



**Survey results from “Perception of  
Chapter house” survey: understanding  
low voter turnout**

**2018**

## Introduction:

There has been a discussion about the low voter participation on the Navajo Nation but what has not been discussed is the decreasing voter participation regardless of the growing registered voter. In 2006, the voter participation for the General Election was 65.56%.<sup>1</sup> Six years later, the voter participation for the 2012 General Election was 50.15%.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the voter participation for the General Election decreased to 47.21%.<sup>3</sup> The voter participation ratio has decreased by 18% in 10 years. In 2006, there were 65,906 ballots casted with 100,525 registered voters. In 2016, there were 59,272 ballots casted with 125,543 registered voters. There is an increase of 25,000 registered voters yet the amount of ballots casted has decreased. Less Navajos are participating in the election process.

Diné Policy Institute [DPI] decided to start with the chapter houses because they are sub units of government. Chapter houses are the sites of local government and voter participation. There are 110 chapter houses within the Navajo Nation. They were originally established as communication sites between the federal government and the people for agricultural practices. They have grown in authority and size since their creation and many Navajo people visit or know about their chapter houses. With the creation of Local Governance Act in the 90s, chapter houses were to become e

In 2017, DPI surveyed major fair grounds, flea markets, and a tribal college asking participants how they feel about the chapter houses. We asked them what they thought the purpose of the chapter house was to them and what they expected from the local government. This would help get an understanding of the perception of the chapter house from their point of view. We asked the participants what the needs of their community were. We even asked how many chapter meetings they attend throughout the year. We asked why they go to the chapter house and what qualifications they would like to see in their chapter house official.

We were investigating the perceptions that Navajo people held about their chapter houses with the idea that it could give a brief glimpse into local government and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.navajoelections.navajo-nsn.gov/pdfs/Election/2006/General/2006%20GE%20Official%20Voter%20Participation%20Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.navajoelections.navajo-nsn.gov/pdfs/Election/2012ElectionResults/General/Official/Voter%20Participation%20-%20Official%20Navajo%20Nation%20General%20Election%20Results.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.navajoelections.navajo-nsn.gov/pdfs/2016/Voter%20Participation%20-%20Official%20Navajo%20General%20Results.pdf>

participation. This would inform us of the relationship that Navajo people shared with their local government. We surveyed 250 Navajo people at the major fair grounds.

#### Brief Historical Overview:

The Chapter houses started in the 30's under the supervision of John C. Hunter. The original title of the organizations was the "Livestock Improvement Association" but this changed and the organizations served as conduits of information between the BIA and the Navajo people. Eventually, the Federal government provided funds for local projects and the chapter members "performed the work" (Wilkins, 2013). This spurred the temporary wage income for Navajo families in the chapter border. Chapter members worked on local projects that revolved around construction, water projects, and agricultural practices. The chapter houses served as subunits that would provide services for the community but had little decision-making authority.

The chapters provided the opportunity for local government in which the people voted for a chapter president, vice president, and a secretary or treasurer. David E. Wilkins list four characteristics of the chapter house; the chapter house would present on government programs and goals, act as a information conduit between the Navajo people and the government, provide a means to vote for council delegates, and provide a space for local opinions (Wilkins, 2013). This list does not demonstrate the extent of local decision-making powers but does provide a look into the function of chapter houses as information subunits that provided services.

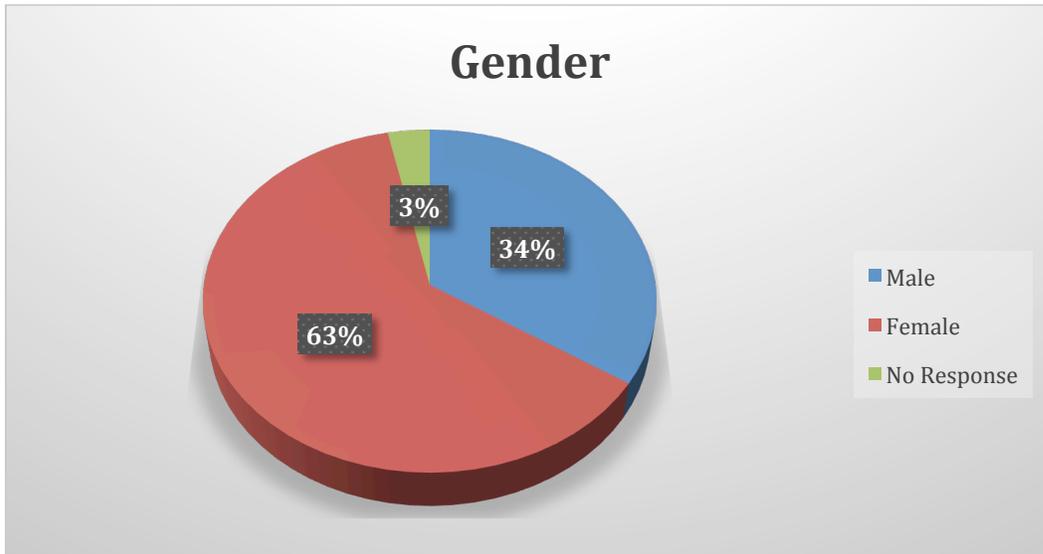
An example of the lack of decision-making power is demonstrated during the Livestock Reduction Era. Most chapters were against the reduction and the chapters lost funding for their opposition. If there was a sufficient amount of decision-making on the local level, the chapters could have opposed the Reduction. Funding for the chapter house system did not come back until 1955 when the Navajo Council passed the resolution to recognize the chapters and provide funding (Wilkins, 2013).

