



**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS, THE KNOXVILLE
VOTER TURNOUT COALITION, AND THE APPALACHIAN JUSTICE RESEARCH LAB**



Our Project

In Fall 2024, we engaged young people in Knoxville in critical conversations about democracy. We used deep canvassing methods to better understand how young people think about democracy; investigate why young people do and do not engage in democracy; and support young people's sense of self-efficacy to create change through democratic participation.

Our Goals

1

Become
change agents
for democracy

2

Promote democratic
engagement and
self-efficacy of
young people

3

Elevate the voices
and perspectives
of young people

Our Process

Learning How to Listen

- ◆ Trained in deep canvassing techniques
- ◆ Created a deep canvassing script
- ◆ Interviewed peers and elders to understand perspectives on democracy and why people do or do not engage with democracy
- ◆ Developed our own stories of personal stake and efficacy



The Past and Present of Voting in the United States

- ◆ Talked with experienced community organizers to learn about electoral and non-electoral forms of participatory democracy
- ◆ Trained in voter registration
- ◆ Registered people to vote on the UTK campus, HOLA Festival, Knox Pride Fest, and other locations with the League of Women Voters
- ◆ Developed responsive stories to help young people process tensions around democracy



Deep Listening for Collective Change

- ◆ Held more than 100 conversations with youth aged 14-27
- ◆ Facilitated listening trainings at the Knoxville Mayor's Youth Council, the Emerging Leaders Council, the Youth Forum, and the Youth Action Board
- ◆ Transcribed our conversations and reviewed each transcript for key themes
- ◆ Developed our own efficacy and the efficacy of people we canvassed



What is deep canvassing?

Deep canvassing is a conversation tool that uses compassion, curiosity, and storytelling to help people process internal conflicts and move toward empathy, understanding, and action on complex issues.

Why deep canvass?

Unlike traditional canvassing, which often focuses on delivering information or securing someone's vote, deep canvassing engages people in identifying and then processing their own beliefs and internal conflicts around complex social and political issues.

This method has been used effectively to encourage people to connect around issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, immigration reform, and climate action. Research has shown that deep canvassing can lead to measurable, long-lasting shifts in attitudes.

Why deep canvass for democracy?

In general, young people...

- ◆ Care deeply about social and political issues
- ◆ Have faith in democracy and trust in elections
- ◆ Believe that democracy is threatened
- ◆ Believe that voting is a crucial tool to effect change

However...

- ◆ Young people are disillusioned by the inability of government to address critical issues
- ◆ This disillusionment fuels pessimism about their future and the future of the country
- ◆ Most young people opt out of voting altogether

Deep canvassing can help people...

- ◆ Understand their own beliefs about democracy and their personal stake in democracy
- ◆ Process internal conflicts between their beliefs and their sense of efficacy to create change
- ◆ Act on their beliefs through voting and other forms of democratic participation

Our deep canvassing conversation structure

- 1 Uncover beliefs about democracy
- 2 Connect around stories of personal stake
- 3 Uplift stories of efficacy
- 4 Making the case
- 5 Final rating
- 6 Invitation to action

"When we connect policy demands to our stories, we create the opportunity to transform apathy into action and individualism into connection."

"If our power is people, we have to assume that transformation is rooted in relationships."
-SOCM canvassing training



Engaging Democracy: An Exhibit

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With gratitude to our participants



This word cloud, inspired by the colors of the Appalachian flag, features key themes and concepts shared during interviews about democracy, governance, and community challenges in the region.

1. Beliefs about Democracy

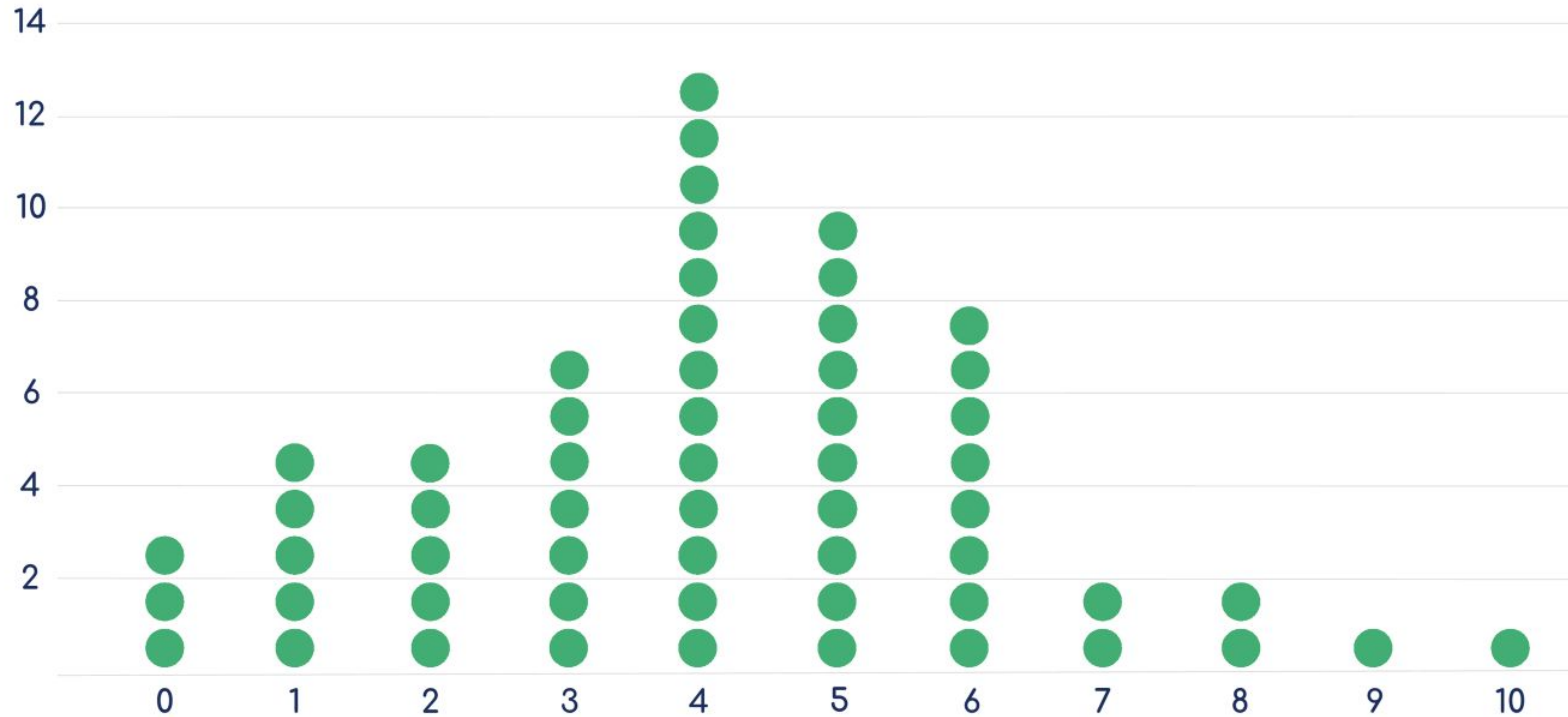
At the beginning of each canvassing conversation, we uncovered young people's beliefs about our democracy. We invited participants to define democracy for themselves, consider their roles in our democracy, and share their thoughts about their perceived impact on our democracy.

