

2023 Civic Health Assessment



Executive Summary

It is right and appropriate that from time to time we, as a self-governing people, take stock of our civic health. Historically such efforts have focused on superficial indicators. To be sure, voter registration and turnout statistics are informative. But do they really tell us very much about how civically minded and prepared we are?

A doctor's assessment would not consist of asking if you had a gym membership and a record of attendance. At the very least a doctor might ask you what workouts you do and for how long. Are you getting your heartrate up?

Even that is not sufficient. A person's health is comprised of many factors including diet, exercise, stress, and mental health, just to name a few.

We sought to measure civic health in a more comprehensive way. We are not just reviewing whether you are registered to vote, and whether you vote, but reviewing how you vote. This is not a look at for whom you vote, but how informed are you about that choice, whether you know the role of the office being sought, and how you pursue that information.

To that end, we looked at three overarching themes of civic health, **Direct Participation**, **Social Civics**, and **Polarization**.

We used national studies from some of America's top-flight research institutions and universities to understand the national situation. We then used data on Kentucky, and conducted our own survey of 800 Kentucky voters, equally split by party, to ascertain where Kentucky stands relative to the nation, and if we are in fact civically healthy.

Conclusion

We graded the Commonwealth as having a **C** grade on Direct Participation, a **D+** grade on Social Civics, and a **B** grade on Polarization.

Taken together we give Kentucky an overall grade of **C** for Civic Health.

But we are at a crossroads. We have a lot of opportunity, with minimal work, to raise our Social Civics grade.

We believe this alone will help raise our Direct Participation grade and maintain or even improve our Polarization grade. But if we do nothing and instead continue on the same course, we believe polarization will grow, and as it does it will leave us civically unhealthy.

Kentucky's Overall Civic Health Grade

C

CIVIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT POLL

Number of Respondents: 800

Margin of Error: \pm 3.46%

DIRECT PARTICIPATION

When it comes to direct participation, Kentucky is generally in line with national trends. Voter registration is slightly elevated while turnout is slightly depressed. However, these variances can largely be attributed to prior years of voter roll maintenance being neglected. This is a situation that is in the process of being rectified.

We also found that nationally voters are not well educated about the government institutions they elect people to run. Some good news is that Kentuckians are more knowledgeable than the average American. For example, Kentuckians are twice as likely as the average American to be able to name the three branches of government and be able to name one of their state legislators.

Kentuckians are also more likely to refrain from voting in specific races on the ballot if they lack knowledge about the candidates. But many Americans and Kentuckians blindly vote in races without knowing whom they are voting for and what office the candidates seek. Kentucky is one of the only states that does not produce a voters' guide, or a government almanac (blue book) to attempt to correct this trend.

Our methods of civic education in school are decidedly behind national norms. Kentucky is one of only a handful of states that have no formal K-12 civics education. Though like most states, Kentucky requires graduates to pass the citizenship test, this test is woefully inadequate. The knowledge required to pass is on an elementary level, and by all indications the test is easily passed by the majority of Kentucky graduates.



**5 OUT
OF 10**

could name all
three branches of
government

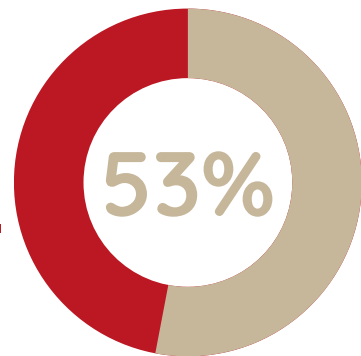
49%

could name a local elected
official

87%

could name the President
of the United States

could name
both of
Kentucky's U.S.
Senators



44%

Could name a
legislator that
represents them

92%

could name the Governor

SOCIAL CIVICS

When considering the relationship between civic health and social interaction, we found that Kentucky seems to be on the leading edge of this troubling trend. An exceptionally small number of Kentuckians seem to be mixing civics and interpersonal relations.

However, for those that are, civic health is flourishing. “Social Interactors” were consistently some of the most knowledgeable, engaged, and deliberative civic actors in the state. While perhaps the most civically healthy group, Social Interactors were not alone. Other groups that shared some characteristics of social interaction also performed well.

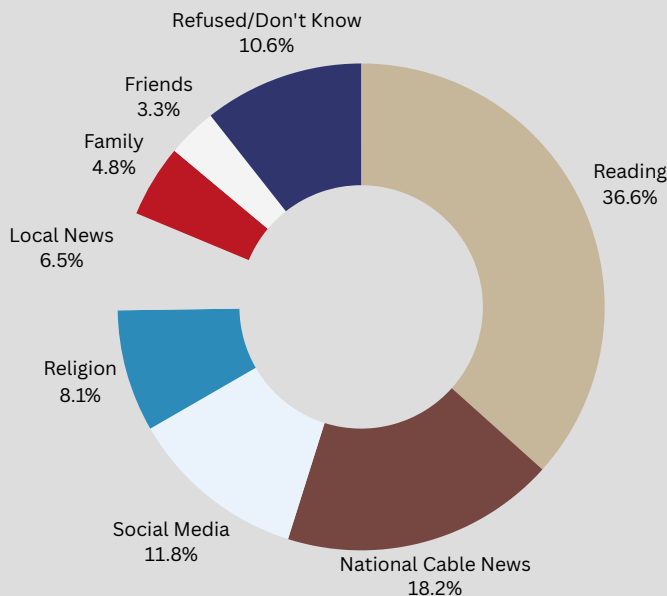
It should be noted too, that these groups were determined by self-identification with a primary source of forming political opinions. Social interactors likely read, and many may be religious. All those groups also likely engaged in socialization. All generally performed well in our assessment.

