

A photograph of three diverse individuals (a man, a woman, and a woman) standing outdoors in a grassy park area. They are all smiling and holding up large, colorful speech bubble cutouts. The man on the left is holding a blue speech bubble, the woman in the center is holding a pink one, and the woman on the right is holding a teal one. The background shows a blurred city skyline and trees.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN TENNESSEE

TAKEAWAYS FROM SIX COMMUNITY
CONVERSATIONS ABOUT OUR STATE'S CIVIC HEALTH

JULY 2019


THINK TENNESSEE

INTRODUCTION

Tennesseans vote far less regularly than most Americans. In fact, voter turnout in our state consistently ranks toward the bottom of the nation -- #50 in 2014 and #49 in 2016. And yet, as the state that cast the deciding vote for the Nineteenth Amendment when our neighboring states were still resisting women's suffrage, our state has a rich and proud civic history.



Community
Conversations
infographic used to
advertise the events
in each community.

To understand why, despite this history, many Tennesseans today choose not to participate in elections, ThinkTennessee partnered with Humanities Tennessee and the Tennessee Press Association to co-host a series of Community Conversations across the state in the lead up to the November 2018 elections. Over 100 Tennesseans joined us in six communities from Memphis to Kingsport, all wanting to know how to do better -- as individuals, as a community and as a state.

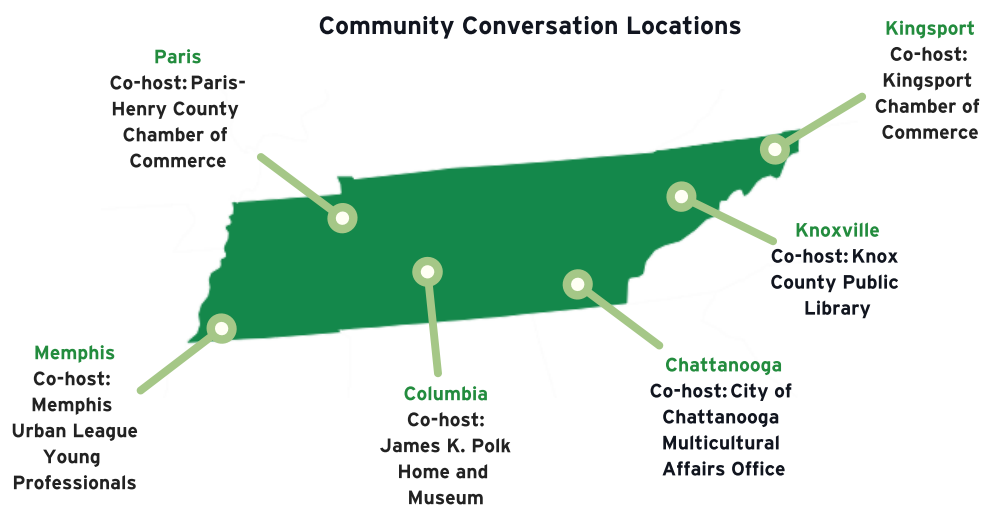
A full account of what we heard from participants can be found in the following pages. In summary, participants identified perceived barriers to civic participation and shared their solutions for how to address them. Both the barriers and solutions identified can be categorized as either **individual** or **structural**. Individual barriers included a missing foundation of civic education and detachment from candidates, from local issues and from the overall process of elections. Structural barriers included a lack of reliable sources of information to inform would-be voters, as well as a handful of what participants identified as restrictive voting policies. To address these barriers, participants identified as recommended solutions, both individual efforts -- such as paying more attention to local issues -- as well as structural -- such as changes to voting policies.

These Community Conversations laid an important foundation for our work to increase civic engagement, and they demonstrated a need for action. So, working with Mile22 Associates, ThinkTennessee is launching the **Tennessee Mayors Growing Civic Engagement** project. Participating mayors will commit to improving civic engagement in their communities by identifying goals and implementing action plans to achieve them. Together we will explore the different ways that we -- as community members and leaders -- can deepen civic engagement across our state.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Your Voice, Your Vote: What's the Civic Health in Tennessee?

