



**Tennessee Democracy Forum**

# DEMOCRACY DELIVERS RESULTS

*Economic Opportunity and Support for  
Democratic Institutions in Tennessee*

A POSITION PAPER BY THE TENNESSEE  
DEMOCRACY FORUM

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# SUMMARY

## DEMOCRACY & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Data from Tennessee suggest that there is a direct connection between lack of confidence in democratic processes and institutions and concerns about economic opportunity. To gain and retain confidence in democratic institutions, democracy needs to deliver results. Discussions with community development leaders from across Tennessee point to the opportunity for a revitalization strategy that can assist low income rural and urban areas. Polling data suggest that there is agreement on the need for federal action to increase the fairness of the economy.

And implementation of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law demonstrates how democracy can and is delivering results in Tennessee.

## DISENGAGEMENT FROM VOTING

An analysis of 2020 election results by the Poor People's Campaign suggest that 45 percent of low-income voters in Tennessee who were eligible to vote in the 2020 election failed to do so.[1] The lack of engagement by low-income voters is a critical factor in explaining why Tennessee had one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the nation. Overall 59.8 percent of Tennesseans eligible to vote voted in 2020: Tennessee ranked 46th in turnout, with only West Virginia (57.6%), Hawaii (57.5%), Arkansas (56.1%) and Oklahoma (55%) having a lower turnout.[2] By comparison, in eight states, more than three out of four eligible voters voted in the 2020 election.[3]

[1] See, <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/waking-the-sleeping-giant-poor-and-low-income-voters-in-the-2020-elections/>.

[2] Data is from the US Elections Project and can be found at <https://www.electproject.org/home>.

[3] Minnesota, Colorado, Maine, Wisconsin, Washington, New Hampshire, Oregon and New Jersey.



## **POLARIZATION AMONG LOW INCOME VOTERS**

The 2020 results also demonstrated extraordinary polarization between Black and White low-income voters. White rural voters overwhelmingly supported President Trump, while Black urban voters overwhelmingly supported President Biden.

As of late 2021, the Appalachian Regional Commission had designated nine Tennessee counties as “distressed” – among the poorest ten percent of counties nationally: each with more than one in five residents living in poverty. The poorest counties in Tennessee produced some of the highest percentages in the state in support of the re-election of President Trump in 2020. In most of these counties – six out of nine – more than ninety percent of the population was White.

# POLARIZATION AMONG LOW INCOME VOTERS

## ECONOMICALLY DISTRESSED COUNTIES IN TENNESSEE - 2021

COUNTY	POVERTY RATE [4]	TRUMP 2020 % [5]	WHITE, NON-HISPANIC % [6]
Hancock	28.6	86.4	96.6
Lake	28.6	73.4	66.3
Perry	26.9	81.0	90.8
Clay	26.1	78.0	94.1
Cocke	23.5	81.8	92.5
Bledsoe	23.2	82.1	86.9
Grundy	22.7	82.0	94.9
Scott	21.9	88.4	96.8
Lauderdale	21.2	63.3	59.4

[4] A discussion of the distressed areas classification system can be found at <https://www.arc.gov/distressed-areas-classification-system/>. The list of distressed counties is updated on an annual basis.

[5] Data on county election results is from [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

[6] Data is from the 2020 U.S. Census and is available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>.

# POLARIZATION AMONG LOW INCOME VOTERS

POVERTY BY CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT  
TENNESSEE

In 2020, President Biden carried only one Tennessee congressional district with more than 75 percent of the vote: he won the 9th district with 78.5 percent of the vote.[7] Based on 2021 American Community Survey data, the 9th district has the highest poverty in Tennessee. It is also the only majority Black congressional district in the state, with Black residents accounting for 67.6 percent of the population: Black residents account for no more than 30 percent in any other district and account for fewer than one in ten residents in five out of the state’s nine congressional districts.[8]

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT	POVERTY
9	22.2%
1	16.9%
5	14.6%
3	13.5%
8	12.3%
6	12.0%
2	11.8%
4	11.1%
7	9.9%

[7] See data analysis at <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/11/19/1163009/-Daily-Kos-Elections-presidential-results-by-congressional-district-for-2020-2016-and-2012>  
[8] Data is available at <https://www.census.gov/mycd/>

# DEMOCRACY NEEDS TO DELIVER RESULTS: REVITALIZING LOW INCOME COMMUNITIES

As part of the Conversations on Democracy series, the Tennessee Democracy Forum convened a group of community development leaders from across Tennessee. Whether rural or urban, their focus was on working to help finance and support efforts to create economic opportunity in mostly low income, high poverty areas across the state.

While the communities that they served were different, their challenges were frequently the same: the need for housing, better transportation options, increasing costs, access to capital, support for small businesses, workforce development and digital equity and literacy. And they all noted the importance of trust and partnership in their work.

At the same time, they recognized that long term disinvestment can lead to a pessimism that is an obstacle to revitalization. As a result, lack of success undermines both institutions and opportunity.



# DEMOCRACY NEEDS TO DELIVER RESULTS: A FAIRER ECONOMY

The Tennessee Democracy Poll also found that there was bipartisan support for action to increase economic fairness at the federal level. These sorts of initiatives could also build support for democratic institutions.