We asked participants to rate their impact more explicitly on a 0-10 scale, where 0 meant they felt like they had no impact on our democracy and 10 meant they felt like they had a major impact.

After rating themselves, we asked: "Why is that the right number for you?" And then we listened.

In this section of the exhibit, we invite you to explore these ratings and the perspectives of some of our participants. We also invite you to rate yourself in terms of your impact on our democracy.

Before Being Canvassed: Impact on Democracy



As a young person, to what extent do you feel like you have an impact on our democracy? (on a scale from 0 to 10)

Views on Democracy



"I really don't think democracy exists as long as the Electoral College exists."

-Kalee

"I feel like no matter who wins [the election], nobody else does, except for a select group of people. Nobody, per se, loses, but nobody really wins either."

-Canaan, 22

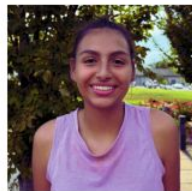


"I went to protests in Washington, DC and they're so-so. I mean, at least you get the word out to people. But does it really have any impact on the national government? Same thing with town halls. You can say what you want, but will people actually listen? The people who are making the laws."

-Tasneem, 16

"As youth I feel we are often encouraged to be in spaces or conversations where we talk about democracy. But I often have to call people out on their hypocrisy because we are told to be in these conversations, yet there aren't often spaces for youth to be heard. It makes me feel more as a token than someone who actively gets their voice heard."

-Jasmine, 14



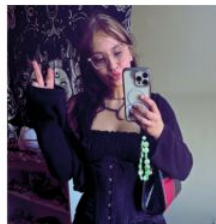


"I feel like me being trans in general, I have no voice at all. Like, I have an opinion, but by speaking, everybody would come at me: 'Oh, you're trans.' Wouldn't even matter what I say."

-Antonio, 25

"Democratic participation really lies in what the individual sees their impact can be, whether that be speaking to an elected official, using their power as a voter, working on a campaign, or just studying civics in their academic work. I think democratic participation is a very fluid thing. It doesn't have to be defined to a single action or ideal."

-Sophie, 17



"What is democracy, like, literally? Because I thought it was supposed to be about what the people wanted."

-Zoe, 23

"To me, democratic participation is using my voice. I want to put it out there and defend it and stand by it while staying open minded to other opinions and ideas. Democratic participation is patriotic. People say it's my natural right. I think it's because I have that privilege. Not everyone my age around the world has that ability to voice their opinions so freely. Because I have that privilege, I should take advantage of it and I should use it."

-Addison, 16



2. Personal Stake Stories

In the next phase of our canvassing conversation, we asked young people to identify one thing that really matters to them. We approached these concerns with curiosity, asking follow-up questions to surface the core emotions, values, and experiences that contribute to these concerns.

We also shared our own personal stake stories. This connection is key to deep canvassing: in candidly sharing what matters to us, and why we care, we invite our conversation partners to deeply reflect on their own stories. By sharing our personal experiences, rather than abstract talking points, we create space for mutual understanding and empathy.

In this section of the exhibit, we invite you to explore the personal stakes that some of our participants shared with us.

We also invite you to contribute your own personal stakes: When *you* think about *your* life right now, in terms of *your* community, what's one thing that really matters to *you*?

