

# State of Our State: Education and Youth Civic Engagement



## Tennessee's Young Voters are Some of the Least Civically Engaged in the Country

**Education in Tennessee should prepare our students for college, career and full participation in civic life.** An informed and engaged citizenry keeps elected officials accountable, fosters civil public discourse, enhances community participation and promotes a more equitable society.(i) Moreover, voting, volunteering and activism are positively linked to young people's mental health, as well as staying in school and higher incomes later in life.(ii)

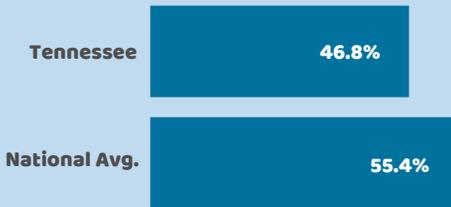
**Young people in Tennessee are less civically engaged than their national counterparts.** Engagement among young Tennessee voters is at a historic low: Tennessee ranked second to last in both youth voter registration and turnout after the 2016 presidential election. Young Tennesseans also volunteer in their communities less often than most young Americans.

**State education policy plays a key role in preparing students for college, career and civic life.** This brief provides an overview of the steps Tennessee has taken to improve civic education and discusses additional policies that have been shown effective in equipping students with the civic competencies that build responsible, thoughtful and engaged citizens.

### Youth Voter Registration

Out of 41 states for which data are available, Tennessee ranks 40th. Only Hawaii has a lower rate of youth registration.

#### Youth Voter Registration in 2016



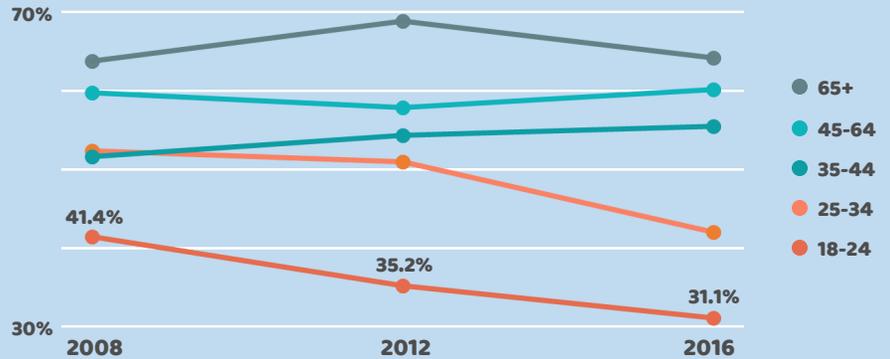
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The registration rate for Tennesseans 18-24 prior to the 2016 presidential election was well below the national average.(iii)

### Youth Voter Turnout

**Only a third of Tennesseans 18-24 (31.1%) voted in the 2016 presidential election,** one of the lowest turnout rates in the country (ranking 40th out of 41). Youth turnout declined 10 percentage points between 2008 and 2016.(iv)

#### Turnout in Presidential Elections in Tennessee



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### Millennial Volunteerism

Young Tennesseans volunteer less often than most of their peers across the country (ranking 34th). **About 1 in 5 Tennesseans (20.9%) born after 1982 volunteered in 2015.**



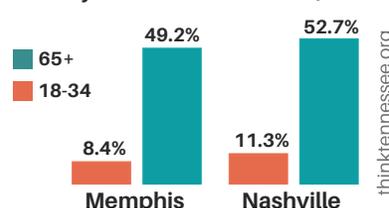
**Youth volunteerism has declined steadily in recent years.** Nearly one in four (24.5%) young people volunteered in 2013.(v)

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## Poor Civic Engagement Leaves Most Young Tennesseans Without a Political Voice

In mayoral elections, voters 65 or older have **16x** greater electoral power than voters 18-34 in Nashville, and they have **15x** greater electoral power than young voters in Memphis.

#### Mayoral Election Turnout, 2015



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In 2015, voters 18-34 in Nashville and Memphis had the lowest mayoral turnout rates, while voters 65 or older had the highest.(vi)

## Civic Education is Essential for Fostering a Strong Civic Culture Among Tennesseans

Experts agree that civic education curricula must include both knowledge-building and participatory components. But most states, including Tennessee, have typically adopted K-12 standards and curricula that focus on classroom instruction and discussion-based activities. **High-quality civic education helps foster student success in citizenship, college and career by developing three fundamental civic competencies:**(vii)

-  **Civic Knowledge:** an understanding of our system of government, policymaking processes and relevant concepts of history, geography and economics.
-  **Civic Skills:** abilities needed to be active and responsible participants in democracy, including information gathering, critical thinking, public dialogue and collaboration.
-  **Civic Dispositions:** democratic values, such as civic duty, personal efficacy, appreciation of diversity and concern for the rights and welfare of others.

