



CIVIC KNOWLEDGE IN TENNESSEE



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**A Report by the Institute of American Civics
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In conjunction with the Social Work Office of Research and Public Service (SWORPS) at the University of Tennessee, the Institute of American Civics conducted a statewide survey (The Tennessee Civic Survey) in April/May 2024 examining civic knowledge and participation by Tennesseans. The results are concerning and show the pressing need for more attention to be paid to civics instruction across the state. While, on average, the youngest respondents demonstrated the greatest shortcomings of civic knowledge, older Tennesseans were far from exempt. Another concerning feature emerged from the survey results: the political climate has pushed a significant percentage of Tennesseans away from participating politically in everything from family discussions to placing a political sign in their yard.

Three sets of results are particularly worth highlighting.

1. Only about half of Tennesseans know that Tennessee has its own state constitution.

Of survey respondents, 51 percent correctly answered that Tennessee has its own state constitution. About a quarter thought that there was no state constitution and that Tennessee relies purely on the national constitution, while the other quarter said they were simply not sure.

A slight majority of Tennesseans with 2-year or 4-year degrees knew that the state has its own constitution, as did a majority of those over 65 years of age. No other groups by age or educational attainment shared that distinction.

In reality, the United States is a federal republic in which the states all have their own separate state constitutions to establish the structure of state government, define the powers of the state government and local governments, and help define the rights of citizens. States are accountable to the federal constitution, and state constitutions cannot give state governments more powers or individuals fewer rights than the federal constitution mandates. Within those limits, however, state constitutions have broad

freedom. Nebraska has a unicameral (one-house) state legislature; Texas has eight separate statewide elected executive offices; the Florida state constitution establishes a right to a “high quality education;” and Tennessee, among many other things, has written a prohibition on a state income tax into its state constitution.

Q.: As far as you know, does Tennessee have its own Constitution or does it just rely on the national one?

51% Its own
 22% Rely on National One
 27% Not sure

| Report Knowing by Education | HS or Less | 2 or 4 yr Degree | All |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Its Own | 42% | 60% | 51% |
| Rely on National One | 25% | 19% | 22% |
| Not sure | 33% | 21% | 27% |

| Report Knowing by Age | 18-30 | 31-45 | 46-65 | Over 65 | All |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Its Own | 43% | 50% | 50% | 56% | 51% |
| Rely on National One | 32% | 22% | 35% | 14% | 22% |
| Not sure | 25% | 28% | 25% | 30% | 27% |

2. Fewer than half of respondents say they know who their state legislators are, and only around one-third their county commissioner or city councilmember. The age group 18-30 has by far the worst level of knowledge of the office-holders at all levels except for city council, where everyone is weak

Tennesseans fare best when asked if they can identify executives at the state, county, or city level. More than 8 in 10 respondents across education levels said they knew who the governor was, as did more than 7 in 10 across age groups. More than half claimed to know the name of their county mayor across education levels and across ages starting with 30. Among city-dwellers, majorities across educational levels and ages also said they could identify the mayor of their city or town.

Federal Senators and House members also had overall levels of recognition approaching three in five--58 percent for Senators, 55 percent for House members. That means, of course, that more than two in five Tennesseans say they do not know who their federal representatives are. That figure rises to more than half of those with an educational level of high school or less, and around three in five of 18-30 year olds.

State senators, state representatives, county commissions, and city council members/aldermen are least well known. The percentage of Tennesseans who claim to know their names ranges from a high of 44 percent (for state senators) to a low of 30 percent (for city council members/aldermen). Only a bit more than one-quarter of 18-30 year olds said they knew the names of their city council members or county commissioners.

One caveat about this data should be mentioned, and it does not offer a more hopeful picture. Respondents were asked whether they knew the names of officeholders, but they were not asked to actually provide the questioner with the names of the officials. Verification of the accuracy of the names of ten officials, seven of whom are not statewide, provided by over 1,000 respondents scattered throughout Tennessee, was not feasible. It is reasonable to assume that actual knowledge of officials is at a level somewhat below what respondents are willing to say, so percentages reported in the survey represent a best case.

It is understandable that busy people might have difficulty keeping track of the large number of government representatives at all levels. Moreover, it is typical that young people, who have often not put down roots in a community, are less well-informed about local affairs than their elders. Nevertheless, the survey results are troubling. There can be no accountability to the governed, either at election time or in between elections, if citizens do not know who represents them and is making laws on their behalf. As with the Tennessee constitution, the data here reveal a particularly concerning vacuum of knowledge about government at the state and local level, which are essential components of our decentralized system of federalism in America. The very low levels of knowledge among the young highlight the importance of efforts to reinvigorate the teaching of civics in our schools.