From late August to early October, ThinkTennessee criss-crossed the state listening to community members discuss Tennessee's low voter participation. Participants included mayors, county commissioners, candidates, business leaders, students, active political party members and concerned citizens, all expressing a desire to see more informed and engaged participation across the state. Each conversation followed the same format, a facilitated group discussion with an emphasis placed on participants' perspectives.



What Motivates Participants to Vote?

As expected, the majority of conversation participants were registered, active voters. Yet nearly all knew eligible voters who choose not to participate in elections. Participants shared their motivations for being active voters, from viewing voting as a civic and social duty akin to paying taxes and recycling -- something they did because they recognized that it's going to have a bigger impact beyond their day-to-day -- to paying homage to the historic trailblazers who fought for suffrage.

In addition to this internalized sense of civic duty, many also pointed to the outside influence of specific candidates on their actions. Participants admitted that from time to time, they will cast their ballot not for their preferred candidate, but rather against his or her opponent.

Conversations across communities were both similar and unique. Participants identified many of the same challenges and perceived barriers to participation, and they brainstormed a number of similar solutions. But each conversation also featured unique solutions for steps participants felt they could take within their specific communities.

PARTICIPATION BARRIERS

Conversation participants identified barriers -- both **individual** and **structural** -- that they perceived as preventing higher civic participation and voter engagement in their communities.

Individual Barriers: Detachment and Missing Civics Education

Detachment From Candidates, Issues and the Overall Process of Elections

Participants identified individual barriers -- detachment from candidates, issues and the overall process of elections -- as internal behaviors rather than systemic road blocks preventing non-voters from participating.

Candidates

Participants shared stories of disliking past candidates, but generally agreed that they can dislike someone and still vote for them. As one Knoxville resident put it, "You don't have to go to dinner with them." But participants acknowledged that non-voters may feel particularly disconnected by not having relatable candidates. In Chattanooga participants asked, "Why would someone want to participate when they don't see candidates that look like them, talk to them and talk about issues they care about?" A Knoxville participant shared that it wasn't until moving to New York, where she saw candidates and elected officials from different classes and races, that she began to consider voting.

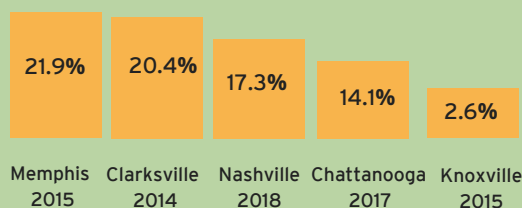
Local Issues

County Commissioners and other elected official participants lamented the low turnout at commission meetings and the overall lack of awareness within communities of the role of local government offices. Still, conversation participants saw local elections as better opportunities to engage as voters. In Columbia, participants shared that the local level is where they're more likely to feel the impact of policies and more likely to know and encounter their elected leaders.

Fact Box: Local Turnout in Tennessee

While overall participation in Tennessee is low, turnout for local elections is particularly poor. Turnout for recent mayoral elections in the five largest cities ranged from just 2.63% to 21.87%.(i)

Turnout in Recent Mayoral Elections



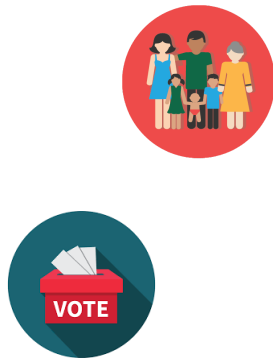
Election Process

Participants widely viewed the hyper-partisanship of elections as catering to the extremes of both the Left and Right, leaving those in the middle disenchanted and detached. Paris participants felt that middle-of-the-road voters are being left out of the process as parties focus messages to the extremes, further adding to their disengagement.

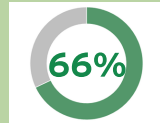
Participants in Paris also discussed what some viewed as a "particularly West Tennessee problem" -- feeling like they were losing their voice in Nashville because major candidates don't come out to see them. One participant acknowledged the cycle: "If you don't vote, they don't listen to you, if they don't listen to you, you don't want to vote."

Missing Foundation of Civics Education

In all communities, participants shared memories from their childhood experiences with civics education learned both in and out of school, swapping memories of class lessons in ethics, being part of a community and the basics about government. They shared similar stories of going to the polls as children with their parents and being excited to turn 18 (or 21 in some cases) and being able to cast their vote for the first time.