According to a poll conducted by Embold Research for the Tennessee Democracy Forum in April, Tennessee voters support a series of steps to improve the economy.[9] In the poll, voters were asked: “Do you support or oppose the following actions by the federal government?”

- 76% supported “taking a tougher stance against corporate mergers and acquisitions that limit competition and result in higher prices” (51% strongly supported and 26% somewhat supported)
- 56% supported “providing extra funding to help rebuild the economy in cities and towns that have lost population and jobs over the last two decades” (28% strongly supported and 28% somewhat supported)
- 55% supported “increasing the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour with regular cost of living increases over time” (29% strongly supported and 15% somewhat supported)

[9] Embold Research surveyed 1,125 registered voters in Tennessee, with an oversample of Hamilton County, from April 8-11, 2022. Respondents were recruited via dynamic online sampling and SMS text-to-web sampling to attain a sample reflective of the electorate. Post-stratification weighting was performed on age, gender, ethnicity, education, region, and vote history. Weighting parameters were based on voterfile data. The modeled margin of error is 3.2%. For more information on Embold Research, go to <https://emboldresearch.com/>.

# DEMOCRACY NEEDS TO DELIVER RESULTS: A FAIRER ECONOMY

On the question of the federal government taking a tougher stance on corporate mergers and acquisitions:

- 89% of Biden 2020 voters (70% strongly support) and 67% of Trump 2020 voters (37% strongly support) backed a greater federal role.
- A greater federal role won majority support among rural (74%), suburban (78%) and urban (75%).
- 76% of Black voters and 76% of white voters supported a tougher stance by the federal government.

On the question of federal funding for economically challenged cities and towns:

- 89% of Biden 2020 voters (52% strongly support) and 32% of Trump 2020 voters (10% strongly support) backed a greater federal role.
- A greater federal role won plurality support among rural voters (49%) and majority support from suburban (61%) and urban (68%) voters.
- 88% of Black voters and 52% of white voters supported a greater federal role.

On the question of a \$15 federal minimum wage:

- 93% of Biden 2020 voters (81% strongly support) and 26% of Trump 2020 voters (11% strongly support) backed a \$15 federal minimum wage.
- A \$15 federal minimum wage won majority support from suburban (59%) and urban (68%) voters but was opposed by a 49% - 47% plurality among rural voters.
- 84% of Black voters and 50% of white voters supported a \$15 federal minimum wage.

## DEMOCRACY DELIVERS RESULTS: THE BIPARTISAN INFRASTRUCTURE LAW

In 2021, Congress passed – and President Biden signed – a bipartisan bill to provide \$1.2 trillion in new funding for infrastructure. The White House has made the explicit connection between the new law and democracy:

“President Biden forged consensus and compromise between Democrats, Republicans and Independents to demonstrate our democracy can deliver big wins for the American people.”[10]

The infrastructure law was enacted without the support of Tennessee’s two Republican senators or seven Republican House members: both Democratic House members supported the bill. In the Senate as a whole, nineteen Republicans – including Minority Leader McConnell – voted for the legislation.[11] In the House, thirteen Republicans supported the bill.[12]

Since its enactment, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has provided more than \$1.8 billion to Tennessee – funding an array of transportation, water and energy projects. While most of those funds have gone to statewide initiatives, more than \$200 million in funding has gone directly to local governments – rural, suburban and urban.[13]

[10] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/build/>

[11]

[https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_votes/vote1171/vote\\_117\\_1\\_00314.htm](https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_votes/vote1171/vote_117_1_00314.htm)

[12] <https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2021369>

[13] For data on Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding by state as of September 6, 2022, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/build/maps-of-progress/>

# DEMOCRACY DELIVERS RESULTS: THE BIPARTISAN INFRASTRUCTURE LAW

These projects have included:

- \$54 million to the Memphis Area Transit Authority for a new operations facility.
- \$23.4 million to the City of Morristown for a complete streets redesign of a highway.
- \$14.6 million to the City of Dunlap for improvements on US 127.
- \$5 million to the Chattanooga Airport for its terminal expansion project.

AWARDS TO TENNESSEE PROJECTS OVER \$5 MILLION UNDER BIPARTISAN  
INFRASTRUCTURE LAW AS OF SEPTEMBER 6, 2022

FUNDING DEPARTMENT	AMOUNT	LOCATION	PROJECT
Dept. of Transportation	\$54,000,000	Memphis	Buses and Bus Facilities – Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA)
Dept. of Transportation	\$25,000,000	Chattanooga	The Wilcox Boulevard Bridge – River to Ridge Mobility Project
Dept. of Transportation	\$23,430,325	Morristown	SR343 Complete Streets and ITS Traffic Signal Coordination Project
Dept. of Transportation	\$22,378,905	Memphis	Low or No Emission – Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA)
Dept. of Transportation	\$17,878,867	Nashville	Nashville International – BNA
Dept. of Transportation	\$17,290,889	Memphis	Memphis International – MEM
Dept. of Transportation	\$14,641,311	Dunlap	U.S. Highway 127 Corridor Optimization
Corps of Engineers – Civil Works	\$13,500,000	Celina	Dale Hollow Lake
Dept. of Transportation	\$5,198,165	Knoxville	McGhee Tyson – TYS





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