Q: I am going to read you a list of political offices. I'd like you to tell me whether you know who holds each office.

| Report Knowing by Education | HS or Less | 2 or 4 yr Degree | All |
|--|-------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| The Governor | 81% | 89% | 85% |
| Your County Mayor | 55% | 66% | 61% |
| United States Senators | 47% | 69% | 58% |
| Your Representative in the United States Congress | 44% | 66% | 55% |
| Do you know who represents you in the Tennessee State Senate | 37% | 50% | 44% |
| How about your representative in the Tennessee House | 32% | 43% | 38% |
| Your County Commissioner? | 32% | 35% | 34% |
| IF LIVE IN CITY OR TOWN. Do you happen to know who the mayor is? | 60% | 68% | 59% |
| Your city councilmember or alderman? | 27% | 33% | 30% |

| Report Knowing by Age | 18-30 | 31-45 | 46-65 | Over 65 | All |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| The Governor | 72% | 87% | 88% | 89% | 85% |
| Your County Mayor | 49% | 67% | 63% | 60% | 61% |
| United States Senators | 42% | 59% | 63% | 63 | 58% |
| Your Representative in the United States Congress | 43% | 54% | 58% | 59% | 55% |
| Do you know who represents you in the Tennessee State Senate | 37% | 47% | 45% | 44% | 44% |
| How about your representative in the Tennessee House | 32% | 39% | 39% | 40% | 38% |
| Your County Commissioner? | 29% | 34% | 37% | 31% | 34% |
| IF LIVE IN CITY OR TOWN. Do you happen to know who the mayor is? | 51% | 62% | 59% | 59% | 59% |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Your city councilmember or alderman? | 27% | 32% | 33% | 27% | 30% |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

3. The polarized political atmosphere seems to have had a chilling effect on Tennesseans’ willingness to engage politically in a number of ways. Rebuilding civility in politics will not be an easy task. While most seem to want it, there is no consensus about what it means.

Nearly half of Tennesseans say they are somewhat or extremely worried about their reputation being harmed by a political opinion they post on social media or say at work. Additionally, one-third are less likely to discuss politics with friends and family than ten years ago. Depending on the office, at least two in five are less likely to put up a political yard sign than they were ten years ago. A non-trivial but lower number said they were more likely to do those things, and many said they were equally likely. But it is a worrisome sign that so many report being discouraged from open expressions of their political views. Ideally, our democratic society would be advancing toward a scenario in which no one avoids expression for fear of the consequences. Moreover, younger respondents were substantially more likely to say they were “extremely worried” about the consequences to them of political expression in social media posts, at work, or in family conversations. On this score, we are headed in the wrong direction.

Although a restoration of civility is a desirable outcome, there is no consensus among Tennesseans about what “civility” means in this context. Half defined the term as “Respect for the positions of those with who we disagree,” while a quarter said “Being polite and avoiding controversial issues” and another quarter identified it as “Being constructive in engaging other people.” Our position would be that a healthy democratic society would combine the first and third elements—respect for those with whom you disagree combined with constructive engagement with those people. On the other hand, avoiding controversial issues is not possible in a robust democracy and is not desirable even if it were possible. Democratic self-government requires candid deliberation over difficult issues. Indeed, while about two-thirds of Tennesseans think talk of more civility is an attempt to “make things better,” the other one-third says such talk is really just an attempt to “avoid discussing tough issues.” Younger respondents were the most likely to define “civility” as avoiding controversial topics and to conclude that avoidance was also what other people meant when they talk about the need for civility. Clearly, those seeking to build a more civil polity face several challenges, including how to make clear that the right goal is constructive and respectful engagement around legitimate disagreements, not avoidance of difficult topics.

Q. Would you say you are extremely worried, somewhat worried, or not at all worried about your reputation being damaged by an opinion about politics by:

| | Not at all Worried | Somewhat Worried | Extremely Worried |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Something you post on social media?* | 53% | 33% | 14% |
| Something you say at work? | 56% | 29% | 15% |
| Something you say to Family Members? | 74% | 20% | 6% |

*Percentages are among those who post.

Q. Would you say you are extremely worried, somewhat worried, or not at all worried about your reputation being damaged by an opinion about politics by something you post in social media?

| Report being: | 18-30 | 31-45 | 46-65 | Over 65 | All |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Not at all worried | 49% | 50% | 55% | 60% | 53% |
| Somewhat worried | 31% | 33% | 34% | 32% | 33% |
| Extremely worried | 19% | 17% | 11% | 8% | 14% |

*Percentages are among those who post.

