Tennessee's November 8, 2022 midterm election featured races for governor, U.S. House of Representatives, all 99 state House, and 17 state Senate offices. Far fewer Tennesseans cast ballots in this election — just 38.6% of registered voters — than in the state's most recent elections. Turnout, however, was slightly higher than the most recent comparable election — 2014's midterm with an incumbent governor on the ballot.

Historically, more Tennessee voters have cast their ballots during Early Voting than on Election Day, but this midterm, votes were split nearly evenly between the two — with 49.3% on Election Day and 48.1% during Early Voting.

After a spike in absentee voting in 2020 during the pandemic, rates returned to their previous trends, with only 2.6% of ballots cast via absentee.

More November 2022 voters chose to cast ballots on Election Day than in recent election cycles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Election Day Voters</th>
<th>Early Voters</th>
<th>Absentee By-Mail Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In November 2022, most Tennessee voters cast ballots on Election Day or during Early Voting.

Part 1 | Voter Turnout and Choice

Part 2 | Election Experience

Part 3 | Policy Recommendations

This after action election report includes three parts:

Part 1 | Voter Turnout and Choice

We look at rates of voter turnout, comparing them to previous elections and other states, and the competitiveness of races — the number of “choices” voters had and the margins of victory in races.

Part 2 | Election Experience

We review survey responses from county election administrators and calls to a national election protection hotline to reflect on how voters and election officials perceived and experienced the election process.

Part 3 | Policy Recommendations

We share recommendations based on best practices and examples from other states for how we can continue to strengthen our state’s system and help improve voter turnout.

In November 2022, most Tennessee voters cast ballots on Election Day or during Early Voting.

Source: Statistical Analysis of Voter Turnout for the November 8, 2022 Election as Submitted by the Counties

After Action Report

AUGUST 2023
Our elections are secure. As with past elections, the 2022 midterms were safely and securely administered across the state. Yet, some counties had challenges with placing voters in newly drawn districts following the most recent redistricting process.

The majority of Tennessee’s elections were uncontested. More than half — 53.9% — of November’s state legislative races featured only one candidate, leaving voters with no “choice.”

Voter turnout remains one of the lowest in the country. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 44.5% of Tennessee’s estimated eligible voting population voted in November 2022. That is nearly eight points behind the national average (52.2%) and ranks 48th, ahead of only three states — Arkansas, Indiana, and West Virginia. The Census Bureau’s estimates are the most reliable data currently available to compare voter turnout across states for the 2022 election.

Would-be Tennessee voters continue to miss out on casting a ballot. Calls to the national election protection hotline reveal that some Tennesseans do not have adequate information or struggle with some voting requirements, such as deadlines and returning absentee ballots on time.

Policy Recommendations

While Tennessee’s voter turnout continues to trail other states, policymakers should consider additional opportunities to further strengthen our state’s election systems and help encourage participation. Looking to best practices and examples from other states, Think Tennessee shares four recommendations to consider ahead of our next election cycle that could help improve voter turnout:

1. Consider extending the voter registration window.

2. Allow absentee ballots to be returned in person.

3. Consider expanding Convenience Vote Centers.

4. Increase support for voter education efforts.

In November 2022, Tennessee’s estimated turnout among eligible voters of 44.5% was among the lowest in the country.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Voter and Registration in the Election of November 2022.
Tennessee's low voter turnout is consistent with past midterm elections but continues to trail other states.

Voter Turnout and Choice:

In this first election following the decennial redistricting process, turnout continued to trail most other states, few races were competitive, and election administration went well, with the exception of challenges with issuing the wrong ballot in a couple of counties.

Part 1

Voter Turnout and Choice:

In this first election following the decennial redistricting process, turnout continued to trail most other states, few races were competitive, and election administration went well, with the exception of challenges with issuing the wrong ballot in a couple of counties.
Tennessee’s voter turnout is one of the lowest in the country. Tennessee’s estimated turnout among eligible voters trails the national average and turnout rates in all but three states. At 44.5%, Tennessee’s turnout is 25.5 percentage points lower than the state with the highest turnout (Oregon, 70.0%), 6.7 points behind the national rate (52.2%), and is trailed only by Arkansas (43.9%), Indiana (41.9%), and West Virginia (38.4%).

November 2022 voter turnout as a percentage of eligible voting citizens is the fourth lowest (48th) in the nation.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2022

The vast majority of the 2022 races were uncompetitive. The 2022 ballot included races for governor, all nine U.S. House of Representative seats, all 99 state House of Representative seats, and 17 of the 33 state Senate seats. The majority of these races included only one candidate, leaving many voters without a “choice” to make.

