

It's Time to Vote: Where We Can Increase Civic Engagement Ahead of This Year's Elections

FACT SHEET

Tennessee trails most other states in two key indicators of civic engagement: rates of voter registration and turnout. This year's presidential election cycle gives Tennessee another chance to improve our civic engagement rankings.

ThinkTennessee analyzed the most recent voter registration data from December 2023 and averaged voter turnout rates from the last three presidential election cycles for every county to identify opportunities where we can increase both voter registration and participation.ⁱ

KEY FINDINGS:



Voter registration can increase in both rural areas and major urban areas.

- Rural counties have the most room for growth in voter registration rates.
- Larger counties, particularly ones with the "Big 4" cities, have the largest number of unregistered Tennesseans.



More registered voters across the state can cast ballots.

- Voter turnout rates can increase the most in rural counties.
- More registered voters could be participating in both rural and urban counties.

Tennessee consistently ranks among the lowest states in voter registration and turnout rates.



In a comparison of voter registration and turnout rates, Tennessee consistently trails almost all other states in the country in both presidential and midterm election cycles. Most recently, in November 2022, Tennessee was 42nd in registration and 51st—dead last—in turnout.ⁱⁱ

Even when Tennessee broke state records for voter turnout in 2020, we still ranked 47th nationally and far behind neighboring states.ⁱⁱⁱ

TENNESSEE CIVIC RANKINGS FROM 2012 TO 2022

Where Tennessee ranks among the 50 states and D.C. in **voter registration** and **voter turnout** rates (#1 is highest)

2012*	2014	2016*	2018	2020*	2022
41 st 46 th	40 th 50 th	45 th 49 th	48 th 44 th	41 st 47 th 83.5% 59.8%	42 nd 51 st

CIVIC RANKINGS IN NEIGHBORING STATES: NOVEMBER 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

National average: 87.3% and 67.9%

GEORGIA	KENTUCKY	ALABAMA
28 th 25 th 87.5% 68.0%	23 rd 35 th 88.0% 64.9%	21 st 42 nd 88.2% 63.1%

* Presidential election year

Source: MIT Election Data & Science Lab's Election Performance Index

Voter registration can increase in both rural areas and major urban areas.



Rural areas have the most potential for growth in *registration rates*, while major cities and their surrounding areas have the *highest number* of unregistered Tennesseans.^{iv}

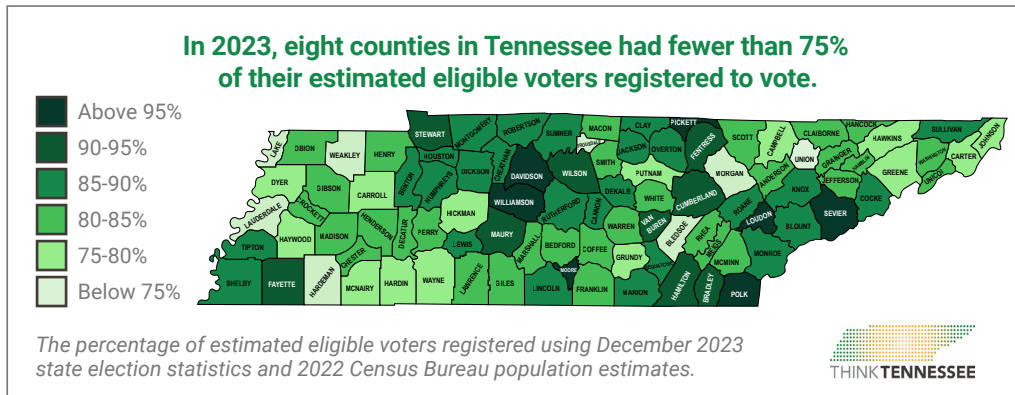
Rural counties have the most room for growth in voter registration rates.

In 2023, 42 of Tennessee's 95 counties had a voter registration rate above 85%—just higher than the 2022 nationwide average (84.4%).^v Of those, 16 counties saw rates above 90%.^{vi} Yet, in eight counties, all rural, fewer than 75% of the estimated eligible voters were registered.^{vii}

Those counties, such as Lake (56.9%), Trousdale (66.4%), Lauderdale (67.5%), and Morgan (68.2%), represent the greatest opportunity for increasing voter registration rates.^{viii}

Larger counties, particularly ones in and around the "Big 4" cities, have the largest number of unregistered Tennesseans.

While larger counties tend to have higher voter registration rates, they also have the largest numbers of unregistered residents. As of 2023, there are an estimated 156,000 unregistered residents in Davidson, Shelby, Knox, and Hamilton counties (home to Tennessee's "Big 4" cities of Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga).^{ix}



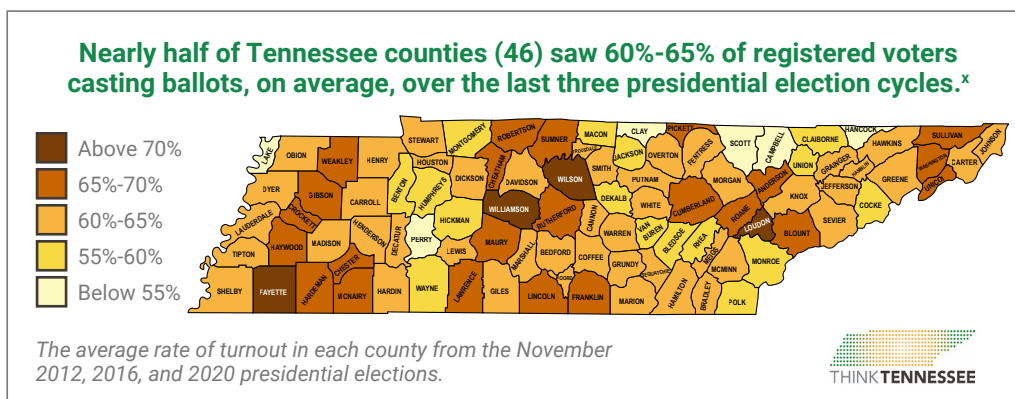
More registered voters across the state can cast ballots.



