

Survey Finds Gaps in Tennessee's Civic Infrastructure

Just weeks away from the state's most competitive election in more than a decade, a recent survey reveals important lessons about voter concerns, knowledge and participation in Tennessee.

Summary

While many of Tennessee's recent election laws target voter fraud, the survey finds the most predominant election-related concern among Tennessee residents (68%) is the state's lack of voter participation.

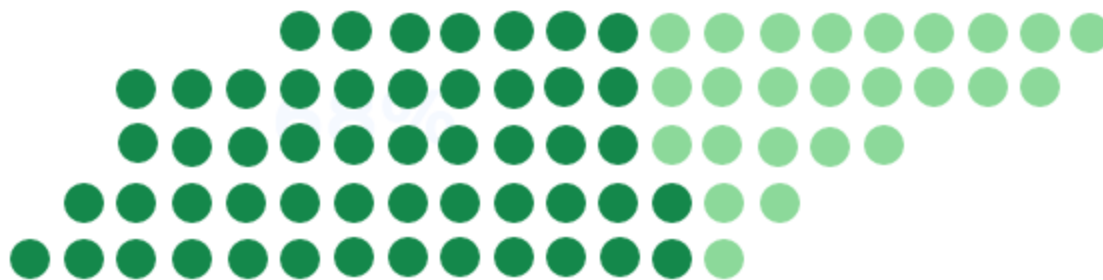
Despite broad consensus around the seriousness of this issue, the findings illuminate that Tennesseans lack important tools—from a strong civic culture to a basic understanding of who is eligible to vote—necessary to improve civic engagement.

Moving forward, the research suggests the state has an opportunity to address these negative perceptions by narrowing gaps in Tennessee's civic infrastructure.

Key Findings

Tennesseans are concerned about the lack of voter participation in the state, yet they don't participate

Two-thirds of Tennessee residents (68%) say too few people voting is a major problem with the current election system – nearly twice as high as the proportion who feel the same about ineligible voters casting ballots (37%).



68% of Tennesseans Say Too Few People Voting is a Major Problem

Source: PRRI/The Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey
Graphic: ThinkTennessee

While there is wide recognition that voter turnout is the most significant challenge facing the state's current election system, less than half of Tennessee residents (47%) report that they are absolutely certain to vote in the upcoming midterm election.

This low propensity to participate is particularly prevalent in local races. State residents report they are approximately twice as likely to vote in the election for U.S. President as they are to vote in local elections.

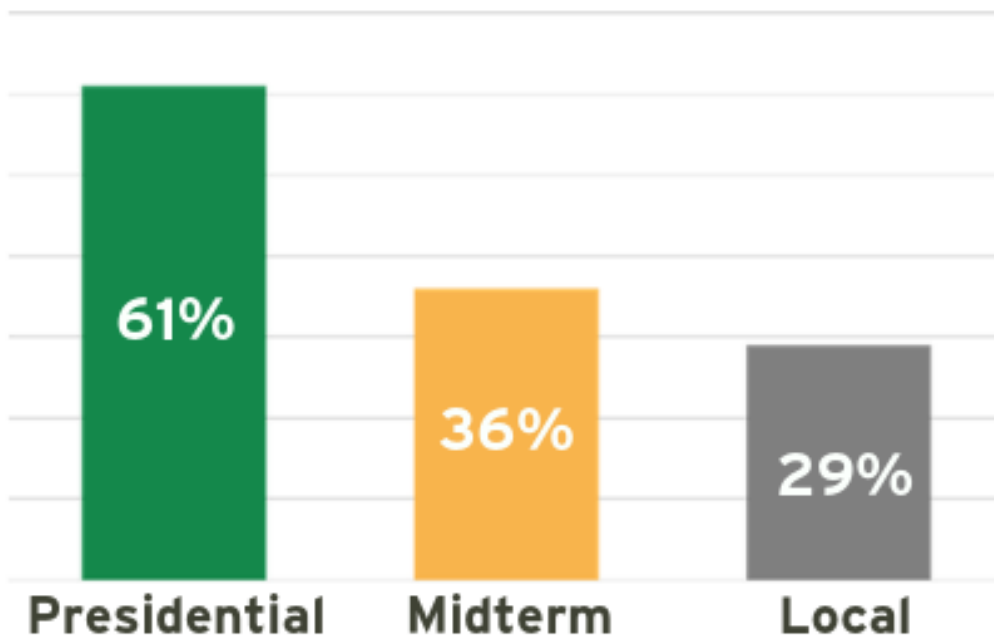
Six in ten Tennessee residents (61%) report that they always vote in elections for U.S. President, compared to just 36% who say the same for elections for U.S. Congress. Only 29% of Tennessee residents report they always vote in local elections for school board, city council and other city and county offices.