Q. Would you say you are extremely worried, somewhat worried, or not at all worried about your reputation being damaged by an opinion about politics by something you say at work?

| Report being: | 18-30 | 31-45 | 46-65 | Over 65 | All |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Not at all worried | 46% | 54% | 60% | 72% | 56% |
| Somewhat worried | 33% | 31% | 26% | 26% | 29% |
| Extremely worried | 21% | 16% | 15% | 3% | 15% |

Q. Would you say you are extremely worried, somewhat worried, or not at all worried about your reputation being damaged by an opinion about politics by something you say to a family member?

| Report being: | 18-30 | 31-45 | 46-65 | Over 65 | All |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-----|
| Not at all worried | 62% | 75% | 77% | 72% | 79% |
| Somewhat worried | 28% | 20% | 17% | 26% | 17% |
| Extremely worried | 10% | 4% | 6% | 3% | 4% |

Q: Are you more likely, less likely, or about as likely to put up a campaign sign for a candidate you support as you were ten years ago?

| For: | More Likely | About as Likely | Less Likely |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|
| President | 27% | 30% | 43% |
| Governor | 26% | 35% | 40% |
| County Commissioner | 22% | 36% | 40% |

Q: How often are things expressed at work in reference to political issues that make you feel uncomfortable? (among those reporting working outside the home)

63% Rarely
 27% Occasionally
 10% Often

Q: Are you more likely, about as likely or less likely to discuss politics with friends and family than you were ten years ago?

36% More Likely
 31% About the Same
 33% Less Likely

Q: How often are things expressed with family and friends about political issues that make you feel uncomfortable?

58% Rarely
 32% Occasionally
 10% Often

Q: When thinking of politics, which of the following do you think of when you hear the word “civility?”

- 50% Respect for the positions of those with whom people disagree
- 24% Being polite and avoiding controversial issues
- 26% Being constructive in engaging other people

Q: When thinking of politics, which of the following do you think of when you hear the word “civility?”

| Report thinking: | 18-30 | 31-45 | 46-65 | Over 65 | All |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Respect for disagreement | 43% | 48% | 55% | 50% | 50% |
| Be polite and avoid controversy | 30% | 17% | 25% | 26% | 24% |
| Constructive in engaging others | 27% | 35% | 20% | 24% | 26% |

Q: When people speak of the need for “civility” do you think they want to make things better or do they want to avoid discussing tough issues.

- 63% They want to make things better
- 37% They want to avoid discussing tough issues

Q: When people speak of the need for “civility” do you think they want to make things better or do they want to avoid discussing tough issues.

| Report thinking: | 18-30 | 31-45 | 46-65 | Over 65 | All |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Make things better | 60% | 63% | 60% | 69% | 63% |
| Avoid discussion of tough issues | 41% | 37% | 40% | 31% | 37% |

CONCLUSION

This survey of Tennesseans contains some positive news. Relatively few Tennesseans report paying “not much attention” to politics—a quarter or less to domestic politics, a third to international politics. Yet well under half say they pay “a lot” of attention to politics. For international politics—issues that determine war or peace and the United States’ position in the world—the number is about one-sixth.

Q: Some people pay attention to politics. Some not so much. Do you pay a lot of attention, some attention, or not much attention at all to politics?

| | Lot of Attention | Some Attention | Not much Attention |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| National politics? | 37% | 49% | 14% |
| International politics? | 17% | 46% | 37% |
| Tennessee state politics. | 38% | 43% | 19% |
| Politics in your County? | 36% | 38% | 26% |

A number of other survey results highlight important shortcomings in civic knowledge in Tennessee. Most notably, only half of Tennesseans know that the state has its own constitution, and large numbers say they do not know the names of their elected representatives. The Governor of Tennessee is best known, but nearly half say they do not know the names of their U.S. Senators and Representatives. Knowledge of other offices goes down from there.

The survey also shows that a substantial proportion of Tennesseans are less willing to express their political views than they were a decade ago, and that nearly half who post on social media have at least some fear of the repercussions of their posts. There is also no consensus on what “civility” should mean in the political realm, or even what the motivations are of those calling for greater civility. Overall, the biggest shortfalls in civic knowledge, and the most pronounced hesitations about free political expression, are found among the young.

The survey results make two things obvious: it is crucial that Tennesseans develop a higher level of civic knowledge, and the process will not be easy. Strong efforts will

need to be made at the K-12 level, in our universities, and in the general public across the state.

The Institute of American Civics

With a strong bipartisan backing, the 112th Tennessee General Assembly created the Institute of American Civics to strengthen civic education and participation while reviving thoughtfulness, civility and respect for opposing viewpoints in national discourse. The institute is committed to improving civic knowledge and civil discourse through courses, student programs, public events, and K-12 outreach.

Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted from April 17 to May 10 and had 1,060 adult respondents across Tennessee. It utilized mixed methods to reach respondents—both telephone and internet. The margin of error was 3%.

Questions regarding the Tennessee Civic Survey should be sent to BakerSchool@utk.edu