I'm all for
shorter rights -
it doesn't matter the
reason, the rhyme, or
anything. If you feel the need to
do that, you should be within your
right to do that because that's your
womanly body. That was always my stance.
We always chant, "My body, my choice,"
and the men always chant, "Her body, her choice."
Well, this year I had a pregnancy scare, and in that
moment I was told, "Well, you're going to get an
abortion." That's the moment I realized
they'd be screaming, "Her body, her
choice," but not really. They don't
really mean it. They just want
to take advantage
of the situation.
-Zo, 23

Reproductive Autonomy

I think
the main battle
in Knoxville right now
is visibility. We have Knoxville
Pride [and] the parade, [and]
that's nice, but I would like to have
a pride flag on campus. Why can't we
not use? This past summer break, I got to
go to San Francisco and Portland for the
first time. It was awesome. I have never
felt more comfortable. It really
makes you realize this weight
that's on you when you
are in Appalachia.
-Peyton, 21

LGBTQ Rights

I worked
for [a] remailer.
He owned the tax shop
[where I worked]. He's
known for presenting the anti
gay bill in the Tennessee State
legislature, and he was my boss. I had
his phone number. I knew him and worked
with him on a daily basis. That caused such a stir
in my mind because he was a nice guy. I don't think he
remotely believed in any of the things that he was presenting
and said "I'm so sorry about today's political climate."
As if he's not the problem. Saying he's sorry to my
trans coworkers for what he's done is just the
epitome of "one person is not going to
make a difference." It's the people in
power that can make a difference
and they say "I'm sorry"
while still doing it.
-Talley, 19

Basic Needs

I've had a
lot of very hard,
tearful conversations
at, "What if I get pregnant
and the pregnancy isn't
viable?" It could be something
where I want to keep the baby, but
having the baby would kill me. I would
rather stay alive than [be forced to have] a
baby who's going to be stillborn [and] who's
also going to kill me. It's just so scary and
frustrating knowing that when we live
wouldn't be able to offer me
solutions for that. I would have
to go to another state
which would be at
least 8 hours
away.
-Maddie, 21

I would say
healthcare,
especially right now.
Before, it would have been
my testosterone. If I didn't have
my testosterone, I'm not who I am,
like physically, emotionally, all of that.
I'm just all out of whack. But now I'm being
tested for multiple sclerosis, and one
treatment for that is \$20,000. I was in
foster care, [so] they extended my
insurance until I'm 26. But
when I turn 26, what
do I do then?
-Antonio, 25

Last
August I went
homeless. I was at
KIAAM and I got kicked
out in December. So I was
staying in the woods and in
tents for the winter. And
it just was so cold.
I didn't have
transportation.
-Levy, 21

Personal Stake

My grandpa
talks to me about
his time in the Civil
Rights Movement. He said it
was so hard for him to vote and
people treated him like a second class
citizen solely because of his skin color.
He couldn't use certain restrooms. He
couldn't go certain places. I
wouldn't ever want to go
back to that.
-Victoria, 20

Neither
side of the
aisle gives a fuck
about Palestine. It
definitely makes me more
pessimistic when there's no
representation of my beliefs at any
level of government. And knowing that
it was designed to give people with money and
interests more of a voice in government than
myself, yeah, I would say that it's
disheartening to me. And it might affect me away from
voting when I don't see somebody
who aligns with certain
beliefs that I hold.
N, 23

My parents
and my cousins
all came from the
border of Mexico. My
cousins came through there and
now they're fighting a case so they
can stay here - so they won't get deported.
That means a lot to me: the immigration
crisis. We should have somebody that cares
about immigrants just as much as I do
because they're all people. Hearing
things people say about
immigrants is
ridiculous.
-Fatou, 20

Financial Security

Cost of living
[is important to
me]. It's gotten so
expensive and inflation has
gotten so high. Used to [be], my
\$200 check every two weeks would
last me. I would have money to save. Now,
living is so much more expensive. I'm lucky
enough where my parents pay my rent, but a
week's worth of food is now \$150. That
\$200 check is now down to \$50, and
I can't pay for gas, so I'm having
to walk my clothes and other
stuff just to be able
to afford to live.
-Jane, 21

I'm 25,
and I have a
pretty average income
right now, but I still have
to have two roommates to be
able to afford to live
anywhere that's not my
parents'.
-Philip, 25

I've worked
since I was 15.
But when you start
adding everything up, and
you're not living in some cheap
apartment with five roommates,
it's hard to even afford a house. Or if
you start thinking about if my car breaks down,
or if I have medical bills, or things like
that. And you start realizing how
many dollars you need and
how hard they are to get.
-Parker, 21

Education

My school's
out in the country,
and they really push
trade school or go straight
into the workforce. They don't
push you towards honors classes or
things like that. It's like the expectation
[that] you're going to be a mechanic or do
two years at Pellissippi and that's it.
Everybody's pushed down the same path.
There are a lot of people who were
born into poverty and feel like
their life's not going to turn
out the way they
wish it could.
-Sydney, 17

Our schools
are fundamentally
flawed. They need to be
changed in a way [where] I
can actually learn about how to
handle my money, how to invest, how
to keep and hold a job, why connecting
with other people is important. Stuff like
that should be deemed more important
over taking science classes which I'll never use.
Being able to understand the basics,
being able to get by should be a
right instead learning
something that I'm
never gonna use.
-Timothée, 22

When I was
a freshman in
high school, my mom
was a school counselor
and the school she worked at was
shot up. That was a scary day for me
seeing how that affected her, anything
gun legislation gets me really riled up.
That's something I feel like I
always have to have a stake
in because of that
experience.
-Austin, 21

Gun Violence

I was in
middle school
[in Florida] when
Parkland happened, [and]
they locked down every school
in Florida. I don't mess with guns. I
am very anti-gun. I understand that you
have your right to have your gun, but
there's a difference between a pistol to
protect your household and an automatic
weapon that they use to kill thousands
of people in wars. That's where
I draw the line; that's my
political thing.
-Victoria, 25