Voter turnout can increase in counties where turnout rates are lowest and where there is a large gap between voter registration and turnout rates.

Voter turnout rates can increase the most in rural counties.

The lowest average turnout rates of registered voters appear in rural counties, particularly those in the northeast and along the West-Middle Grand Division line.^{xi} Fewer than 60% of registered voters cast a recent presidential ballot in 22 counties, with six (Hancock, Clay, Scott, Campbell, Lake, and Perry) averaging less than 55%.^{xii}



However, more registered voters could be participating in both rural and urban counties.

High registration rates do not necessarily result in high voter turnout rates. Rural Polk, Clay, and Sevier counties have a voter registration rate over 88% but fewer than 60% of registered voters cast recent ballots.^{xiii} Similarly, counties with the "Big 4" cities have registration rates above 85%, but none averaged above 65% turnout.^{xiv}



Focusing efforts on the areas with the most opportunities can help increase civic engagement.

Voter turnout increased in every—particularly rural—Tennessee county from 2016 to 2020.^{xv} Focusing registration and get-out-the-vote efforts on parts of the state with the most opportunities can help efforts to continue the trend this year.

References and Notes

- ⁱ December 1, 2023, Six Month Summary Report (July 9, 2024) ("Election Statistics"), Tennessee Secretary of State. Available at <https://sos-prod.tnsosgovfiles.com/s3fs-public/document/RptSixMonthSumDec2023.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱ See Election Performance Index. MIT Election Data & Science Lab. Available at <https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/indicators>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Tennessee Breaks Voter Turnout and Participation Records, Tennessee Secretary of State (November 2020). Available at <https://sos.tn.gov/press-releases/tennessee-breaks-voter-turnout-and-participation-records>. Voter turnout can be measured in two ways: by registered voters or by estimated eligible voting population. The 2020 record turnout of 69.3% is based on turnout among registered Tennessee voters, while MIT's Election Performance Index of national rankings uses the total number of people who cast a ballot, divided by the eligible voting population (which is based on population estimates).
- ^{iv} The registration rate is calculated by dividing the number of registered voters (sourced from the state's 2023 Election Statistics) by the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent citizen voting-age population (CVAP) estimates from 2022. The CVAP is estimated using responses from the American Community Survey (ACS) and represents the number of U.S. citizens aged 18 and older but does not account for other ineligibility factors, like felony convictions. Estimated number of unregistered voters is the difference between CVAP and registered voters. See December 1, 2023, Six Month Summary Report (July 9, 2024) ("Election Statistics"). See also U.S. Census Bureau's ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates (2022). Available at [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2022.DP05?g=040XX00US47\\$0500000&moe=false](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2022.DP05?g=040XX00US47$0500000&moe=false).
- ^v Using the state's 2023 Election Statistics and Census Bureau's CVAP estimates, we found registration rates for all 95 counties. Forty-two Tennessee counties have a registration rate that exceeds 85%—which is higher than the nationwide average from MIT's Election Performance Index (2022) of 84.42%.
- ^{vi} Population estimates can result in some counties appearing to have over 100% registration rates when the CVAP exceeds the reported total voter registration or if voter list maintenance is conducted at different times across counties.
- ^{vii} Using the state's 2023 Election Statistics and Census Bureau's CVAP estimates, eight counties had registration rates below 75%, all in more rural parts of the state.
- ^{viii} The remaining counties with less than 75% registration rate were: Weakley (70.3%), Hardeman (72.2%), Bledsoe (73.4%), and Union (74.1%).
- ^{ix} An estimate of the number of unregistered voters is the difference between the eligible voting population (sourced from the U.S. Census) and number of registered voters in each county (sourced from the state's 2023 Election Statistics). Rutherford, Washington, and Montgomery counties also have a large share of unregistered residents, totaling an estimated 71,800 people.
- ^x Using the number of votes cast by registered voters as reported by the state for the 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential elections, Tennessee's average voter turnout as a percentage of registered voters across all counties was 64.36%.
- ^{xi} Montgomery county is an outlier as a more populous county with turnout significantly below 60% (at 55.2%).
- ^{xii} Using the average rate of turnout for each Tennessee county for the 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential elections, voter turnout among registered voters was below 60% in 22 counties.
- ^{xiii} Using the state's 2023 Election Statistics and U.S. Census CVAP, Polk, Clay, and Sevier have relatively high voter registration, while each have below average voter turnout among registered voters. Montgomery county is an example of a more populous county that has higher registration rate (89.1%) with much lower turnout (55.2%).
- ^{xiv} Davidson, Hamilton, Knox, and Shelby counties (home of the Big 4 cities) all have relatively high registration rates compared to other counties, while turnout rates are consistently average for the state.
- ^{xv} Each of Tennessee's 95 counties experienced an increase in voter turnout as a percentage of registered voters from 2016 to 2020 presidential elections—ranging from a slight 2.85% increase in Davidson to a 16.22% increase in Morgan.

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Written by:

Dawn Schluckebier, Advocacy and Government Relations Director and Alex Brown, Policy Associate

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