In 1998, the Local Governance Act was passed. This legislation would empower the local chapters; it extended the political authority of the chapter houses for the purpose of economic development. Since the creation of the LGA, chapters have struggled to get certified and this has caused Council to seek an alternative political structure.

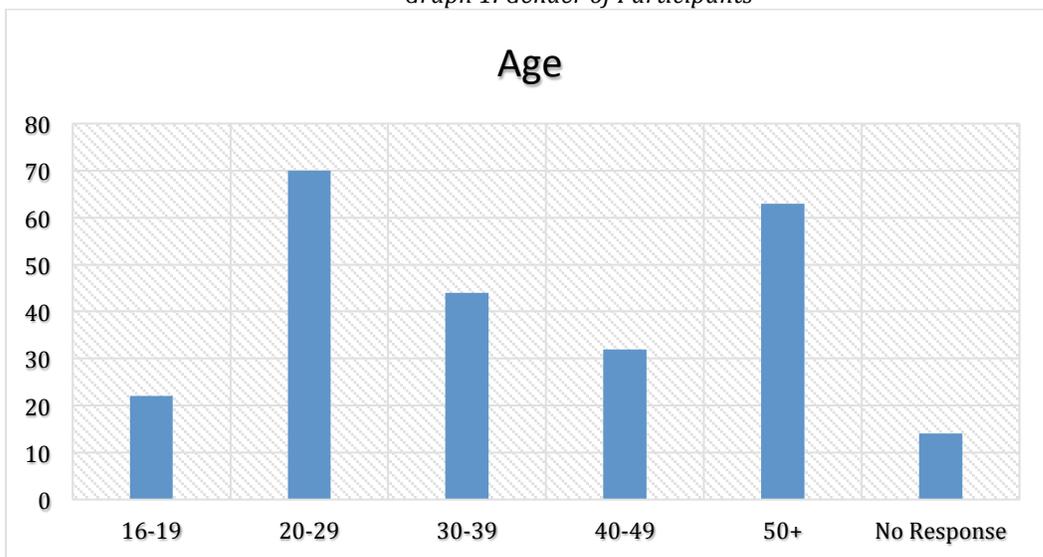
#### Data:

We surveyed 250 participants to whom 63% were female, 34% were male, and 3% did not answer. Of the participants, 22 were between the ages of 16-19, 70 were between the ages of 20-29, 44 were between the ages of 30-39, 32 were between the

ages of 40-49, 63 were 50 and older, and 14 did not answer. 28% of the participants were between the ages of 20-29 and 25% were 50 and older.