Groups that did not perform well were the “Media Consumers.” These groups generally were less knowledgeable about government, less engaged, and more polarized. They too may socialize, but they themselves expressed a primary preference for media as a leading determinant in their political outlook.

To the extent one group engages in the other group’s activities, one can infer that media consumers form an opinion before socialization occurs, and given that, are more likely to socialize with like-minded persons.

Social Interactors are exposed to civic concepts through often non-political socialization, and hone and test political ideas after. Media consumers form their opinions in isolation then take them ready-made to the social world, with echo chambers being the most receptive and thus attractive.

WHERE KENTUCKIANS GET THEIR POLITICAL LEANINGS AND VIEWS



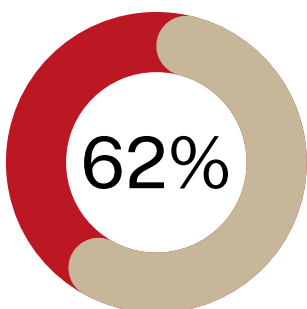
Discuss politics with family and friends a few times a week



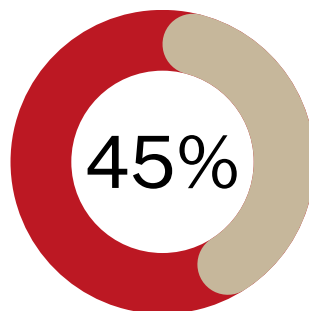
Have purchased or boycotted products to express political opinions



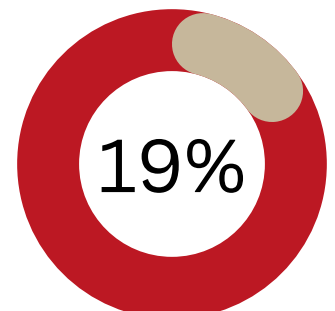
Have contacted an elected public official in the past year



Trust local TV News



Trust local newspapers



Trust social media

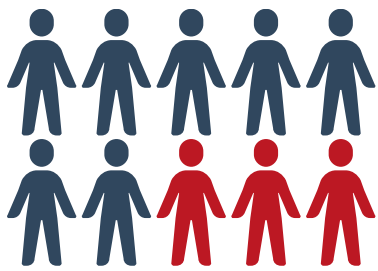
POLARIZATION

Overall, Kentucky is vastly less polarized than the national trend. We seem more tolerant of others who have opposing views to our own, and we seem less inclined to self-segregate. Geographically we are much less homogeneous than conventional wisdom would say. While our cities may be more Democratic and our rural areas more Republican, the ideologies that drive us are more dispersed than most would think.

Perhaps if we just socialized more, on non-political grounds, we would see this. But the seeds of polarization have fallen on the Bluegrass.

Our survey showed that self-identified liberals seem to be very resistant to allowing themselves to be exposed to persons with differing points of view. Meanwhile conservatives disproportionately gravitate to news media as their main source of political information and they are decidedly distrustful of it – more so than even national trends.

Research has shown both preferences are a toxic mix in which polarization grows. If socialization is a cure, polarization is a disease. But socialization is not a cure, it is a preventative measure against polarization. Once polarization sets in, in a self-segregated environment, social interaction loses its effect.



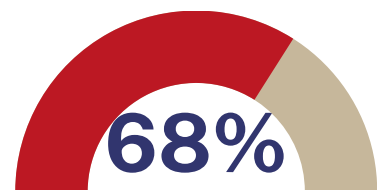
**7 OUT
OF 10**
have changed at
least one political
view over lifetime

61%

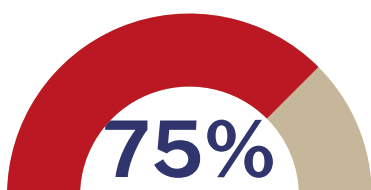
think it is better when
lawmakers compromise

60%

of respondents would be comfortable in
a romantic relationship with someone
they disagree with politically.



of respondents would feel
comfortable working for
an employer who they
disagree with politically.



of respondents do not think it
is important to have friends
with the same political views.

80%

of respondents would not feel ashamed
if their child doesn't share their
political views.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve Civic Education

Most states require some form of formal civic instruction in the classroom - Kentucky is one of the few that does not. Current high school graduation requirements only dictate 3 years of social studies; adding a 4th year, dedicated to civics instruction, would not only be a logical move, but may reap increasable benefits. Further, to ensure the effectiveness of these classes, a more robust civics exam for our high school graduates, similar to Ohio's, is needed.



Not only will these requirements reap benefits in terms of citizenship, but also in other academic pursuits. Research from Harvard and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation have found that many of the so-called soft skills needed to succeed in a 21st century workforce are associated with higher levels of civic education.

Produce a Blue Book

Kentucky has never produced a true, blue book – an almanac of state government. Fortunately, most of the requisite information is readily available. It only need be compiled in one source. Simply compiling existing information into a handy reference guide would not be difficult or costly. Such a guide could be in print, online, or both. Many states charge for a print copy or only provide free copies to schools and libraries. Having this resource is associated with higher voter turnout in other states. This is a simple approach that could reap great benefits.

