

Why is Tennessee dead last when it comes to voting?

Tyler Whetstone, Knoxville News Sentinel

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Katie Cahill, of the Howard H Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy at the University of Tennessee, on the state's voting registration and turnout numbers. Tyler Whetstone, USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee



(Photo: News Sentinel Photo Archives)

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When Dr. Katie Cahill moved to Knoxville last year from Indiana she was prepared to exercise her voice and vote in the city's council elections.

She registered to vote, but when she made her way to the polling location on the University of Tennessee's campus on Election Day, it didn't quite work out.

Cahill, the associate director of the Howard H Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy at UT, knows a thing or two about elections, but she didn't know that while the Baker Center was a polling location, it wasn't her polling location.

Cahill joined the majority of Tennesseans in most elections by not voting.

Tennessee last in voter turnout, near bottom for registration

According to the [PEW Charitable Trust's much-cited analysis of the 2014 midterm elections](#), the most recent figures they have, the state of Tennessee was a dismal 40th in voter registration at 74 percent of the population, and was 50th in voter turnout, just 28.5 percent, that November.

This August's federal and state primary and the following general election in November are the same stakes as the 2014 midterms, two years after a presidential election.

Cahill is hoping her work in breaking down the state's voter registration and participation numbers by county will encourage leaders and voters in poor-performing counties to change those numbers this fall.



Retired school teacher Delores Jones checks in at The Love Kitchen during early voting in Knoxville, Tennessee on Tuesday, July 17, 2018. (Photo: News Sentinel Photo Archives)

“Voting is a very local phenomenon, right? People do it inside of their communities, for their communities, so we wanted to think about counting how the data is reported so it’s important that counties understand where they’re at in relationship to other counties in the state and the national trend,” she said Monday in her office inside the Baker Center.

A democracy, not partisan, issue

Cahill said voting is the bottom floor, the most basic level of civic engagement. Tennessee is failing that basic level, she said.



"I Voted" stickers at The Love Kitchen during early voting in Knoxville, Tennessee on Tuesday, July 17, 2018. (Photo: News Sentinel Photo Archives)

“I think that sometimes it can be shocking ... in terms of voter turnout, that 70 percent of people basically let other people make decisions for them (in Tennessee),” she said.

“I think it is shocking to let someone else decide for you, but I also think that we have to do a better job of letting people know where to go, how to get registered and to make those barriers as low as possible.”

Voter registration often gets painted as a partisan issue, but Cahill said she’s simply trying to get people registered.

"I guess I've never really considered it as a partisan issue," she said. "It's a democracy issue. If you have a lot of people who aren't engaged or aren't sharing their view, then it makes it really difficult to represent them."

The [PEW study](#) didn't take into account Tennessee's new online voter registration process that began in 2017, a point made by the state's Republican Party when asked about the PEW numbers.

"Republicans in the legislature recently enacted online voter registration in Tennessee, adding simplicity and convenience to the registration process," spokeswoman Candice Dawkins said in an emailed statement. "The Tennessee Republican Party has always focused, and will continue to focus on, encouraging Republican voters across the state to get out and vote."



A "Vote Here" sign points voters to The Love Kitchen during early voting in Knoxville, Tennessee on Tuesday, July 17, 2018. (Photo: News Sentinel Photo Archives)

Dawkins also pointed to a [fluctuating PEW score for the state](#). In 2014, the year referenced earlier, the state was ranked 34th in the nation in composite rankings. In previous years it has been as high as 22.

Tennessee Democratic Party Chair Mary Mancini said this cycle's elections are too important not to be registered to vote and be an active voter.

"The only way to increase voter turnout numbers is for Tennesseans to register to vote, double-check to make sure they are still registered, and then make a concrete plan to vote," she said in an emailed statement. "Voters can register and double-check to make sure they are still registered at IWillVote.com."

Voter registration numbers

Cahill and a colleague split the state into four quadrants to more easily see which counties struggle the most with voting registration and turnout. Their data is based on voter registration in December 2017.

Registration by Tennessee County (December 2017)



ending active) for December 1, 2017 from Tennessee's Secretary of State Office (<https://sos.tn.gov/products/elections/election-statistics>) and US Census July 1, 2016 estimates (<https://nces.naystpages/index.xhtml>). Total population is used as a base of registration rates rather than voting-age population since that information is only available at the state level. 1.2% registration is based on data from the US Census on the total citizen population and the percent registered from November 2016 (<https://www.census.gov/data/tables>)

A map of Tennessee counties and how they perform in active voter registration. (Photo: Howard H Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy at the University of Tennessee)

Of the state's 95 counties, only five are above the national average of 65 percent in active voter registration numbers. Their data includes active voters, or voters who have voted in one of the last two general elections, as a percentage of the total population of the county.

Top 10 counties for voter registration based on population

Polk, 76.34

Moore, 73.64

Van Buren, 70.26

Pickett, 69.37

Clay, 65.96

Williamson, 63.65

Fayette, 62.84

Humphreys, 62.10

Hancock, 61.09

Cumberland, 60.74

Bottom 10 counties for voter registration based on population

Lake, 41.80

Lauderdale, 44.00

Bedford, 45.08

Morgan, 46.65

Weakley, 46.66

Carter, 46.81

Campbell, 47.07

Montgomery, 47.31

Jefferson, 47.32

McMinn, 47.42