[Growing up,
there] was an
intense where a
little kid got killed in my
neighborhood because there
was a shootout. I feel like gun
violence is one thing that's always been
a part of my childhood. I don't differentiate a
freeracker from a gunshot, that's how bad it was.
Every time I heard a thump, I jumped. I have a
little brother and he's also growing up there. That
makes me scared for him since he's an African
American boy growing up in this state that's
against us. I really want someone
to make a change to gun violence
and not just anyone have a
gun, because that's
what's killing
our people.
-Fatou, 20

My senior
year of high
school, I lost 6
classmates all in one year
over gun violence and police
brutality. There was a white kid who
had got threatened by his girlfriend. She
was mixed and her white mom called the
police [to] say that he has a gun on him at
Austin East High School. Next thing you know
the police came and helicopters came.
Flying over the school. And then police
came and shot and killed the boy.
His best friend saw it. He's
going to be scarred with
that for life.
-Drea, 20

Palestine

For me,
the biggest
social issue is the
fucking bombing of my
people. I'm Palestinian. My
grandparents were refugees. We
immigrated to the US, and our tax money
is going to this. I think democracy should
have an impact, but ultimately I feel like
what we do to resolve that issue is not
up to us. It's gonna be up to cutting
funding from Israel or
something, which we
can't really vote for.
-Ang, 22

3. Efficacy Stories

In this phase of our canvassing conversation, we invited young people to share stories of personal efficacy. We asked them to reflect on a time when they felt strongly about an issue in their community and recognized a need for change. We also shared our efficacy stories.

Psychologist Albert Bandura defines efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to “execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations.” He identifies four key sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological feedback.

Young people often face barriers to realizing political efficacy; they may be excluded from political decision-making and feel overlooked by those in power. However, non-political experiences of efficacy can help build confidence in their ability to create broader change. When young people see or believe that their actions lead to tangible results in one area, they may reassess their potential to impact our democracy.

In this section of the exhibit, we invite you to explore efficacy stories that our participants shared with us.

Mastery Experiences

Efficiency grows through action. When we overcome challenges, we build resilience and accomplishment.

"My senior year of high school there was an English teacher that I disliked, and I could not place my finger on why. He was a cool teacher, lights were always dim, he had the couch, he played guitar. Everybody loved him. And I couldn't help but feel that something was wrong. I found out some 20 years prior he had a relationship with his student. I was disgusted and horrified, so I went to the principal. He said, 'Oh, I know. We keep an eye on him.' And I'm like, 'Oh, you keep an eye on him when he's hitting his vape in the classroom and talking about sex in a very predatory way?' There were several conversations in class that were entirely inappropriate for a teacher. He was breaking boundaries with female students. And [the principal] said, 'We haven't been able to do anything about it because no student has come forward with a statement.' And so I said, 'Well, I'll give you one right now.' So I did. And he never showed up again. I believe he was quietly fired. The Tennessee Board of Education reached out to me a few months later because they had gotten a copy of my statement. I don't know if he got his license removed, but he's no longer teaching at that school." -Talley, 19

"I was involved in some organizing with retired coal miners who had black lung. We organized a lobbying trip to get their retirement and health benefits extended when Congress was trying to cut their benefits. I didn't see the win immediately, it took a couple years, but they did end up getting those benefits extended indefinitely." -Caleb, 26

"We got a 1.5 million dollar grant that's about to hit this community precisely for services that a lot of the youth here in this room helped to create. And we networked with both the mayors to do that. We got proclamations to make November Youth Homelessness Awareness month in Knox County." -Jaeger, 21

"I went campaigning for our senator. I talked with people on things that I didn't think I was going to talk about." -Jasmine, 14

"From a young age, I went to protests with my mom and my aunt. That was really empowering and a lot of fun. It was a way to show other people and myself what I believed in and try and help make a difference when I couldn't vote. Because protests depend on people. They kind of serve as a wake up call for politicians." -Eleanor

"I'm part of the Muslim minority, and not a lot of Muslims are part of the democratic process. A lot of them don't show up in the Census, so our numbers are not counted properly. Our voice isn't heard as much." -Jasmine, 26

"I went to one of the town hall meetings where there were Palestine protesters. I witnessed Mayor Gincannon throw someone out for a rule that had not been mentioned. I understand that they were dealing with these protesters at every meeting, [but] there's a document you have to have as a leader in your community. When you have the town hall getting upset at you – the mayor – for your actions, I feel like you should take a step back. To me, that's pretty reflective of our democracy at the moment." -Peyton, 21

"When I was in high school, there were a ton of walkouts organized by students regarding gun violence or Black Lives Matter. These walkouts would take up the entire street. In 2021, there was a sit-in outside of our town hall, and 15-year-olds were organizing it. They had megaphones and were talking directly to town hall. I was never involved with that but I participated in the walkouts. It made me want to be more politically active." -Maddie, 21

"I think it's good to remember through conversations like this that a lot of times if we show up and actually make our voices heard, as much as we are discouraged by the current state of electoral politics, if we do participate, we can make a difference." -Patrick, 27

Social Persuasion

Efficacy strengthens when others put their confidence in us. Positive reinforcement can help us overcome self-doubt.

"I rate my impact differently because I'm actually having a conversation with someone about democracy in America. And I'm not just having to skate around someone's political views." -Devon, 21

"I still have a lot of negative views like, 'Oh well, one vote really doesn't matter.' But this [conversation] makes me feel a lot better. It makes me feel a little bit less like I'm the only person who struggles with that and has concerns." -Gracie, 21

"I've talked to politicians, and it's really nerve wracking because I see them as really important people. It's hard to get your point across when you're anxious. If I could change something, [I would] be taking away that stigma that because they're a politician, they're better than me. It's just a conversation." -Camila, 17

"My freshman year of high school they canceled the SGA election. I felt really fired up about that cause. I was super interested in joining SGA, and so I sent emails to the school board. I ended up being able to meet with the principal and talk to him about why I was so frustrated with that process. That was something that I felt impassioned to do." -Connor, 20

Physiological Feedback

We interpret our physical and emotional responses as signals of our abilities. Our self-efficacy is shaped by whether we view an intense moment as energizing or anxiety provoking.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to "execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations."