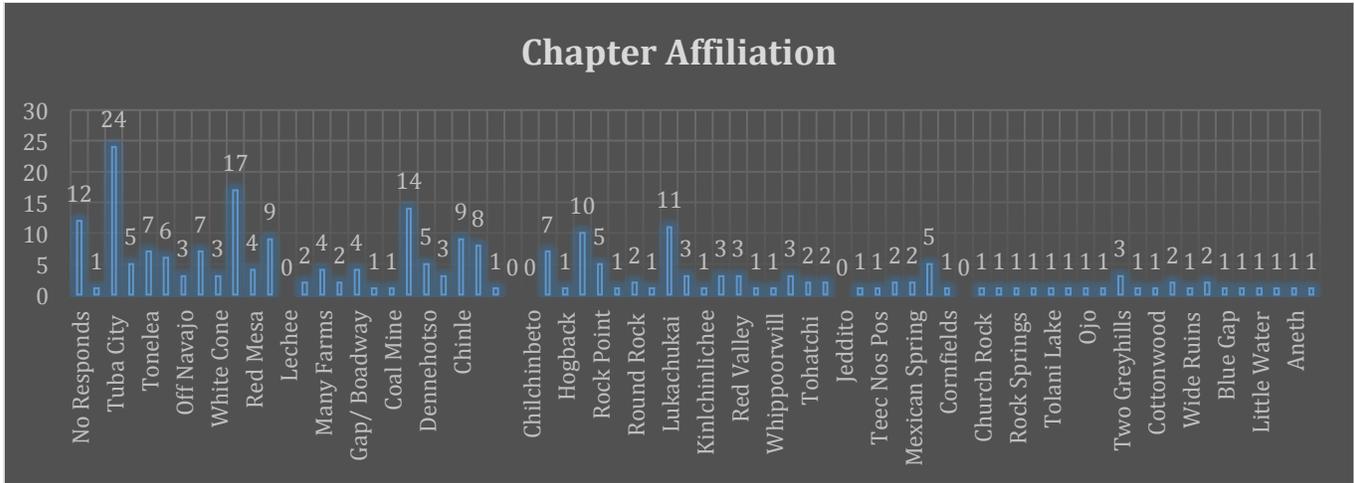


Graph 1: Gender of Participants



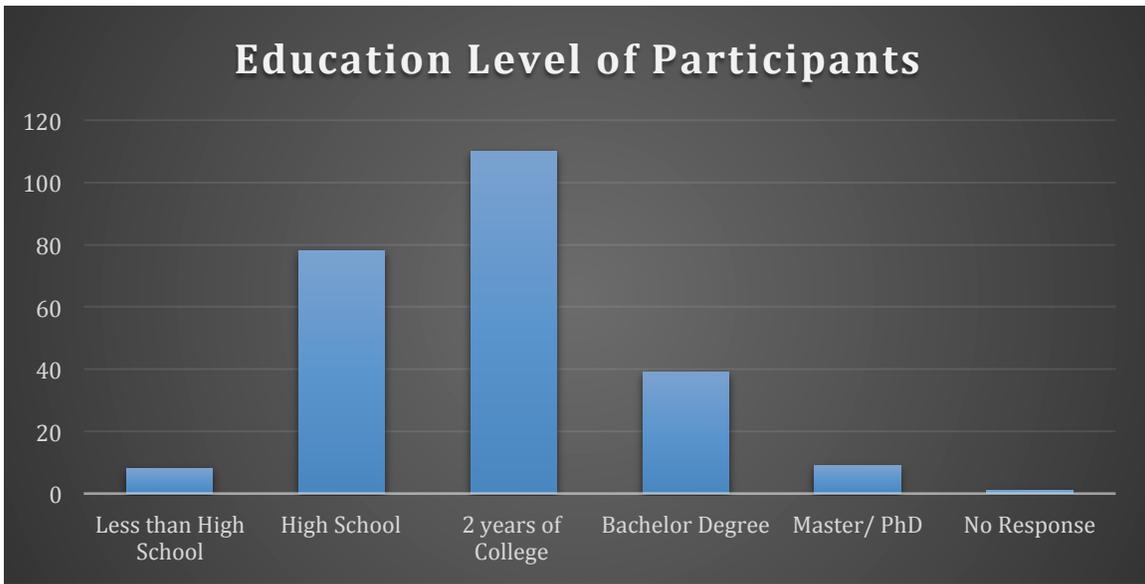
Graph 2: Age of Survey Participants

The Navajo Nation consists of 110 chapter houses and we were able to reach 69 chapter houses.



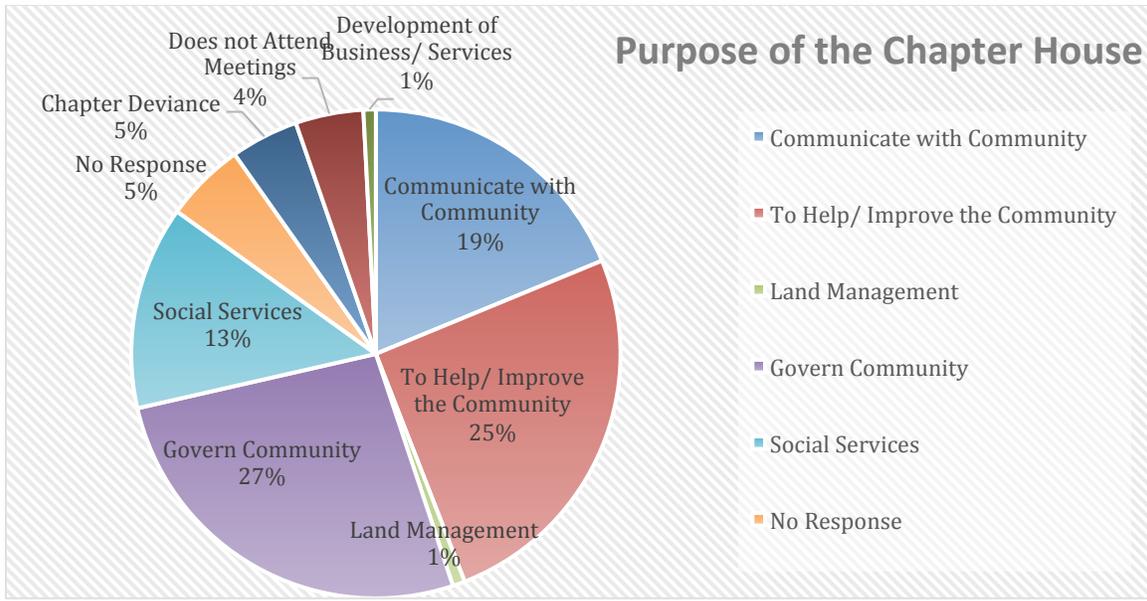
*Graph 3: Chapter Affiliation of Participants*