Few candidates ran in August’s primary races. In the August primary elections, both the Republican and Democratic parties may field candidates for each race to compete in the November general election. Yet, more than half of the Senate (52.9%) and House (62.6%) primary races featured only one party fielding a candidate. Additionally, only 17.9% of August primary races (45 out of the 252 total possible) for the state legislature, governor, and Congress had more than one candidate running.

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While November races saw more choices for voters compared to August's primaries, nearly half of state legislative races still had only one candidate.

Of the 99 state House and 17 state Senate races on the ballot in November, 53.9% were unopposed, leaving voters with only one “choice” for the seat. Only one candidate ran in 54.6% of state House races and 47.1% of state Senate races.

Of the races where more than one candidate was running, the more competitive races were in August’s primaries.

August’s Democratic gubernatorial primary was decided by 0.6 points, whereas in November, Governor Lee won by a 32-point margin. Primary races for state legislative seats saw an average margin of victory of fewer than 30 points compared to 41 (House) and 50 (Senate) points in November’s general elections.

Only 30 (15.2%) of the 198 possible state House primary races were contested in August. Of those, the average margin of victory was 24.7 points, with 11 (36.7%) coming within 10 points or fewer. Whereas in November, the average margin of victory among the 45 (45.5%) contested races was 41.0 points. Only four (8.9%) races came within 10 points.

Six (17.7%) of the 34 possible state Senate primaries were contested in August and saw an average margin of victory of 28.5 points – with three (50%) decided by fewer than six points. And in November, the average margin of victory among the nine (52.9%) of the 17 state Senate races contested was 50.1 points, with the closest race determined by 24.6 points.

Only a few races in August and November were determined by close margins of victory.

In total, 18 races (out of 378) were determined by fewer than 10 percentage points: 14 August primaries — the Democratic gubernatorial, 10 state House, and three Senate races — and four November state House general elections.

Six August primaries and one November general election were decided by fewer than 200 votes.

In seven of the 378 races in both August and November, the winning candidate was determined by fewer than 200 votes.

August's primaries saw closer races than in November's general election.
Voter Experience

Overall, Tennessee’s election administration went smoothly, though voters in some counties received incorrect ballots following the recent redistricting process. Election experiences shared by both election administrators (through surveys) and voters (through hotline calls) demonstrate both positive takeaways and opportunities for further strengthening of our election system.

Tennessee’s first election post-redistricting after the 2020 census resulted in some mistakes.

Part 2

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A December report examining the issues in Davidson County identified “human error” as the root cause. Election commission staff continued to make updates to the voter rolls and files after the final verification stage had been made, leading to some confusion and discrepancies.17

Ballot Issue

Davidson County (Districts 5, 6, and 7), 437 voters cast the wrong ballot along with 50 voters in Shelby County (Districts 8 and 9).

Of the 437 affected Davidson County voters, 117 cast provisional ballots for the correct congressional district that would have been counted in the event of a close race.

Election administrators shared positive takeaways from November 2022.

Voter Engagement Was as Expected

All 15 respondents answered the question “How do you feel about the level of voter engagement in your county this election cycle?” The majority felt that voter turnout in their counties was “average” or “expected” (73.3%), 20% indicated it was “lower than normal turnout” and 13.3% indicated it was “higher” than normal.

Voter Experience

Overall, Tennessee’s election administration went smoothly, though voters in some counties received incorrect ballots following the recent redistricting process. Election experiences shared by both election administrators (through surveys) and voters (through hotline calls) demonstrate both positive takeaways and opportunities for further strengthening of our election system.
What Worked Well, What Was Challenging

Most of the respondents to the multiple-choice question of what went particularly well this election cycle indicated “poll worker recruitment and training” (50%) and “sharing information with voters, e.g., about new districts or polling locations” (42.9%).

Some shared additional measures they found particularly helpful, such as voter trainings — including role-playing where participants took turns playing the role of voter and poll worker — and video presentations about the primary election process shared on the county’s election website and with local media outlets.

In response to the multiple choice question of what they consider to have been the biggest challenges this cycle, most indicated “poll worker recruitment and training” (46.2%) and “updating post-redistricting” (38.5%). Some respondents shared additional challenges of voters not updating their address after a move and issues with voters who thought they had registered at other state agencies but officials did not receive those applications.

Support for Voter Education Efforts

The majority of the nine respondents said “social media and/or website features sharing information” (77.8%) would help support additional voter education efforts.