Civic education experts point to **six proven practices** for developing these key civic competencies among students:(viii)

Proven Practice	Student Civic Impact	Required in TN K-12?
<b>1. Classroom instruction</b> in civics, government, history, law, economics and geography.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater political knowledge.</li> <li>• More likely to vote and more informed voting.(ix)</li> </ul>	High school students are required to complete three social studies credits, including U.S. History and Geography, World History and Geography, U.S. Government and Civics and Economics.(x)
<b>2. Discussion of current events and controversial issues.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater deliberative skills, political knowledge and interest.(xi)</li> </ul>	Social studies standards for grades 9-12 recommend—but do not require—classes that cover current events.(xii)
<b>3. Service-Learning (SL)</b> , combining classroom instruction with applied learning through community service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater self-efficacy, altruism, civic responsibility and voting habits.(xiii)</li> </ul>	SL is offered as a high school elective—not a requirement—for students in grades 10-12. The state specifies course standards and provides teacher training.(xiv)
<b>4. Extracurricular activities</b> that involve student-led voluntary associations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater sense of agency and stronger participation habits.(xv)</li> </ul>	Like most states, Tennessee does not have assessment metrics for these types of activities, making it difficult to measure the extent to which the state uses this practice for civic learning.(xvi)
<b>5. Student participation in school governance</b> , including management of their own classrooms and schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds civic skills and dispositions.</li> <li>• More likely to vote, volunteer and be politically active.(xvii)</li> </ul>	As above, most states, including Tennessee, do not include measures for participation in school governance for their accountability framework.
<b>6. Simulations of democratic processes</b> , such as mock voting and trials, legislative deliberation or model diplomacy programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased civic knowledge, political interest, public speaking, team work and critical thinking.(xviii)</li> </ul>	Tennessee's course standards and curriculum requirements do not include examples of this practice.

# Tennessee Should Continue Leading the Way by Building on Current Civic K-12 Education Practices

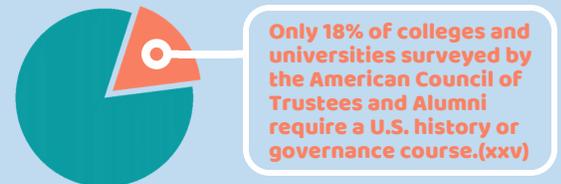
The Tennessee Department of Education uses innovative practices to assess its students' civic knowledge. The Secretary of State's office has also created some promising initiatives to encourage civic engagement among elementary and high school students.

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**Tennessee is the first state to require all school districts to implement a project-based assessment in civics** at least once in grades four through eight, and at least once in grades nine through twelve. The practice promotes a hands-on approach to civic learning beyond the classroom setting, requiring students to take initiative in seeking solutions to complex and authentic questions about public policy and government structure. There is no state-mandated format for the assessment, but each Local Education Agency develops its own standards.(xix)
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**State law requires students to take the United States citizenship and immigration test** during high school, though a passing grade is not a requirement for graduation. The Department of Education designates schools as a "U.S. Civics All-Star School" if all seniors earning a regular diploma also earn a passing grade (70 percent or higher).(xx)
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**The Secretary of State's office encourages students to be civically engaged through a variety of initiatives:**
  - **Tennessee Student Mock Election** - The Secretary of State's office provides instructions and lesson plans to schools interested in hosting their own mock elections. 231 schools and 57,961 students participated in the 2018 mock election.
  - **Annual Civics Essay Contest** - Students submit essays on an annual theme related to their role as citizens. Winners receive a TNStars 529 Program College Savings scholarship, and a trip to the State Capitol.
  - **Civic education and engagement teacher and student resources** - The Secretary of State's website offers voter registration information and various resources for classroom instruction, including lesson plans.(xxi)

## Higher Education Also Plays a Role in Preparing Tennesseans for Democratic Engagement

The U.S. Department of Education in 2012 called for a renewed commitment in higher education to civic learning. It argued that, beyond workforce preparation and training, higher education must also fulfill a civic mission to prepare citizens for democratic engagement.(xxii) This call to action spurred **a growing movement among dozens of colleges, universities, and organizations (collectively known as the "Campus Compact," or CC) to launch new civic-engagement initiatives.** About half of CC's member colleges and universities signed on to the "civic action plan" created in 2015.(xxiii)

Still, civic course requirements are rare in higher education. The adoption of civic education "proven practices" among colleges and universities has been much more fragmented than K-12 systems, as course and teaching standards and requirements tend to be made at the institutional level.(xxiv)

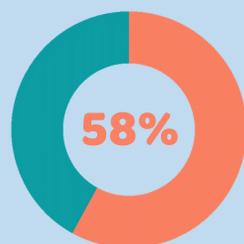


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### One area in which higher education has led the way in civic education is service-learning.