Tennessee lacks a strong civic culture

The disconnect between Tennesseans' concern about low voter participation and their low propensity to actually participate may be due in part to a relatively lackluster civic culture in the state.

The vast majority of Tennesseans (66%) say they never accompanied their parents to the polls as a child. And most Tennesseans do not expect their friends to regularly participate in civic life: Just 8% think all of their close friends will vote in the 2018 midterm election.

Percentage of Tennesseans Who Say They Always Vote



Source: PRRI/The Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey

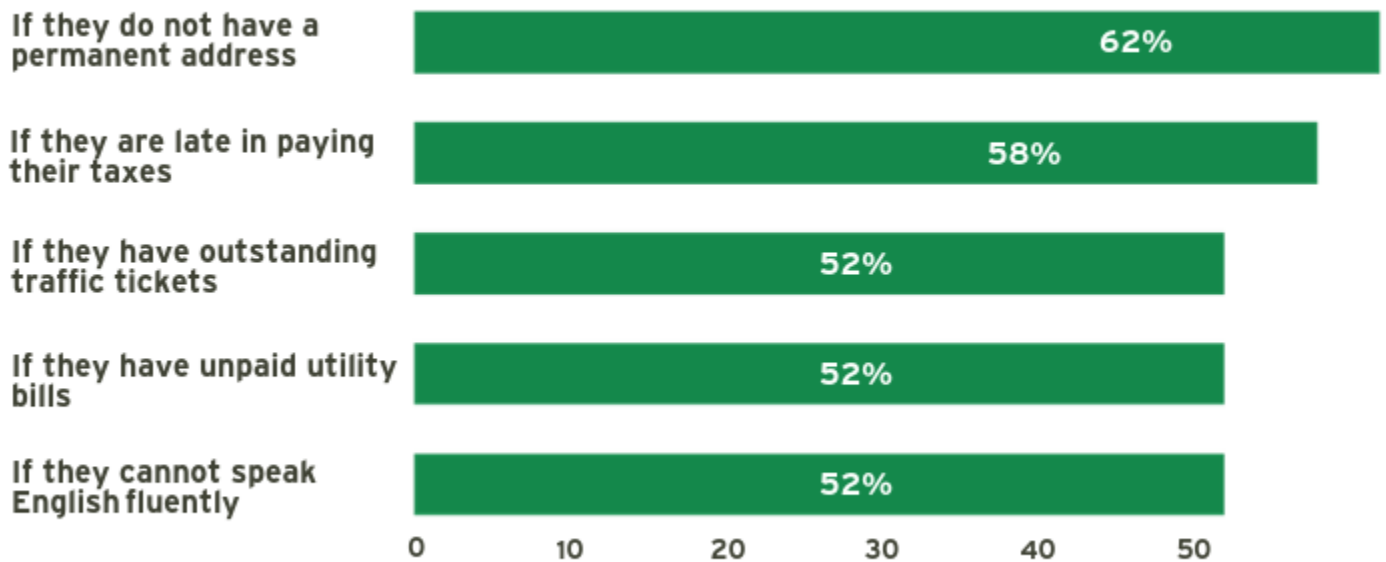
Graphic: ThinkTennessee

Tennesseans face large gaps in their civic education

Tennessee's weak civic culture is exacerbated by pervasive uncertainty about basic civic facts, such as voter eligibility.

A majority of residents are uncertain if someone can vote in Tennessee if they do not have a permanent address (62%) or if they are late in paying their taxes (58%). Additionally, over half of residents are unsure whether those with outstanding traffic tickets or unpaid utility bills (52%) or who cannot speak English fluently (52%) are allowed to vote.

Tennesseans Unsure about Voting Eligibility Requirements



Source: PRRI/The Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey

Graphic: ThinkTennessee

Importantly, few Tennesseans have complaints about the actual administration of elections. Only a fraction of residents (7%) say they or someone in their household were unable to find their correct polling place, and even fewer (4%) report they were harassed or bothered while trying to vote.

Methodology

Data for this memo comes from the PRRI/Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey. The survey was conducted among a random sample of adults (age 18 and up) who live in the United States and are part of GfK's Knowledge Panel. The survey included a national sample (N=1,031) representing all 50 states, as well as a Tennessee-specific oversample (N=274) with a margin of error of +/- 6.5 percentage points. Interviews were conducted online in both English and Spanish between June 6 and June 18, 2018. The survey was made possible by generous grants from The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation and The McKnight Foundation.