

ELECTIONS

Indiana voter turnout is almost last in the nation. Many are working to turn this around.



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Indianapolis Star

Published 6:25 a.m. ET Oct. 21, 2024 | Updated 6:25 a.m. ET Oct. 21, 2024

Ask a class of 50 motivated students in Plainfield High School why they think so many people don't care about voting, and the hands start flying.

Politics has been meme-ified. The discussion is toxic, and participants fear ostracization from their social groups. It's so easy to feel numb and mindless today, caught in your own echo chamber on social media with surface-level takes from celebrities. And it's sensitive.

"I think a lot of people don't like hurting people's feelings, and so they don't like to talk about it as much because they don't want to offend other people," junior Austin Call said.

But these students, who themselves were about to conduct a mock election using a real voting booth in the classroom, are just as ready with solutions: Indiana should have citizen-led ballot referenda, remove more barriers to voting and require all high school seniors to take civics, to name a few.

These are the questions plaguing Indiana's most civic-minded, as the state continues to outdo itself with staggeringly low voter engagement statistics. Indiana ranked 50th in voter turnout in 2022, according to the Indiana Civic Health Index, and has been in the bottom 10 during midterm elections since 2010. There's little hope that those stats will flip this election cycle as voters head to the polls Nov. 5 to select Indiana's next governor and a plethora of critical down-ballot races: The number of registered voters is down from eight years ago.

Indiana voter guide: Who's running for Congress, Statehouse, governor, AG and school board

There aren't solid answers for why Hoosiers, in particular, have such a problem. Some point to our laws and our mostly uncompetitive elections, on top of the polarized dynamics that affect the whole country. But a bevy of civic-minded organizations have taken note and launched new concerted efforts to try to turn these statistics around, with a particular focus on young people.

"Because of where we're starting," points out Angela Carr Klitzsch, CEO of Women4Change Indiana, "We've got nowhere to go but up."

Why Indiana voter turnout is so low

There was a time when Hoosiers bested the national averages in voter turnout. But that time was brief, and about 40 years ago.

Since the 90s, the state has underperformed the nation in both midterm and presidential elections. The last midterm election in 2022 was a particularly low mark for Indiana: The state ranked 50th among the states and Washington D.C. for voter turnout, and its voting rate of 42% fell 10 percentage points behind the national voter participation of 52% – the widest gap since at least the 70s, according to the latest Indiana Civic Health Index.

Presidential years are not much better. While Indiana ranked 36th in 2012, it fell to 46th in 2020. Indiana has been falling since 2010 in voter registration rankings, too, landing at 40th in 2022.

"There's a lot of, 'My vote doesn't matter,'" said Chuck Dunlap, president and CEO of the Indiana Bar Foundation, who hears this sentiment from his adjunct class at IU. "It's hard to counteract that, especially when it's not easy to do. Any barrier can be a detriment."

The biennial Indiana Civic Health Index, on which the Bar Foundation is a partner, suggests that policy choices correlate to states' voter participation outcomes. The states that have the highest turnout and registration numbers, like Colorado, Iowa and Wisconsin, tend to have policies that Indiana does not, such as automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, unrestricted absentee voting and a 12-hour voting period on Election Day.

Indiana has a history of strict elections laws compared to other states. In 2005, it was the first state in the nation to enact a voter ID law. In 2020, despite bipartisanly supporting the use of unrestricted absentee voting during the height of the covid-19 pandemic in the primary, Indiana was one of just five states to decide not to allow this in November.

Moreover, across the country voter access legislation has become politicized, with Democrats tending to support removing barriers and Republicans tending to support adding restrictions in the name of "election security."

This leaves nonpartisan groups like the Bar Foundation hesitant to advocate for policy change that could be seen as revealing a political bent, and preferring to let the data – like in their health index reports – speak for itself.

"Voting and voting participation, I personally don't see it as controversial," Dunlap said. "That shouldn't be controversial – getting people to participate."