The 2016 CC survey of nearly 396-member colleges and universities found that more than half report that some portion of their graduates took at least one community-based learning course before graduating.(xxvi)

Colleges in which Some Graduates Took at Least One Service-Learning Course, 2016



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### Service-learning in post-secondary institutions is positively linked to multiple student success outcomes, including civic engagement.(xxvii)



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## Higher Education Institutions in Tennessee Have Focused on Service Learning

The connections between higher education and civic engagement have not gone unnoticed here in Tennessee. Colleges and universities in our state have nurtured this key relationship through several projects that encourage community engagement and service learning.



**Tennessee Service-Learning Consortium (TN-SLC)** – 16 colleges and universities in Tennessee belong to the TN-SLC, a membership association that promotes active citizenship as an aim of higher education. Through efforts like economic-impact analyses, professional development forums and legislative advocacy, the TN-SLC helps its member institutions increase student involvement in academic and co-curricular-based public service.(xxviii)



**Tennessee Promise Service Requirement** – To be eligible for two years of tuition-free education at a community college or technical school, Tennessee Promise students must complete a minimum of eight hours of community service prior to each semester. In the first year of the Tennessee Promise, 16,291 students completed a collective 776,985 hours of community service.(xxix)

### Lessons from Other States: Participatory Course Requirements, Task Forces and Preregistration



#### K-12 Curriculum Frameworks Requiring Participatory or Interactive Courses in Civic Learning

**Civic education is incomplete without the inclusion of programs that teach students the practice of civic engagement**, including service-learning requirements geared toward civic learning and simulations of democratic processes.

- **North Carolina and Nebraska** are two of 11 states that include civic learning and democratic simulations as key components of their K-12 social studies course standards and link these practices specifically to developing necessary skills in civic engagement.(xxx)
- **Illinois’s Democracy Schools** program recognizes schools that sustain a schoolwide commitment to high-quality civic learning. These schools receive faculty training and financial support to pursue civic-learning improvement plans. (xxxi)



#### Task Forces

Massachusetts, Illinois, Alaska and Oregon have appointed task forces that bring together various sectors to assess and make recommendations for civic-education improvements in their states.(xxxii)

- In 2014, Massachusetts became the first state in the country to commit to a statewide civic learning policy for higher education. Massachusetts has adopted statewide undergraduate civic course designations and metrics for assessing civic learning outcomes. This was the result of extensive collaboration and strategic planning between the Massachusetts Department of Education, the Board of Higher Education and the state legislature.(xxxiii)



#### Preregistration of Young Voters

**Preregistration, practiced in 17 states and Washington, D.C., allows individuals 16 or 17 years of age to register to vote.** This practice does not lower the voting age but allows young voters to be eligible to cast a ballot when they turn 18, the voting age for all state and federal elections. Preregistration also opens up opportunities for practical learning, as schools can use preregistration activities as an interactive civic-education opportunity.

- The probability of young people voting in states with preregistration laws increased by an average of two to eight percentage points. In Florida specifically, preregistration increased youth turnout by up to 14 percent.(xxxiv)
- As required by federal law, Tennessee allows 17-year-olds to register to vote provided they will be 18 years of age by the next Election Day.(xxxv)

## How Might Tennessee Further Improve Youth Participation and Civic Education?

Tennessee has taken important steps toward adopting curriculum requirements and policies aimed at creating more civically engaged youth. But given our state's low level of youth civic participation, we must continue to improve the effectiveness of civic education. Below are some ideas for state policymakers to consider.



### Build on Tennessee's innovation in K-12 civic education:

- **Expand Tennessee's K-12 course requirements**, standards and curriculum to include widely recommended civic education practices for interactive activities and community engagement. Revised requirements would specifically include service learning and simulations of democratic processes and procedures.
- **Develop a model project-based civic assessment that Local Education Agencies (such as school boards) can follow**, facilitating uniform implementation across school districts.



### Take steps toward adopting a state higher education policy on civic education through initiatives that leverage and coordinate work across sectors.

- One approach would be to create a **task force on civic education and engagement** that brings together the governor's office, the state legislature and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to establish a shared definition and vision of civic learning and engagement and to develop policy recommendations.



### Continue to facilitate access to voting for young Tennesseans:

- Include preregistration as a component of Tennessee's broader civic-education efforts.
- Ensure that, as required by state law, all county election commissions are conducting at least one voter registration drive each year at every public and private high school in their county.(xxxvi)
- Expand Project Register, a bipartisan effort to register eligible voters before they graduate from high school, beyond Middle Tennessee.(xxxvii)

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