The education of the participants ranges from less than high school to Masters/PHD. 44% had two years of college, 31% had high school diploma, 15% had a Bachelors, 4% had a Masters/PHD, and 3% had less than a high school diploma.



*Graph 4: Education levels of Survey Participants*

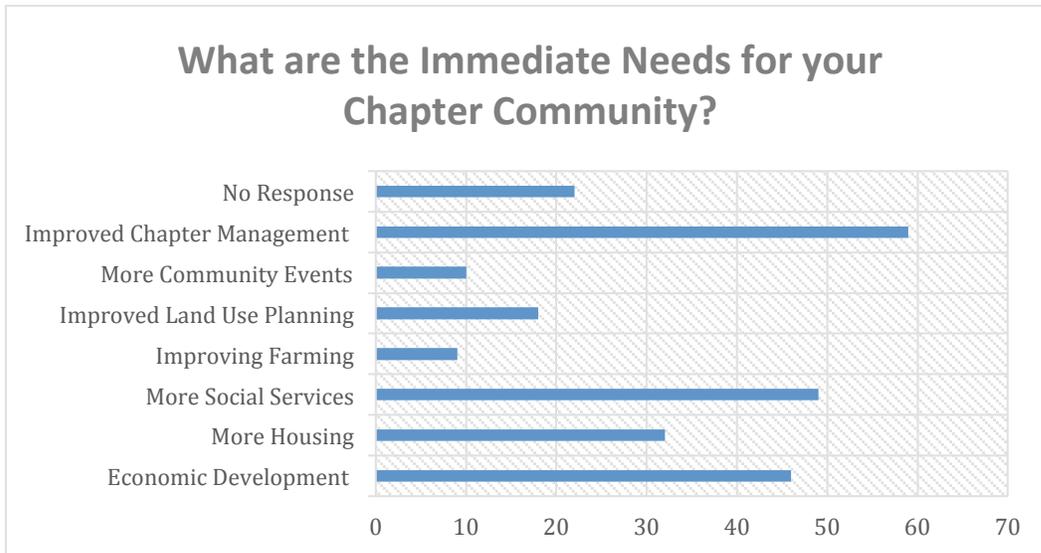
We asked the survey participants what they felt the “purpose” of the chapter house meant to them. We left the question open-ended for the participants so that they may express their own opinions without previous categories. This helped DPI narrow the different perspectives of local government and what the Navajo people believe they are created for.



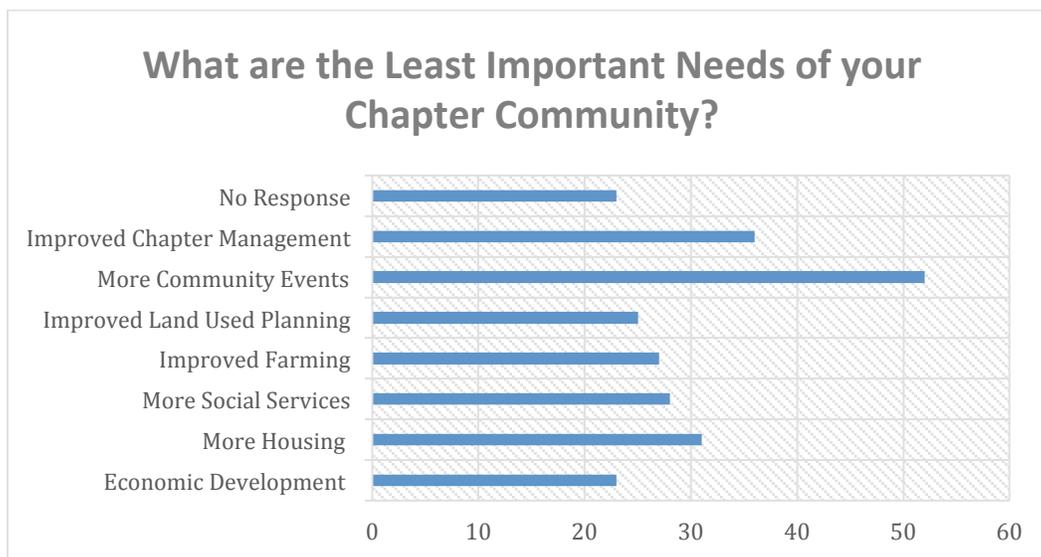
Graph 5: What is the purpose of the Chapter house?