Fact Box: Voting with Parents in Tennessee

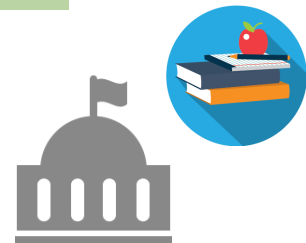


In a 2018 survey, 66% of Tennesseans said they never accompanied their parents to the polls as a child.(ii)

Though a Columbia County Commissioner shared that at least one local high school must include civics education in their curriculum (every year, the commission receives questions from students about the role of local government in what appears to be a class assignment), participants generally agreed that today's students are not receiving a strong civics education in schools.

Former teachers and students in Knoxville, Paris and Columbia shared that they believed high schools aren't teaching civics in class anymore. Participants suggested this gap could be negatively impacting youth turnout, with one Memphis participant suggesting high school students could be intimidated away from participation by their unfamiliarity with the process.

However, in the absence of a formal curriculum, participants shared ways in which they are engaging high school students. In Paris, the local election administrator shared that they host annual high school assemblies where they're able to address students' questions about the election process -- and register those turning 18 by the next election. And in Chattanooga, participants discussed the city's active Mayor's Youth Council as a way to engage students in civic-related discussions in schools.



Fact Box: Civics Education in Tennessee

Tennessee schools are one of the first to require a project-based civics assessment at least twice between fourth and twelfth grades.

The Secretary of State's office hosts a civics essay contest for Tennessee students, and their website provides resources like mock election instructions and civics education lesson plans.

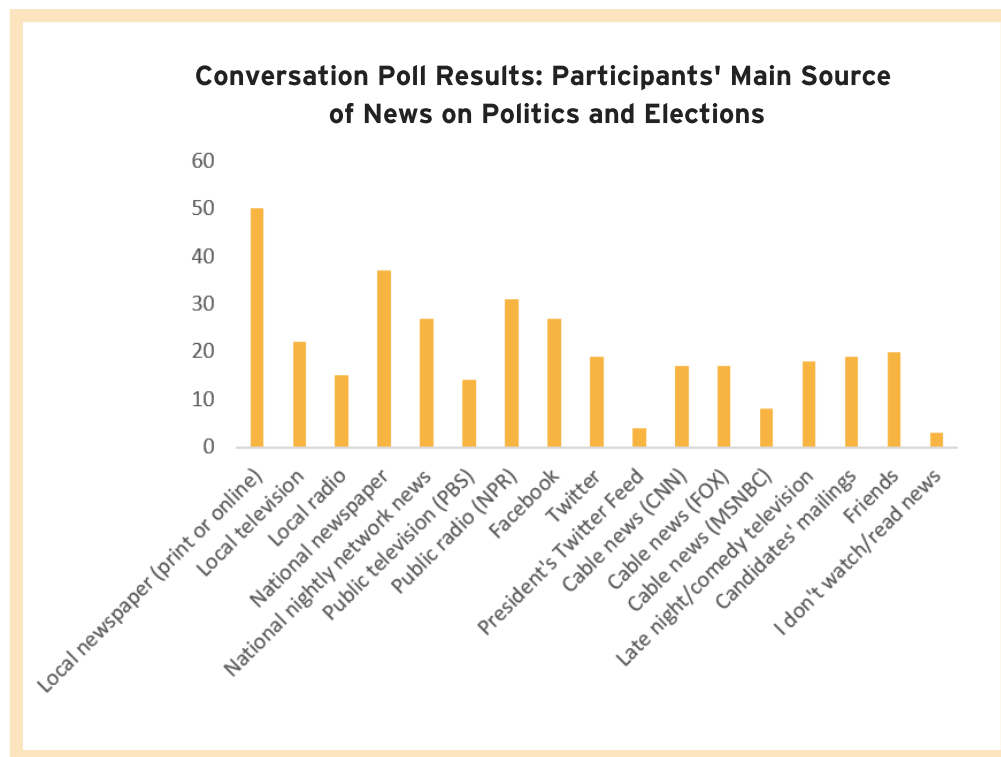
Structural Barriers: Lack of Information Sources and Challenging Policies

While participants credited low civic participation in part to non-voters' individual behavior, they also agreed that certain structural barriers -- from **reliable sources of information** to **voting policies** -- also bear responsibility.

