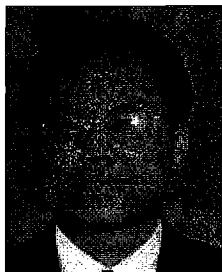


## Electoral participation critical

Drop in voting a big challenge in finding next generation of leaders.

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By Sean Won Lew

On May 2, 2006, just 10.27 percent of eligible voters in Forsyth County voted on Primary Day.

At stake were seats for North Carolina's General Assembly and the county board of commissioners and board of education.

I remember that warm May afternoon when I went to my local precinct to cast my vote. Expecting a long line at the voting booth, I left work early to make it home on time for dinner.

I expected an election buzz at the voting center, canvassers, a reporter or two, maybe colorful balloons and a patriotic festive atmosphere.

To my chagrin, my "festive" atmosphere didn't happen.

In fact, I didn't see anyone when I arrived to vote. The parking lot was empty and there were no political signs or canvassers.

When I got to the voting center, I had to ask a kind gentleman where to go vote.

And when I got to the room to vote, it was just me, two ladies, and that same kind gentleman ready to check me in. Checking their watches every few moments, they looked eager to go home.

There are many hackneyed phrases we hear, how "every vote counts," and how voting is one of our most "cherished rights" as citizens.

But these clichés are really true, perhaps more than ever.

In the 21st century, there are still places in the world where many oppressed people -- women, ethnic and religious minorities, those with physical disabilities -- are denied the ballot.

Voting can be defined as an act of leadership.

Our state is said to be hungry for new leadership. It is a parlor game on the news.

With fewer getting involved with participatory politics in our state, from where will the next generation of leaders come?

A recent experience offered me a hint.

Just days ago, I decided to witness a naturalization ceremony at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration

Services office in Charlotte.

I congratulated several of our newest citizens from nearby countries such as Canada, Mexico and Belize. I congratulated others from far away lands such as India, China, and Nepal.

Laughter filled the room as American flags and red, white and blue colors provided for the festive atmosphere that I searched for just weeks earlier.

I asked several what they planned to do now that they were naturalized. Maybe a party? Call a few friends over? Cake and ice cream?

The overwhelming response: "I'm going to register to vote..."

It was the response that I wish more than 10.27 percent of our state's voting population could hear.

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