As a follow up question, we asked the participants to list the immediate needs of their chapter community. As a result we were also able to pinpoint what weren't immediate needs for their community. The top three responses marked in the survey were, "improved chapter management", "more social services", and "economic development".

Listed by default of the prioritization of others, the top three responses for "least important" were, "more community events", "improved chapter management", and "more housing".

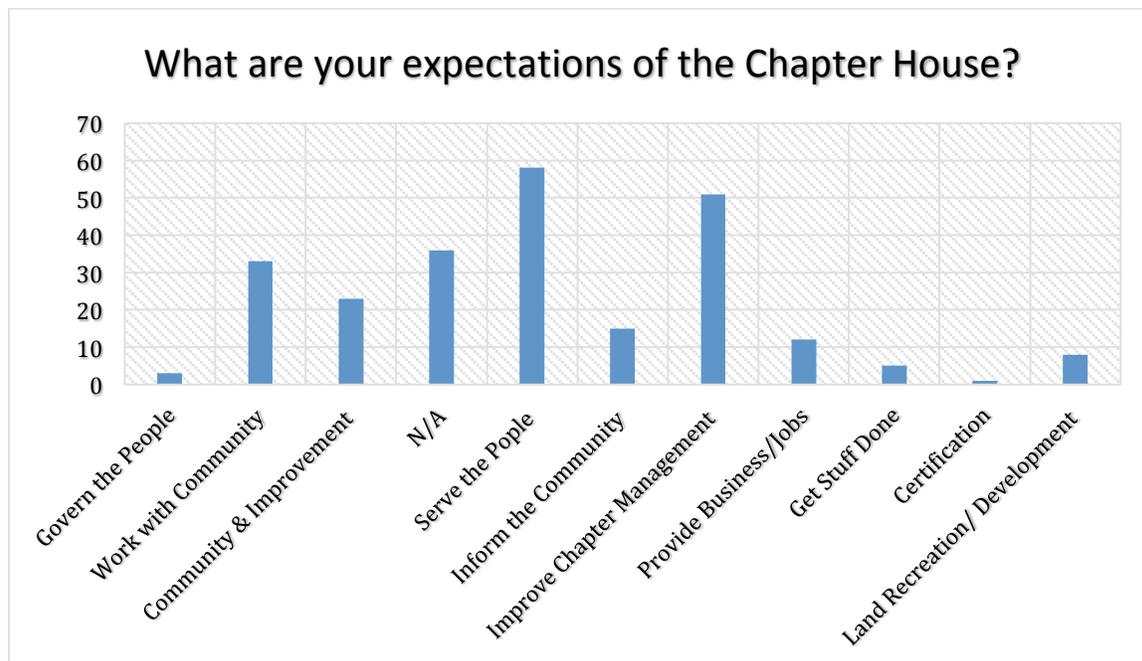


Graph 6: What are the Immediate Needs for your Chapter community?



*Graph 7: What are the least important needs of your chapter community?*

We followed up that question with, “what are your expectations for the chapter house”? We also kept this response open so that participants would write their own ideas without any categories. The top three topics from their responses were, “serve the people”, “improve chapter management”, and “work with the people”.