Lack of Reliable Sources of Information

Participants agreed that, rather than a blanket increase in turnout, they would most welcome an increased turnout of informed voters. Conversations explored the role of media in helping to inform citizens about local and national issues and to inspire civic engagement.

Though some sources were more trusted than others, most participants cited the lack of unbiased news sources as a key structural barrier to informed participation. When asked to share their main sources of news on politics and elections, the majority of participants listed local newspapers. Other sources included television news -- both local and national networks -- social media and family or friends.



Local Newspapers

Though mostly trusted, participants expressed a desire to see more detailed coverage of local politics -- school board, county commission and city council meetings -- in the hopes that doing so would help to create a deeper awareness of local issues and motivate engagement.

National Television News

On the opposite end of the trust spectrum, national television news was widely viewed as partisan and biased. Where earlier eras of TV news broadcasts were seen as unbiased presentations of facts that allowed viewers to draw their own conclusions, participants agreed that viewers today have the burden of recognizing and identifying the bias from each major source themselves.

Social Media

Receiving mixed reviews, participants viewed social media as both helpful and harmful to creating informed citizens. While Facebook was cited by many as a main source of information, others viewed its impact negatively. In their view, social media decreases attention to local news by increasing the universe of easily-accessible information to include national and celebrity stories.

Challenging Voting Policies

Low motivation to participate may be preventing some non-voters from engaging, but participants also identified barriers they viewed as making participation challenging for some groups who *are* motivated to participate.

Voter ID

Participants widely viewed Voter ID requirements as an inconvenience -- particularly for college students and senior citizens. One Kingsport participant remarked, "If it's convenient for people, they'll vote, if it's not, they won't." Participants in Kingsport discussed frustrations with the ID guidelines, which prevent students from using their university IDs even though the IDs for faculty from the same institutions are accepted.

Kingsport participants also discussed the impact of Voter ID guidelines on senior citizens. One participant, who was a poll worker during elections, shared that she "feels terrible" when elderly voters come into the polling place without a photo ID. In Tennessee, drivers over the age of 60 may choose to get their driver license without a photo.

Participants also discussed the inconvenience of accessing Driver Services locations in order to get the proper photo ID. In Knoxville, participants discussed their local challenge of accessing their nearest full service location, which is in Strawberry Plains, 11 miles from downtown Knoxville.

Fact Box: Voter ID in Tennessee

Voters in Tennessee must show a government-issued photo ID to cast a ballot. The list of acceptable forms of ID includes the following, even if expired:

- Tennessee driver license with your photo
- United States Passport
- Photo ID issued by the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security
- Photo ID issued by the federal or Tennessee state government
- United States Military photo ID
- Tennessee handgun carry permit with your photo



Student ID cards from state universities and photo IDs not issued by the Tennessee state government are NOT acceptable.

Exemptions include voters who: vote absentee by mail(iii); are residents of a licensed nursing home or assisted living center and who vote at the facility; are hospitalized; have a religious objection to being photographed and who are indigent and unable to obtain a photo ID without paying a fee. (iv)

Voting Bans for Individuals with Felony Convictions

Communities identified the confusing language guiding the revocation and restoration of voting rights for certain individuals with felony convictions as a barrier preventing some eligible voters from registering. Chattanooga participants shared stories from voter registration efforts where community members have been confused -- both in knowing whether they are restricted and about how to reinstate their rights. Participants highlighted some resources that were helpful, but questioned the burdensome process individuals must maneuver to regain their voting rights.

Fact Box: Restoration of Voting Rights in Tennessee

In Tennessee, the process for petitioning to restore voting rights for individuals with a felony conviction requires completion of sentence (including parole and probation), fully paying court fees and restitution, being current on child support and filing a certificate of restoration.



Access Barriers

Participants identified additional barriers preventing voters from accessing polling places and restricting access for potential candidates from the ballot.

