme Court	60	21

\*Matthews and Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, p. 272.

### Political Participation

The first level of political participation, that of no participation, is not descriptive of a single librarian. The Matthews and Prothro study found that two percent of their Southern white sample did not involve themselves in politics<sup>9</sup>. (See table 2).

Fewer librarians than Southern whites limit their activity to talking about politics. Eight librarians (five percent) in the sample did not participate in politics beyond talking about political issues. The political scientists reported that nine percent of the Southern whites were "content merely to talk about politics and public problems."<sup>10</sup>

Ninety-five percent of the librarians vote in elections. Of those librarians who vote, 51 percent do not become otherwise involved in political campaigns. Matthews and Prothro found that 8 percent of their sample vote; 43 percent do not participate beyond voting.<sup>11</sup>

At the fourth level of participation, 45 percent of the librarians in the sample were active in political campaigns. Forty-six percent of the white population sampled take part in campaigns.<sup>12</sup> If the librarians are compared with that segment of the Southern white population which has a college education, the result is quite different. Approximately 55 percent of college educated Southern Whites participate in politics beyond voting; 45 percent of the librarians are politically active beyond voting.<sup>13</sup>

At the highest level of activity, 15 percent of the librarians are members of political groups such as the League of Women Voters. One librarian in the sample of 169 has held an elected public office. Five per cent of the Southern white sample are "political activists."<sup>14</sup>

**TABLE 2**  
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIANS  
ARRANGED BY TYPE OF LIBRARY

Type of Librarian	No Participation	Talking Politics	Voting + Talking	Campaigning + Voting + Talking	Belonging to organizations + Campaigning, Voting, Talking
	%	%	%	%	%
PUBLIC (N=48)	0	8	52	21	19
SCHOOL (N=61)	0	7	51	34	8
ACADEMIC (N=53)	0	0	45	36	19
SPECIAL (N=7)	0	0	72	14	14
TOTAL (N=169)	0	5	51	30	15

### Attitudes

Most of the librarians were either *mildly* in favor of participating in politics (40 percent) or were *undecided* about their attitude toward political involvement (44 percent). Only seven percent *strongly* approved of librarians in politics. Twelve percent of the sample were *mildly* against participation, but no one felt *strongly* against involvement.

The responses to the attitude questions were varied. In some cases, the librarians indicated in the margins of questionnaires a dichotomous view: "A librarian should act as a citizen in politics, not as a librarian." (See table 3).

### Socio-economic Data

Male respondents to the questionnaire comprised 18 percent of the sample, which is fairly representative of the sex ratio in the profession at large.<sup>15</sup> Half of the 169 respondents have worked ten years or more in libraries. Fifty-five percent of the librarians are sub-professional library employees. Twenty-eight percent of the librarians report an annual salary between \$5,000 and \$6,000; 6 percent earn \$7,000 and above.

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT ACCORDING TO THE TYPE OF LIBRARY

Library	Strongly Agree	Mildly Agree	Undecided	Mildly Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	%	%	%	%	%
PUBLIC (N=48)	2	28	48	23	0
SCHOOL (N=61)	3	51	38	8	0
ACADEMIC (N=53)	13	41	38	8	0
SPECIAL (N=7)	14	14	57	14	0
TOTAL (N=169)	7	40	41	12	0

### Conclusions

The study suggests that North Carolina librarians are politically well-informed based upon their consistently high scores on the political information test. The librarians outscore a sample of the Southern white population on every question.

Approximately as many librarians in the sample indicate that they talk about politics as the Matthews-Prothro sample. Ninety-five percent of the librarians vote or have voted at least once as compared to 89 percent of the Southern white population. The librarians are as active in political campaigns as the Mathew-Prothro sample. It is on

the top level of the political participation scale (belonging to political groups or holding public office) that the librarians appear to outdistance the Southern whites three to one.

The results of the study suggest that the political participation of North Carolina librarians closely resembles the level of political activity of the Southern white sample reported by Matthews and Prothro. An exception is that the librarians are considerably more active than the Southern whites in belonging to political groups or holding office. However, the librarians are significantly less active in politics beyond voting than the college educated Southern whites.

Although many librarians are scaled as political activists, few of them indicate that they hold strong opinions about participating in politics. The majority are divided between being undecided or in mild agreement that they should take part in the political life of their communities.

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1. Eldon Waldo Tamblin, *Censorship and North Carolina Public Libraries*, (unpublished Master's thesis, School of Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1964), p. 25, table 2.
  2. Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966, p. 38.
  3. Jerome Cushman, "The Librarian as Citizen," *ALA Bulletin*, XLIX (April, 1955), p. 157.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
  5. Alice I. Bryan, *The Public Librarian*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, p. 50.
  6. Oliver Garceau, *The Public Library in the Political Process*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1949, p. 149.
  7. Phillip Money Penny, "The Public Library as a Pressure Group." *Illinois Libraries*, XLIII (December, 1961), p. 723.
  8. Matthews, *op. cit.*, chapter 3, "Levels of Participation," pp. 37-58.
  9. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
  15. *Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*, New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1966, table 3, p. 29.

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## THESES COMPLETED, 1963-1967, IN THE SCHOOL OF LIBRARY SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

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- Gore, Daniel. *The Schomburg Collection and Its Catalog, an Historical Sketch*. pp. 63.