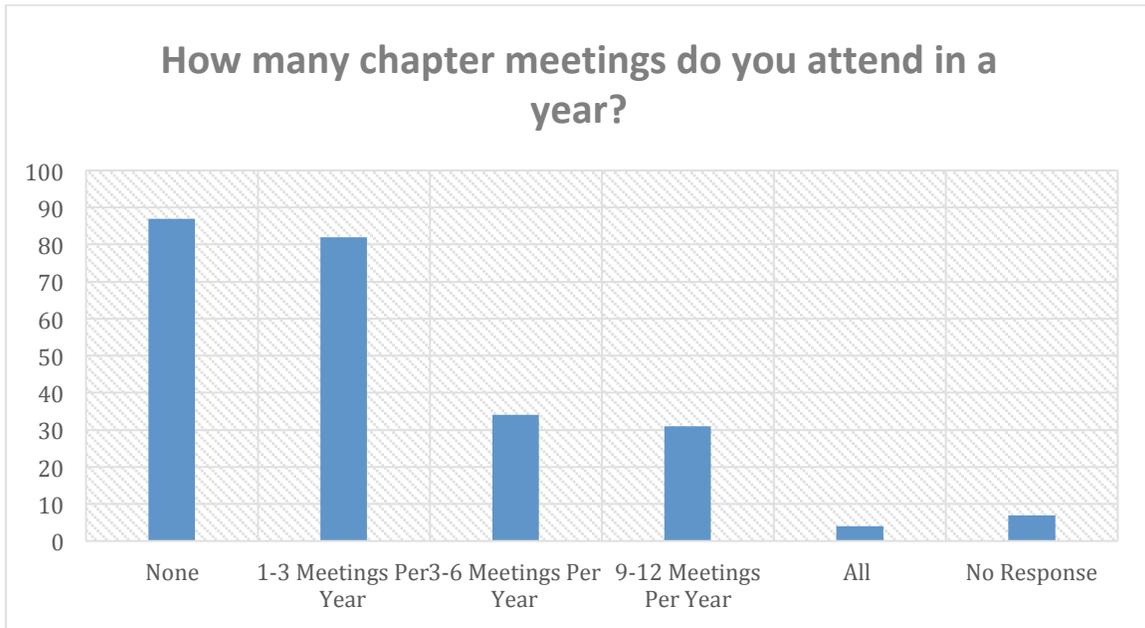


*Graph 8: What are your expectations of the Chapter house?*

The next three questions would help us understand which participants go to chapter houses and their motivations for going. We asked the participants, “How many chapter meetings they attend in a year”? 87 marked that they do not go to chapter

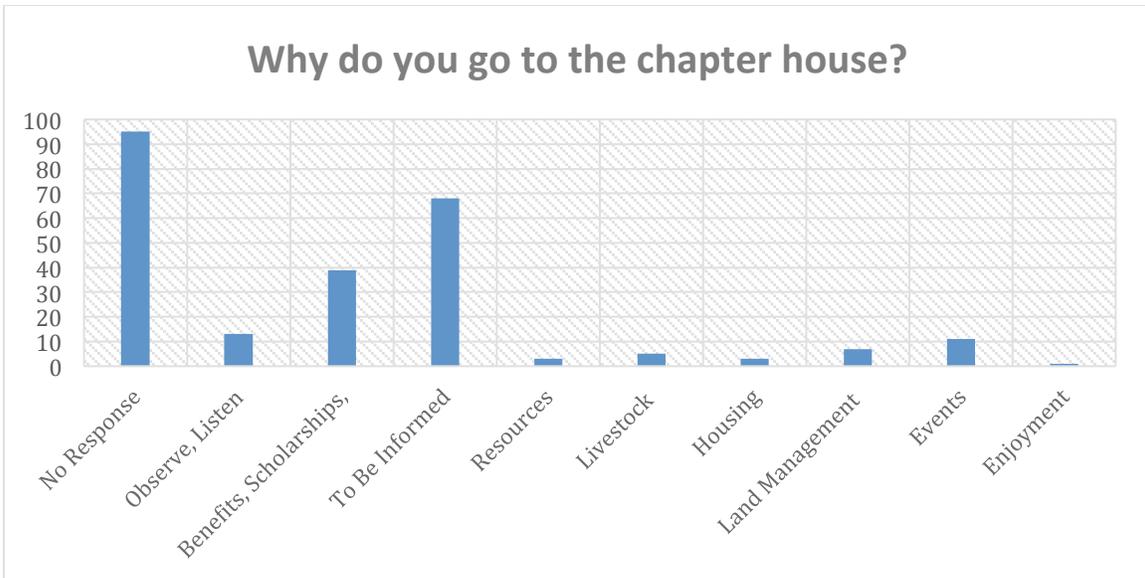
meetings, 82 marked that they go to 1-3 meetings, 34 marked that they go to 3-6 meetings, 31 marked that they got 9-12 meetings, 4 marked that they go to all the meetings, and 7 did not answer.

35% marked that they do not attend chapter meetings and 33% say they only go to 1-3 meetings. 60% of the participants rarely go the chapter meetings.