-Albert Bandura

Vicarious Experiences

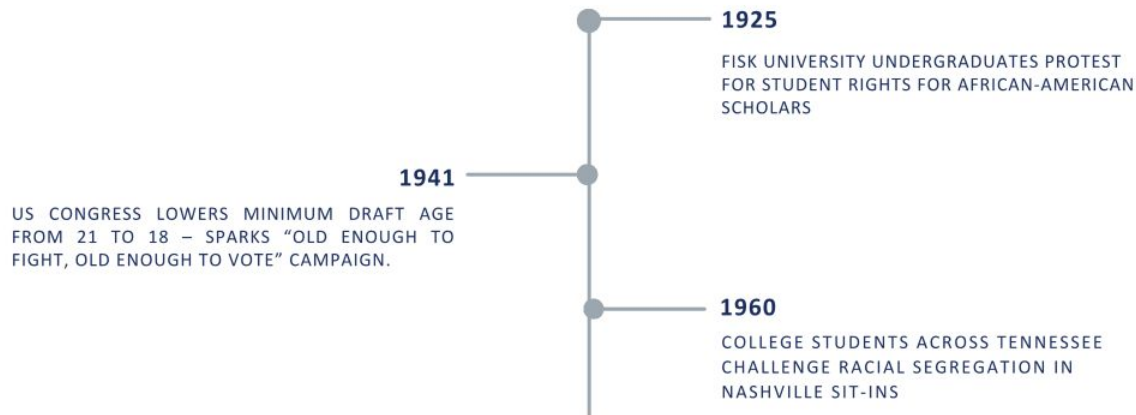
When we see people like us succeed, it reinforces our belief that we can succeed too.

"I'm at a certain point where I'm very happy out to deal with politics. I think I'm much happier not diving into the realm of politics, whether it's local or national. It's very stressful to think about the implications. And although, yes, it is pushing binders on, it's kind of how I've been going about it for the past few years." -Dillon, 20

Timeline

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, young people have engaged with democracy in more ways than just voting. According to historian Katherine J. Ballantyne, student-led protests in Tennessee have been overlooked by many historians, despite the fact that they were more sustained than those that took place at notable East and West Coast institutions, particularly regarding conflicts over voting rights for African Americans and women, the Vietnam War, and the occupation of Palestine. All systemic changes in the past century that have allowed young people to be more involved in democracy came due to relentless political activity by young adults. The year after the voting age was lowered to 18, youth voter turnout hit its highest peak ever. Since then young people have faced many obstacles to democratic participation. Still, young people in Tennessee have not slowed down in creating sustained democratic action outside of the voting booth.

Have a look below for some key dates of how young people have engaged with democracy.



1967

SEWANEE STUDENTS DEMONSTRATE AGAINST
FOOD QUALITY

1970

US CONGRESS LOWERS MINIMUM VOTING AGE
FROM 21 TO 18 FOR ALL FEDERAL, STATE AND
LOCAL ELECTIONS – SUPREME COURT LIMITS
SCOPE TO FEDERAL ELECTIONS.

1970

STUDENTS NATIONWIDE ENGAGE IN VIETNAM WAR
PROTESTS, CULMINATING IN THE KENT STATE
SHOOTING WHERE OHIO NATIONAL GUARD
SOLDIERS SHOT 15 STUDENTS

1971

US SENATE VOTES UNANIMOUSLY IN FAVOR OF A
CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT LOWERING THE
VOTING AGE TO 18, FOLLOWED BY AN
OVERWHELMING MAJORITY IN THE HOUSE –
STATES SWIFTLY RATIFY THE 26TH AMENDMENT,
WHICH TAKES EFFECT ON JULY 1, 1971.

1972

YEAR OF HIGHEST YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT
NATIONWIDE

2024

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE STUDENTS PROTEST THE
TREATMENT OF PALESTINIANS BY ISRAELI FORCES

4. Making the Case

In this phase of our canvassing conversation, we “made the case” for participatory democracy. We shared why we still engage with democracy, even though we have not always felt heard or valued by its institutions, and even as we acknowledge how these institutions have failed us.

As we expressed our commitments to democratic participation, something remarkable happened: many of our conversation partners echoed those values back to us, making the case for engaging with democracy in their own words and through their own perspectives.

In this section of the exhibit, we invite you to explore the words of participants as they share why young people’s concerns matter, why their voices must be valued, and why they must engage with democracy through both electoral and non-electoral means.

We also invite you to reflect on why democracy matters to you, and to consider how you honor the voices, concerns, and engagement of young people in our democracy.

The Appalachian Flag: An Explainer

Our project brought young people in Knoxville into meaningful conversations about democracy and their role in democracy. Located in Appalachia, Knoxville serves as both the backdrop and inspiration for this work. Members of our research team and canvassing participants often drew on their connections to Appalachia when sharing their stories of personal stake and efficacy. For us, Appalachia is more than a region—it is home: a place that has shaped who we are and given us the opportunity to accomplish so much.

To honor this connection, we incorporated elements of Appalachia into the visual design of our exhibit. The quilt design featured throughout the exhibit is based on the unofficial Appalachian Flag. Our flag is filled with quotes from our conversations to amplify the voices and perspectives of Knoxville's youth, highlighting the depth and diversity of experiences.