- **Polling Locations:** Some participants didn't feel well-informed about polling location changes in advance of Election Day. In Memphis and Paris, participants shared that getting to a specific polling place can be challenging. If a polling location isn't on the way to work or easy to accommodate in their routines, they struggle to find the time to vote.
- **Ballot Access:** In Columbia, participants discussed how the challenges required to register third-party candidates negatively impact both access to the ballot for potential candidates and voter turnout. As one participant shared, "No one would watch the NFL if there were only two teams."

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants in each Community Conversation shared frustrations and challenges they perceived as barriers that help explain Tennessee's nearly last-place civic participation rankings. Yet participants across the state were hopeful and eager to discuss ways to address the challenges they identified. In Kingsport, Mayor John Clark encouraged participants to focus on the solutions they could control.

Again, the solutions raised by participants ranged from individual to structural and called on action from voters, non-voters, candidates, communities and policy leaders.

Participant Recommendations: Individual

To address the detachment from local issues, candidates and elections overall, participants suggested:

- **Pay more attention to what is happening at the local level.** Columbia participants suggested that local policies can have a more tangible impact on voters' lives than some national ones. Engaging with local officials can help to build the connection communities identified as missing for non-voters.
- **Host candidate forums in communities.** A Paris participant who moved to the area from New Hampshire shared that, as a voter in that state, the exposure to candidates in a forum setting helped to build a sense of engagement. Voters could ask candidates questions, and candidates could speak directly to voters.
- **Elected officials should continue engaging communities after the campaign.** Memphis participants discussed some voters' frustrations at their sense of politicians disappearing from their communities after they've been elected, only to return when it's campaign time again. A deeper connection to communities and their concerns by candidates can help build a deeper connection and engagement among would-be voters.
- **Encourage candidates who reflect communities.** In Chattanooga, participants challenged the perception of non-voters as being apathetic. One participant who engages with local African-American, Hispanic and LGBTQ communities shared that "they are interested, but the problem is that candidates don't speak to them."

To address the lack of civics education, a Kingsport participant suggested:

- **Promote a "take your child to the polls" effort.** Participants in most communities shared personal experiences of going to the polls with their parents when they were children. They believed it helped instill a culture of voting that led them to become active voters. Communities could mirror the "take your child to work" day and encourage parents and schools to allow children to share in the voting experience.

Participant Recommendations: Structural

Participants shared a number of recommendations to address the perceived structural barriers of reliable information and restrictive voting policies.

Information Sharing

- **More robust reporting of local news.** A participant in Knoxville shared that, when she lived in Arizona and New Mexico, she would often hear about local issues from the TV news. While preparing dinner, she would hear about something the local city council was working on, and she felt adequately informed.
- **Support neighborhood and community organizations as key messengers.** Participants reflected on the resources available within their communities to help engage and inform voters. Knoxville participants shared that neighborhood organizations could be a good place to educate people about civics and participation; Chattanooga participants acknowledged the breadth of community-based coalitions engaged in voter outreach like the Hamilton County Voter Coalition, and Kingsport participants highlighted the city's neighborhood commissions as potential channels to share information with residents.

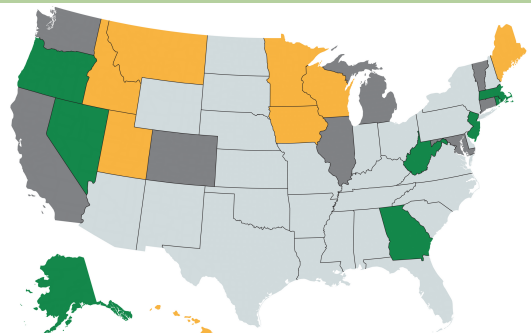
Voting Policies

Voter Registration

- **Same Day and Automatic Registration.** Despite voter-registration outreach efforts within communities, participants shared hearing confusion about registration deadlines. Participants in Chattanooga discussed allowing Same Day registration so that, if a person wanted to participate, she wouldn't run the risk of missing her opportunity before Election Day occurs. And in Memphis, participants discussed Automatic Voter Registration, with one participant asking, "Why is registration required when you have all my information already?"