Tennessee voters asked questions and reported challenges to a national election protection hotline.

The Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law operated their national election protection hotline, 866-OUR-VOTE, where voters across the country could seek help and share challenges that they encountered. Tennessee voters made 221 calls during November’s election cycle.

Most callers (61.1%) sought information — on whether they were registered, where their polling place was, or inquiring about the status of their absentee ballot — while the remainder (43.3%) reported a challenge — not being able to cast a ballot because they hadn’t registered to vote in time or not being able to cast an absentee ballot because they had registered online.

Some calls were categorized as both questions and issues, so the total does not add up to 100%.

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Think Tennessee Analysis

Calls were classified as either a “question” or “issue” and categorized into 12 areas based on the reason for the call. These areas included: seven categories of questions, e.g., information on polling place location, confirming voter registration status, and inquiring about the status of absentee ballots, and five categories of issues, e.g., not appearing on the voter rolls, and long lines or ballot issues.

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Voter registration calls included those asking whether they were registered or how a recent move would affect their registration status and reporting issues, such as believing that they should be registered despite not appearing on the voter rolls.

At least 29 callers were unable to cast a ballot because they either did not appear on the voter rolls or because they missed the registration deadline. Some calls appeared to be administrative errors, e.g., an incorrect date of birth listed on file, or the voter believed they had registered at a state agency. But 16 callers missed the voter registration deadline either because they weren’t aware of it, or they hadn’t changed their registration after moving.

Voters who had moved since voting in their last election couldn’t cast ballots because they didn’t register in time. Out-of-state moves: One caller thought he would be automatically registered when he received his Tennessee driver’s license, and another moved after the 30-day voter registration deadline had passed. County-to-county moves: Some callers didn’t know they had to re-register in their new county, and some had re-registered but had done so after the registration deadline had passed. Moves within the same county: A handful of callers were not sure if they would be allowed to cast a ballot since they hadn’t updated their voter registration record with their new address.

Most of the calls about polling places (56.2%) came from voters looking to find where they could cast their ballot. The remaining calls dealt with polling place procedure — questions about Voter ID and polling place accessibility — while a small handful shared concerns about people outside the polling place and long lines.

After the most recent redistricting cycle, many voters were placed into new districts or assigned new Election Day polling places. Some callers looking for their polling place knew that they might have a new one this year, while other calls came from voters who went to the wrong polling place because they didn’t realize it had changed since they last voted.

Voter Registration
(53 calls)

Which polling place to use depends on when and where you vote.

Polling Places
(73 calls)

Moving affects voting eligibility differently.

Polling places (73 calls)

Which polling place to use depends on when and where you vote.

Which polling place to use depends on when and where you vote.
Most calls from voters reporting to have received the wrong or incomplete ballots came from those in Davidson County who had been assigned to the wrong congressional district, although another 11 callers reported they believed something had been missing from their ballot.

Early voters in Davidson County who had been assigned to the wrong congressional district were able to cast provisional ballots for the correct district on Election Day. Over a dozen calls came from Davidson voters either reporting this issue or seeking to verify this information. Two callers — one out of town and the other sick — expressed concern that they were unable to take advantage of this fix.

Additional issues with incorrect ballots included reports that some races — in all categories, state legislative, governor, and congressional races — had been missing from callers' ballots.

Most calls about absentee voting were from voters seeking help with applying for an absentee ballot or inquiring about the status of their absentee ballot or application. A few callers flagged concerns, such as whether their absentee ballot would arrive in time and not being able to vote absentee because they registered online.

Some callers worried that their absentee ballot wouldn't arrive on time. Some callers flagged concerns that they either hadn't yet received their absentee ballot or that it didn't appear that the election commission had yet received their completed ballot.

A voter who had moved to a new county could not vote absentee because they had registered online. A caretaker of a voter with a disability shared that though the voter had previously been registered and voted in one Tennessee county, he had moved since the last election and re-registered in his new county online. The voter's request for an absentee ballot had been denied because voters who do not register in person must first vote in person before voting absentee in later elections.
**Policy Recommendations**

**Voter turnout in Tennessee continues to trail that of most other states.**

While some voters may decide not to participate because races are not competitive, some voters may wish to participate but are not able to because of a lack of awareness about how the process works or due to obstacles encountered along the way.