Below are more details about the flag, as explained by The Appalachian Flag Initiative.

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History

This banner was finalized in 2023 after over a year of discussion and contributions by Appalachians through online social media discussions, primarily through websites such as Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter. Through the year, the design slowly changed and morphed based off of aesthetic principle and community input.

Finally, this design was chosen from a list of 6 possible designs in an online vote taken by over 300 participants from Appalachian social media groups, receiving a vast majority of the votes. Following the vote, the design was placed under Creative Commons as to ensure the highest degree of ease of access is available to Appalachians interested in representing their region.

Color Scheme

- ◆ The green is representative of the lush forests that wrap around the ancient mountains and the rural setting of the region.
- ◆ The navy blue is representative of the blue hue that colors the distant ridgelines that rest on the horizon while traveling through Appalachia.
- ◆ The gold is representative of the morning sun pouring out over the distant hills, indicative of a bright future for those who reside in these hills.
- ◆ The off-white of the quilt star motif is taken from the color of cloth, indicative of a blank canvas from which each Appalachian may draw their own colorful story.
- ◆ Altogether, the design forms a depiction of the beautiful mountain landscape that is distinctly unique to the Appalachian region.

Design Elements

- ◆ The quilt star is a symbol found throughout Appalachian arts and crafts, commonly seen on the facades of barns and in the construction of quilts in many Appalachian homes. The inclusion of this symbol is meant to symbolize the unique Appalachian people that reside within the mountains, with every rendition of the star being done in the artist's style and coloration, further including the diverse array of cultures, faces, and backgrounds in the Appalachian people.

What was excluded from the design

- ◆ This design leaves out any semblance of reference toward ethnicity or race. While it is true that there are predominant trends in ethnic movements and backgrounds in Appalachia (the Scots Irish likely being the most notable), Appalachia still is a constantly changing region with many different faces, each contributing to our region's culture and identity in their own unique way. By including any sort of symbols for any specific ethnic background, you are simultaneously excluding every other background by not representing them. Therefore, the flag remains neutral in this and instead seeks to only represent the symbol that unites all of us: the mountains that we call home.
- ◆ The design leaves out any sort of reference to political affiliation. While general political cultures exist the Appalachian region also has a colorful history with many different political leanings, and the inclusion of political elements would only serve as a divisive and inconclusive element.

”

"I think it's important in the democratic process for people to have their say. In my head, the way we get our say is through voting." - Kyle, 22

"We do have an impact. We're the youngest people that are able to vote. Every generation does have the ability to make an impact." - Jane, 21

"We're setting the next generations for success. We're helping them, where they can feel safe, and they can be in an environment that is OK to them. Where they don't have to fear." - Levy, 21

"People assume that they don't have an important part in the democratic process, but being a citizen is not something you can passively do. Being a good citizen requires active commitment. Sitting back and doing nothing is not being a good citizen." - Isaac, 18

"The issues that people care about are not acted upon by our elected representatives. But just in my lifetime, whether it was marriage equality, reproductive freedom for women, the environment, now the conflict in the Middle East, I've seen increasing amounts of grassroots participation in peaceful protest. As a global community, we've started to see how people can mobilize around an issue. Civic engagement spurs more civic engagement, and that can be an inspiration to people when they don't feel like electoral politics is working for them." - Patrick, 27

"It doesn't really work if everyone doesn't participate. Even if you don't participate, you're still having an impact. Even if you don't vote, you're still feeling the effects." - Ian

"[Young people] get dismissed a lot. They think we're not experienced, we don't have jobs, we don't have houses, we don't have issues that affect a lot of citizens. And that dismissiveness is very irritating. Although we don't have all the responsibilities that adults may have, we see things that affect us as people. Even if we're under 18, we still have issues that affect us. Our voice needs to be heard." - Leyton, 16

"It's important to vote, whether you think it matters or not. Plenty of people didn't have [that right] in the past. It's important to exercise that even if you want to win, don't win, or I can't vote the exact way I would like to, or have the outcome that I want. It's important to be responsible and exercise that right." - Emma, 20

"It is harder in Tennessee to feel like your vote means something to your elected officials. But I still think it's important to not give up on the South as a forever Red state. And there are a lot of queer people in Appalachia. It's not worth giving up on all these people." - Sabrina, 24

[Student protests in support of Palestine] "made a profound impact, at least on the student body at UT. It really was a small scale of what the ultimate goal is. There was so much artistic expression, history lessons, actual education. And that made me want to go back there." - Angi, 22

"To me,
democracy is people."
- Talley, 19

"A big power in being a young person is that politicians don't expect you to say anything. So when you do, I think they take you more seriously. There is power in being young because you're the new generation." - Aya

"If a bunch of people who felt like their voices weren't heard could get behind one person who had that drive and motivation to make a big change, that person could set as a conduit to get everyone else's voices out there to make something happen." - Canaan, 22

"We are the next generation. It is very important that you vote so that you have the power to change the way things are done. Decisions are being made by the older generation. Our generation is much different. We have much different historical context and beliefs." - Antigone, 18

"At the end of the day, we are our own. We can form a future for the next generation, and it doesn't have to be ideologies passed down from one to the next. Everybody has their own way of thinking and everybody's voice does matter. It's not just one constructive thought. It's multiple thoughts that create a big difference." - Nyamal, 20