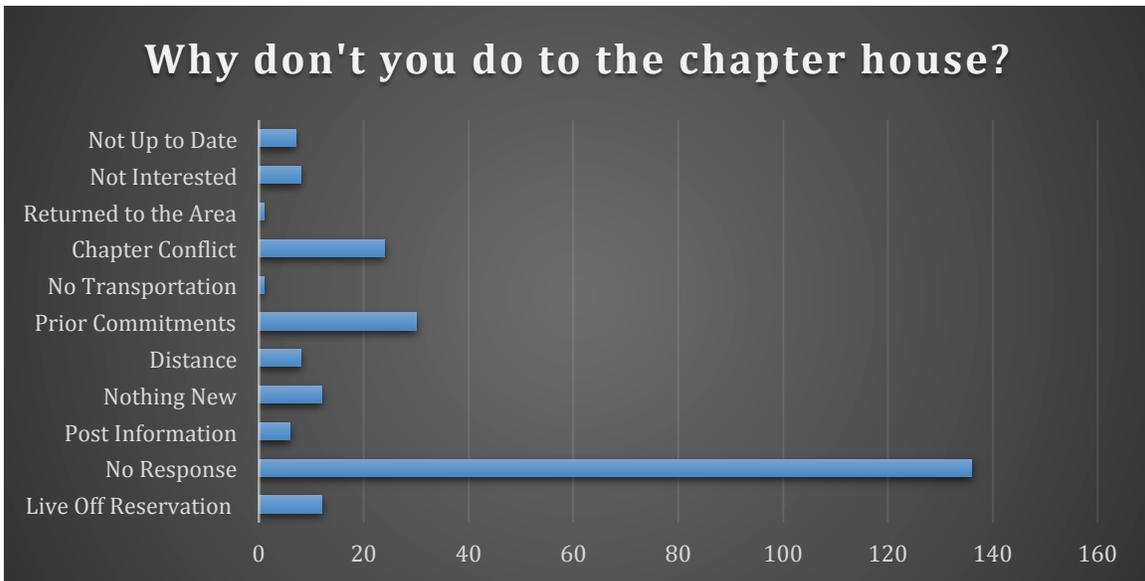
Graph 9: How many chapter meetings do you attend in a year?

Our follow up questions asked why the participants choose not to go the chapter house and why they go to the chapter house. Of 154 participants who marked that they go to chapter meetings, 68 marked “to be informed”, 39 marked “benefits, scholarships, and vote”, 13 marked “observe and listen”, 11 marked “events”, 7 marked “land management”, 5 marked “livestock”, 3 marked for “resources”, 3 marked “housing”, and 1 marked “enjoyment”.



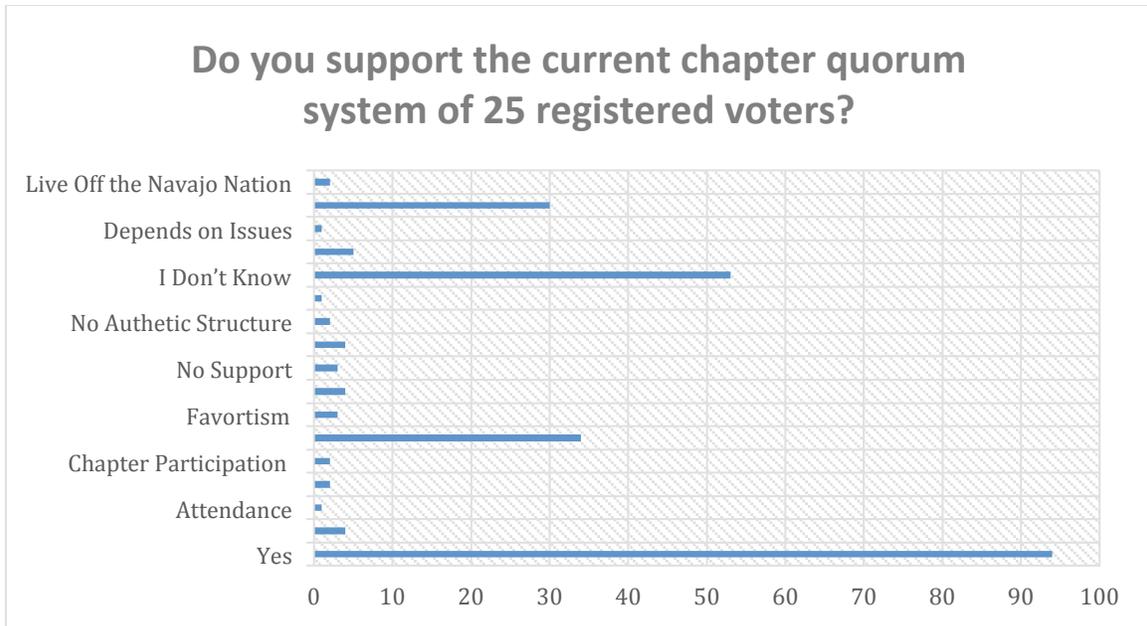
*Graph 10: Why participants go to the Chapter house*

Of the 87 participants who marked that they don't go to the chapter house, 30 marked "prior commitment", 24 marked "chapter conflict", 12 marked that "nothing new" occurred at the chapter house, 12 marked "live off reservation", 8 marked "distance", 8 marked "not interested" in the chapter house, 7 marked "post information", 7 marked the chapter house was not "not up to date", 1 marked that they just "returned to the area", 1 marked "no transportation".