---

### Increase voter education efforts to help inform new and existing voters.

The many rules, steps, and deadlines can be confusing for inexperienced or occasional voters. Educational efforts should include those targeting new voters, e.g., “Register to Vote!” and also reminders to existing voters. For example:

- **Update your registration if you’ve moved.**
- **Review your ballot and flag questions or concerns with poll workers before you cast it.**
- **Request an absentee ballot early enough to allow it to travel through the mail.**

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**Absentee ballots in Tennessee can only be returned by mail.**

**In 48 states and DC, voters may also return absentee ballots in person to election offices or polling places.**

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**Part 3**

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While some voters may decide not to participate because races are not competitive, some voters may wish to participate but are not able to because of a lack of awareness about how the process works or due to obstacles encountered along the way.
Consider expanding Convenience Vote Centers to more counties. Establishing a Vote Center model on Election Day could help reduce the number of voters turned away from casting a ballot because they show up at the wrong polling precinct. The model has pros and cons and may not be a good fit for all counties – it may involve reducing the overall number of polling places in a county. But it increases convenience by allowing a voter to use any location within their county rather than their specific polling place. For counties who are able to meet the capacity and technology requirements and who believe the model will help increase rather than limit access for voters, Vote Centers may be a good option to consider to ensure voters can cast their ballots.

Consider extending the voter registration window. As we saw in 2020, would-be Tennessee voters were unable to cast ballots because they missed the voter registration window. Tennesseans are missing the opportunity to participate in elections because they act too late and are either not registered or their registration is not updated due to a recent move. Federal law requires voter-registration deadlines be set at no more than 30 days before an election, however many states set it closer to Election Day to allow more voters the opportunity to participate. Tennessee is one of 14 states with the longest possible window between the registration deadline and Election Day (28-30 days). Other states allow voters more time to register. Half of states — 24 and DC — offer Same Day Registration. Two of those states — Alaska and Rhode Island — also offer Same Day Registration only for presidential elections. In 24 states and DC, voter registration applications are received until a deadline — there is a period of time before an election where voters may not register — but voters may appear on Election Day and can register and cast a ballot at that time. Some states have different voter registration deadlines for different methods of registration, i.e., in person or online. The deadline shown here is the one closest to Election Day.

Tennessee is one of 14 states with the longest possible window between the registration deadline and Election Day.*

States with Same Day Registration*

*For presidential elections only in Alaska and Rhode Island
During Early Voting only in Montana and North Carolina
THINKTENNESSEE

Sign up for email alerts at ThinkTennessee.org.

Written by: Dawn Schluckebier, Advocacy and Government Relations Director

For further information, email us at info@thinktn.org.

1. Turnout in presidential elections is typically higher than midterms, particularly when an incumbent governor is running for a second term. Turnout comparisons are best made between similar election cycles.


3. ThinkTN uses an additional data source — the Elections Performance Index — to demonstrate voter turnout rankings for our State of the State Dashboard, but it is not yet available. See https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/map.


5. Some states have different deadlines for voters who register online or in person. For example, Nebraska has a voter registration deadline of 18 days for most modes of registration but 11 days for in-person registration. Nebraska Secretary of State. Registering to Vote. See https://sos.nebraska.gov/elections/registering-vote.


11. For example, each of the 99 state House seats could feature a Republican and a Democratic primary, totaling 198 possible state House primary races.

12. Only one party fielded a candidate in 62 out of the 99 state House races and nine out of the 17 state Senate races.

13. Races determined by fewer than 10 percentage points include 14 August races: Democratic Gubernatorial, House Districts 71, 32, 63, 64, 69, 75, 24, 43, 52, 97, and Senate Districts 19, 27, and 1; and four November races: House Districts 59, 67, 18, and 41.


15. Ibid

16. The ACLU and the League of Women Voters filed a lawsuit seeking an injunction to prevent further incorrect ballots from being distributed. As a result, the state agreed to allow voters who had cast ballots in the wrong district to re-cast a provisional ballot in the correct district. Those provisional ballots would only be counted if any of the races had been contested. Based on the margin of victory, this was not necessary. ACLU Tennessee. (November 4, 2022). See https://www.aclu-tn.org/aclu-tn-victorious-lawsuit-protect-davidson-county-voters-wake-ballot-errors/


18. The hotline was open for the full election cycle, including the August primary and Early Voting periods in both August and November.


20. Tenn. Code Ann. §2-6-202(e) In most other states (48 and DC), voters also have the option of returning absentee ballots in-person to election offices, polling places, or in some states through a ballot “dropbox.”


23. This includes Alaska and Rhode Island who offer Same Day Registration only for presidential elections and Montana and North Carolina who offer it only during the Early Voting period.