"Every time there's a natural disaster, you get a slew of centrist white liberals going 'Haha, that's what you get. You're a bunch of backwards bigots.' And I'm like, well now, hold on now. I am Indigenous. I'm queer. I'm Pagan. And I am very much from Appalachia and have family in Appalachia who are not hateful bigots. And to see one party use them for their own gain, to act like they're pro-working class while simultaneously reducing our unions and our rights to our farmland, is hurtful. And then half of my allies look at my home and my culture like we're a bunch of cavemen. They patronize us. That's frustrating. When I look at Appalachia, I see worker's rights history. I see anti-establishment in a real and sustainable way. I see family that's created through bond instead of kin in a way that doesn't really exist in more urban areas. But to completely discredit a very rich piece of American history, and a very rich piece of a lot of our histories if we're from the South, creates wider division. And it's something that needs to change." - Jasper, 21

5. Final Rating

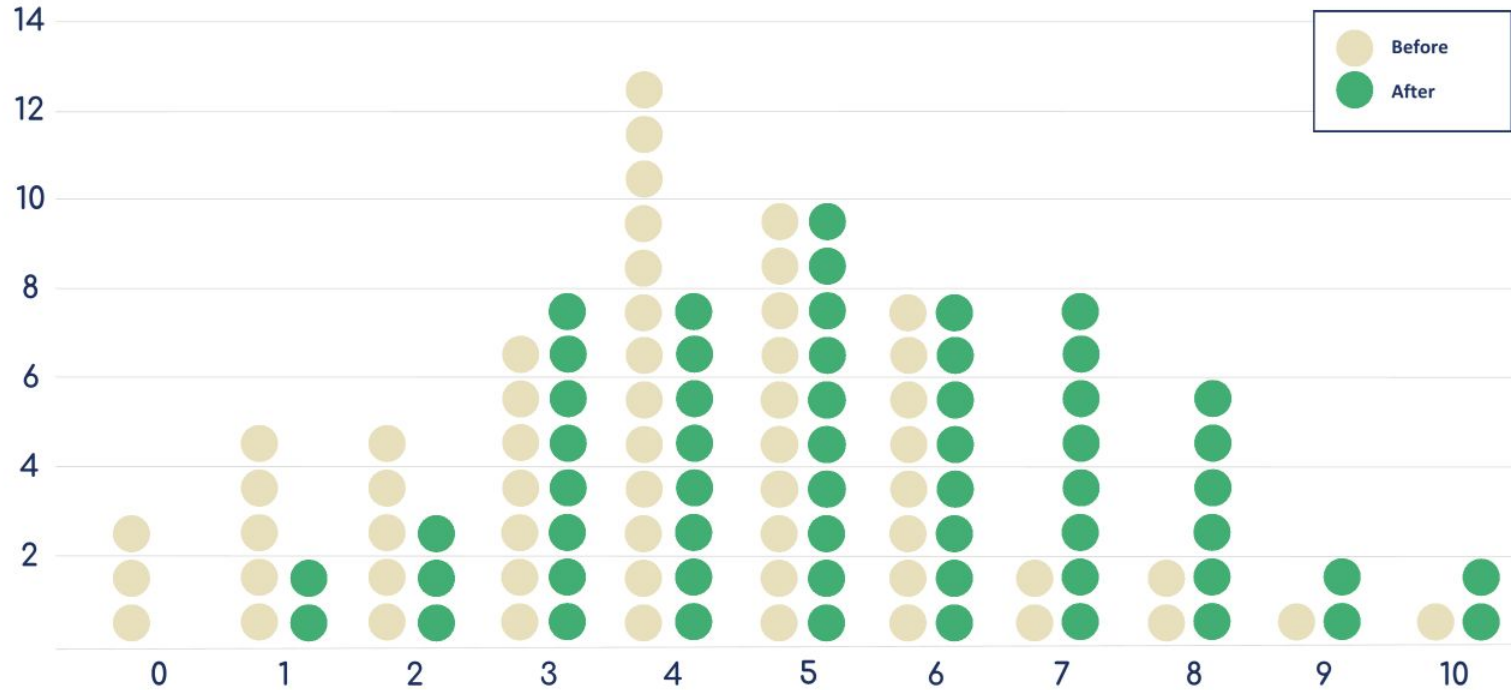
At the end of each canvassing conversation, we asked young people to once again rate their impact on democracy on a scale of 0-10, where 0 meant they felt like they had no impact on our democracy and 10 meant they felt like they had a major impact.

More than half of our conversation partners rated their impact higher at the end of the conversation than at the beginning. Of those who rated themselves higher, nearly 60 percent increased their rating by two points or more. In other words, more than half of our conversations ended with people feeling that they had more of an impact on our democracy than they originally believed.

Once again, we asked: “Why is that the right number for you?”

We invite you to explore these revised ratings side by side with the original ratings, and to read why some of our participants changed their number. We also invite you to once again rate yourself in terms of your impact on our democracy.

