

Community Advocacy Activity: Voter Engagement as a Means of Community Betterment

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## COMMUNITY ADVOCACY ACTIVITY

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This paper covers the history of low voter turnout in the United States, as well as Tennessee and Hamilton County in particular, and discusses policies shown to improve voter turnout. The social work profession is deeply ingrained in policy practice and will be discussed as well. In addition to relevant policies and policy advocacy in social work, community involvement as a means for social change will also be covered.

#### **Issue Overview**

During the 2016 presidential election, Tennessee ranked 48<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states for best voter turnout, with a turnout rate of 54 percent (Suneson, 2018). In other words, only two states in the nation had a worse voter turnout than Tennessee. More specifically, Hamilton County ranked 25<sup>th</sup> out of 95 counties in Tennessee for worst voter turnout (Election Statistics, n.d.). While this is better than Tennessee's overall placement, it is not great as Hamilton County is still in the bottom third for of the list for each county's participation. This trend of low voter turnout is not just found in Tennessee, but as well as in the nation as a whole.

Voter participation in the United States for presidential elections has maintained a low percentage of 54 to 64 percent, and only 41 to 48 percent for midterm elections, since 2000 (DeSilver, 2018). These percentages drop even lower for primary and local elections. Only 28.5 percent of eligible voters voted in the 2016 primaries and rates of below 20 percent voter participation are seen in many major cities in the united states for local elections (DeSilver, 2016) (Capps, 2016). Despite being a leader in many other areas for developed countries, the United States trails far behind other developed countries in terms of voter participation (DeSilver, 2018). In addition to the United States' rates of low voter turnout, the population of those who do vote does not represent the overall population of eligible citizens. Research shows

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that some populations in the U.S. are disproportionately burdened by disadvantages that prevent them from voting, including registration barriers, inflexible voting hours, and polling place closures. The populations consistently seen to be most affected by these disadvantages include communities of color, young people, and low-income individuals (Root & Kennedy, 2018).

### **Related Policies**

Tennessee is one of many states that have a voter ID law that states that Tennessee voters must provide a government-issued ID at the poll (Voting in Tennessee, n.d.). In addition to its ID policies, Tennessee also employs several voting policies and provisions that have been seen as beneficial in increasing voter turnout, including online registration, early voting, and absentee voting (Voting in Tennessee, n.d.). For example, one study noted that early voting policies can increase voter turnout by as much as two to four percent (Gronke, et al., 2008). Other provisions and policies that Tennessee could implement, that have been shown to be helpful in increasing voter turnout, include automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, preregistration, and additional vote-at-home provisions, among others (Root & Kennedy, 2018). States with same-day voter registration experience an average of a 5 percent increase in voter participation and have the highest rates of voter turnout in the country (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019).

Another law that Tennessee has implemented, like many other states, is the ability to take time off from work to vote (Guerin, 2014). This law protects employees from receiving repercussions at work for taking time to do their civic duty (Employee Rights, n.d.). This law helps hourly workers and workers with schedules that would not regularly allow them to be away from work during times that polling places are open. These laws vary from state to state. In Tennessee, this law provides workers with paid time off for voting within a “reasonable” time

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frame of up to three hours during times that the polls are open (Tennessee Code Title 2, n.d.). Employers reserve the right to decide when the hours are taken off and are not required to give such time if the employee's shift begins at least 3 hours after polls open or if their shift ends at least 3 hours before the polls close. Additionally, to qualify for this provision, employees must request the time in advance; before noon on the day before the election.

### **Social Work Perspective**

The competencies (2015) of social work as outlined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the Social Work Code of Ethics (2017) provide several guidelines about how social workers are encouraged to participate in social and political action. During school, social work students are taught to strive to meet the requirements of the CSWE competencies. One such competency is to “engage in policy practice” which includes everything from researching and studying relevant policies, to advocated for and developing one’s own policies for the communities in which they are working with. Along with this specific direction to engage in policy practice, the CSWE competencies also include the direction to “advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice.” This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, one of the easiest being through policy advocacy and social action that directly responds to an individual or community’s needs. In this way, social workers are trained to accept policy practice as a core component, or competency, of social work, before they even obtain their degrees.

In addition to the CSWE competencies, the Social Work Code of Ethics (2017) also outlines ways in which policy practice is expected among social workers. Beginning with the preamble, “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being (2017).” When seen in the view of policy practice, there are many ways that political advocacy

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could help social workers to more effectively enhance human well-being. Under the section of “Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession” within the Ethical Standards of the Code of Ethics, social workers are supposed to

“...engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and develop fully... [and] should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice (2017).”

Here, the Social Work Code of Ethics (2017) outlines several ways in which social workers can, and should, use policy practice to help their clients.

### **Community Involvement**

Together with local social workers and other policy advocates, the community can involve themselves in many ways in order to improve rates of voter turnout, locally and nationally as well as create change for community betterment. Two areas in which the community can help through advocacy in particular is civics education in schools and community voter engagement outreach. Civics education in schools is important, because every year, more and more young people reach voting age and should be able to have a basic understanding of the electoral process and know that their vote counts. However, this education should not be left only in the classroom. Successful civics education will include the community and the family as well as the school (Root & Kennedy, 2018). This is one area in which community members can be involved in the efforts to increase voter turnout.

Another way that community members can become involved is by advocating for voter engagement and outreach. Outreach activities can include anything from canvassing

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neighborhoods to holding phone-a-thons. Studies show that people who are reached out to through direct canvassing are more likely to become civically engaged at the polls and that this is especially effective for young people (Civic Youth, n.d.). Another study showed that when Virginia community organizations engaged with Latino communities through Spanish advertisements and canvassing, that Virginia saw a 114 percent increase in early and absentee voting within that Latino population (Maxwell, 2018).

While advocating for civic education in schools and participating in community outreach are great ways of increasing voter turnout. There is another, overarching, theme that community members need to embrace, and that is voting themselves. It is not enough to know about policy and to preach the wonders of outreach as a means of increasing voter turnout if those same community members are not voting themselves. It is important for each individual to understand that their vote counts and that they should use each opportunity they have, from local to federal election, to cast their vote for society.

### **Conclusion**

Voter turnout in the United States has remained low for several years, especially when compared to other developed countries (DeSilver, 2018). Voter turnout in Tennessee and Hamilton county specifically are well below average (Suneson, 2018) (Election Statistics, n.d.). There are several policies shown to increase voter turnout, and Tennessee has already implemented a few of them, but more is needed (Voting in Tennessee, n.d.) (Root & Kennedy, 2018). It is an integral part of the social work profession to engage in policy practice, as seen in the CSWE competencies and the Social Work Code of Ethics (2017). Together with social workers and other policy advocates, community members can become involved too. Most

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importantly, it is essential that communities know how valuable their vote is and make their individual contributions to create change.

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