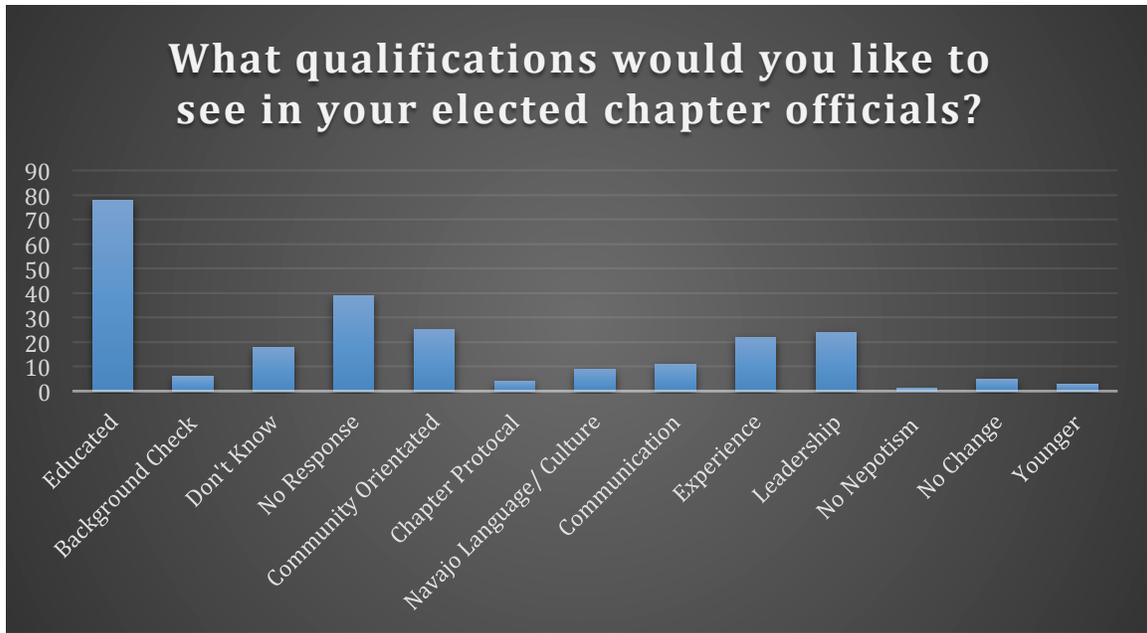
*Graph 11: Why Participants do not go to chapter house*

We asked if the participants supported the 25-registered quorum system of the chapter house.



Graph 12: Do the Participants support the Quorum system of 25 registered voters?

The final question was an open ended question to get some insight into what the qualifications the participants would like to see in their chapter officials. 78 participants marked that they would like to see an educated chapter official, 39 did not respond, 25 wanted a chapter official that was community orientated, 24 wanted a chapter official who had leadership skills, 22 marked that they wanted a chapter official with experience, 11 wanted a chapter official with communication skills, 9 wanted a chapter official with Navajo language/ culture knowledge, 18 did not know, 6 wanted a background check, 5 liked the chapter officials as they were, 4 marked that they wanted a chapter official with chapter protocol knowledge, 3 wanted younger chapter officials, and 1 wanted a chapter official not related to other officials.



*Graph 13: Qualifications of the Chapter Officials*

**Analysis:**

The results show the low voter participation even on the Chapter house level. 66% of the participants either do not go to meetings or they go 1-3 times a year. The participants go to be informed, listen, and services. This becomes even more pronounced when you look at the responses when asked about the purpose and expectations of the participants held for the chapter house. The top four responses were “communicate with community”, “to help and improve the community”, “govern community”, and “social services”. These all fit into the characterization of the chapter house as a site of information and services. Only 2% of the participants mentioned “business development” and “land management” even though LGA was meant to increase the authority of the chapter house to invite economic development. When posed the question of expectation, participants responded with “serve the people”, “work with the people”, “improved chapter management”, and “community development” with the most frequency. 20 participants, 8% of all of the participants, mentioned business/job creation and land development.

The results suggest that Navajo people still see the chapter house as a site of information and services rather than a site of political participation. This perception can affect the rates of turnout. If chapter houses are not able to meet the expectation and purpose that the public has for them then the Navajo populace will be less inclined to participate. The data shows that many Navajos see the chapter houses as a site of information and services. This fits the historical trend of chapter houses, sub units where Navajos would get information and services. Chapter houses were sites of the distribution of services and information and this is embedded in the social perception of the chapter house. Even with LGA, the perception of the chapter

house has yet to change to the site of “empowered” economic development at the local level.

## Bibliography

Wilkins, D. E. (2013). *The Navajo political experience*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.