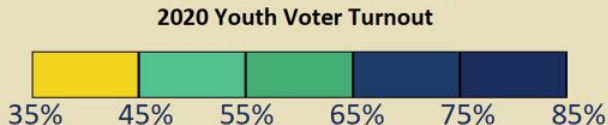
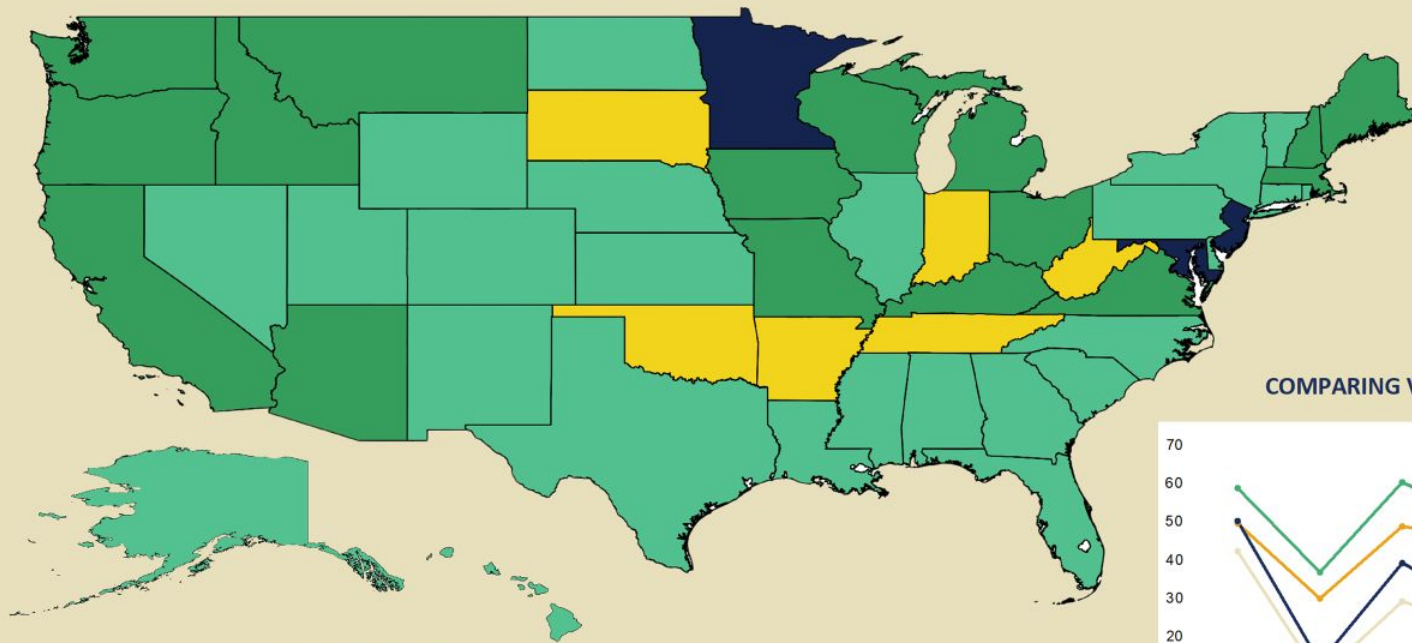
Before and After Being Canvassed: Impact on Democracy



As a young person, to what extent do you feel like you have an impact on our democracy? (on a scale from 0 to 10)

Youth Voter Turnout in Tennessee and the United States

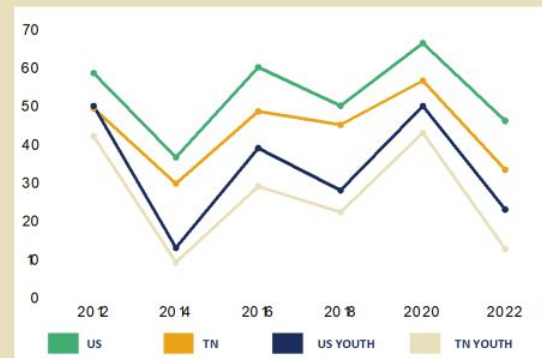
Overall voter turnout in Tennessee is consistently below national turnout, and youth voter turnout in Tennessee is consistently below national youth voter turnout. Within Tennessee, young people turnout to vote at consistently lower rates than other age demographics. This means that young people in Tennessee are some of the least likely citizens to vote in the country.



This map shows the 2020 youth voter turnout across the United States, with participation rates varying significantly by state. The data highlight the percentage of young voters ages 18-29 who cast ballots. Darker shades indicate higher turnout levels.

Data from YourVoiceMatters.vote

COMPARING VOTER TURNOUT



This graph compares voter turnout in federal and state general elections from 2012 to 2022, delimited by overall turnout in the US and Tennessee, as well as turnout for citizens ages 18-29 in the US and Tennessee.

Data compiled from Tufts University Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the University of Florida Election Lab.

6. Invitation to Action

Young people in Knoxville are not apathetic about their role in our democracy. To the contrary, the people we spoke with care deeply. However, young people often feel inadequately prepared to fully participate in the democratic process. When they do participate, they often feel like their concerns are not taken seriously.

We can support youth engagement by advocating for changes that reduce barriers to electoral participation and through deep listening conversations that promote efficacy.

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)

Restrictive policies often disproportionately impact young voters; as a result, our democracy continuously underrepresents youth. Tennessee's voter registration process puts the burden on young people to register themselves, which often prevents them from voting. This has contributed to Tennessee's extremely low voter registration and turnout in recent election cycles.

In contrast, states that streamline and modernize voter registration processes have achieved substantial increases in youth registration. One effective approach is Automatic Voter Registration (AVR).

AVR systems automatically register eligible citizens to vote and update voter information by sharing details from government agencies with election officials, unless someone chooses to opt out. Twenty-four states have implemented AVR, including Georgia, Virginia, and West Virginia. When Georgia implemented AVR in 2016, the state saw over a million residents added to the voter rolls and an 8% increase in registration among people 18 - 34. This contributed to a significant increase in youth voter turnout in 2020.

With your help, Tennessee can achieve similar results. We invite you to write a postcard to encourage our State Legislature and election officials to implement AVR. This common sense reform is one key way to increase youth electoral participation.

Learning How to Listen

We can also use deep listening techniques like those demonstrated in this exhibit to empower young people to confidently engage with our democracy. You can support young people's efficacy by talking with them about the issues they care about, validating their concerns, and affirming their role in creating change.

Young people have a vested interest in our democracy. We must honor their perspectives by lifting our own voices in support.