

Participation in the Democratic Process

Education is the cornerstone of a well-functioning democracy. The founders of our nation believed strongly that an informed electorate could make wiser choices at the ballot box than an uninformed electorate.

We often bemoan the low rate at which Americans go to the polls. In the 2004 presidential election, for example, just over one-half (54.6%) of eligible Tennesseans even bothered to vote (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). But the better educated do tend to participate more in the voting process. For example, national data for the 2004 election show that 74.2% of college graduates voted while only 23.6% of those with less than a 9th grade education voted.

It is disappointing that voter participation has declined with the passage of time. But those with a college degree or advanced degree have seen the smallest declines. Between 1968 and 2004, those with less than a 9th grade education saw the largest drop at 30.9% whereas individuals with a bachelor's degree saw voting rates fall only 9.9%.

"A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to Farce or Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives" (James Madison, 1788).