Fact Box: States with Same Day and Automatic Voter Registration

- 17 states and the District of Columbia have passed Automatic Voter Registration.
- 18 states and the District of Columbia allow Same Day Registration.
- 8 states and the District of Columbia have both. (v)



Voting Process

- **Allow time off work to vote.** Participants suggested different ways in which voters could be given time off on Election Day to make voting easier. Ideas included: making Election Day a holiday or Sunday, closing businesses for the day and employers encouraging employees to take the needed time off.

Fact Box: Time Off For Voting



At least 150 companies across the country joined together for the Time to Vote campaign which focused on ways to encourage employees to vote on Election Day in November 2018. Patagonia closed for business while others committed to paid time off or a day without meetings.(vi)

Tennessee law allows three hours paid time off unless employees already have three hours outside of scheduled work hours with which to vote. Employees are required to give employers notice by noon the day before Election Day.(vii)

- **Make polling locations more accessible.** Participants expressed support for Vote Centers -- piloted in Rutherford County in 2018 -- as a way of making it easier to find a polling place that is convenient for them. With Vote Centers on Election Day, voters aren't required to attend their specific polling location but may choose any in the county -- like they are able to do during Early Voting. Participants also suggested putting polling places in various locations: Memphis and Kingsport discussed college campuses and in Chattanooga a participant suggested grocery stores or fast food restaurants -- places they thought voters were more likely to visit.

Fact Box: Grocery Store Voting

In Travis County, Texas (Austin), voters could choose from a list of polling locations, including a Fiesta Mart grocery store.



Photo: Yi-Chin Lee;
Houston Chronicle (viii).

CONCLUSION



Where We Go From Here: Community Action

Through this conversation series, we heard one clear message: Tennessee communities want to see deeper civic participation, and they are ready to do what they can to help build an engaged and informed electorate. That got us thinking about the important role that city and county leaders play in information-sharing and community-building. We all do better when we all participate in our democracy, and who knows that better than our elected leaders? How can city and county mayors and their teams grow civic engagement?

So from here, we're turning community conversations into community action. We're building a network of mayors and leaders from Tennessee counties, cities and towns committing to increase civic engagement in their communities. Through the **Tennessee Mayors Growing Civic Engagement** project, Think*Tennessee* will work with mayors and their teams to identify a path to deeper civic engagement and the right tools and resources available to support mayors' identified goals.

We look forward to sharing the lessons learned from these Tennessee leaders about what can be achieved when community members and leaders come together.

Interested in Learning More?

Find out more about this first of its kind cohort, the participating mayors and their strategies at www.thinktennessee.org.

NOTES

(i) Turnout is measured by the number of votes cast for mayor rather than overall turnout in the election in order to standardize data from each city. Turnout is measured as a percentage of the estimated Citizen Voting Age Population. In Knoxville, Mayor Madeline Rogero won the September City Primary election which exempted her from running in the November general. Overall turnout for the September 2015 election was 4,748 and turnout for the city's November 2015 general election was 5,440 – both less than 4 percent.

(ii) Tennessee Survey on Elections and Voting. Source: PRRI/The Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey.

(iii) Voters who do not register in person must first vote in person or present a photo ID before being able to request an absentee ballot. Voters may go the the County Election Commission to present their ID for verification.

(iv) Tennessee Secretary of State. What ID is required when voting? Available at <https://sos.tn.gov/products/elections/what-id-required-when-voting>.

(v) National Conference of State Legislatures (2019).

States with Automatic Voter Registration. Available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration.aspx>.

States with Same Day Voter Registration. Available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-registration.aspx>.

(vi) Marcario, Rose. (2018). Time to Vote. Patagonia The Cleanest Line. Available at <https://www.patagonia.com/blog/2018/09/time-to-vote/>.

(vii) TN Code Section 2-1-106 (2017). Available at <https://law.justia.com/codes/tennessee/2017/title-2/chapter-1/section-2-1-106/>.

(viii) Houston Chronicle. (Nov. 6, 2018). Long lines, difficulties, at multiple polling places across Houston." Available at <https://www.chron.com/news/politics/election/article/Long-lines-and-machines-down-at-multiple-polling-13366520.php#photo-16456823>.