The relative lack of competitive elections also likely plays a part, the civic health index speculates. In 2020, for instance, it was fairly easy to predict Donald Trump would win Indiana; there was basically no competition in the race for governor; there was no U.S. Senate race. A third of the Statehouse races were uncontested.

The outcomes of Indiana's Congressional and Statehouse races tend to be predictable in part because of the way they were drawn in 2011. An analysis of this redistricting process by George Washington University professor Christopher Warshaw, commissioned by Women4Change Indiana a decade after the fact, found that the maps have resulted in significantly more "wasted" Democratic votes in Indiana than Republican ones. The 2021 redistricting retained Republicans' advantage in the Statehouse and Congressional districts.

"There is some validity when they feel like their vote doesn't count," Klitzsch said.

New efforts to combat voter apathy

One approach to turning these statistics around that is less political is a renewed focus on civic education. Around this, there's been a convergence of efforts in Indiana over the last few years.

A 2021 House bill by former state Rep. Tony Cook, R-Cicero, required the state to develop civic education standards, which resulted in a new requirement for sixth grade students to have a full semester of civics starting this school year. With this development, Indiana became one of just eight states with this curriculum requirement.

There have been other efforts outside of the legislature, too. The Indiana Bar Foundation hosted an inaugural Indiana Civics Summit in 2023, and out of that, created an Indiana Civics Coalition, which will discuss how to foster greater public understanding of civics.

Likewise, Women4Change has mailed 22,000 postcards encouraging people to vote, exceeding previous years' goals.

Elsewhere in the Statehouse, the Indiana Secretary of State's Office partnered with the Hoosier State Press Association for the first time this year to deliver election guides to more than half a million households, spokesperson Lindsey Eaton said. And, the office now uses targeted social media outreach to unregistered and low-propensity voters.

This year, too, the Eli Lilly and Company Foundation granted \$100,000 to the Bar Foundation to expand its "Indiana Kids Election" program to all willing schools in the state. The program brings mock elections and voting simulations to the classroom, and with the Lilly grant this year, the foundation is adding a goal of registering all eligible high school seniors to vote in Indiana.

"If we can do that, it'll be a dramatic change," Dunlap said. "I've been around this for about 23 years. Within the past five, I think there's been a lot more energy around civic engagement and education."

Similarly, when the U.S. Chamber Foundation put out a call for more states to be a part of their national Civics Bee competition, the Indiana Chamber thought it made perfect sense to participate this year, said Jason Bearce, vice president of education and workforce development. A disengagement with civics can relate to other areas of disengagement, like disregard for institutions, such as the chamber, he said.

"We all feel how politically polarized and divisive everything is now, and at least some of that is based on a lack of understanding of how our system is supposed to work," he said. "If people don't even really understand it, how can we expect them to engage with it productively?"

The inaugural Indiana Civics Bee, held at the Statehouse in August, was nothing for the participating middle schoolers to sneeze at. They were asked questions about precedent-setting Supreme Court cases, the impact of federalism on Reconstruction policies and which section of the U.S. Constitution contains the language about vote certification.

Ellie Fost, the 14-year-old from Richmond who won Indiana's competition and will compete in nationals in D.C. this month, admits that she and her friends are a little more engaged than the average student. They talk about the state of education, read the news together before class starts. The daughter of a social studies teacher, she grew up valuing political engagement.

"I don't know everyone, but I think my friends and I are kind of a little bit more invested," she said.

But these self-proclaimed nerds are not necessarily who need the most attention. At a panel about voter engagement within Black communities held at Eastern Star Church in Indianapolis in September, Dee Yard, a former teacher, asked for advice about how to break through to young people who mainly listen to one another and are inundated with distractions.

"We already know how to speak to the young people who are a part of the process," she told IndyStar afterward, thinking of the kids whose families vote together, or the kids inclined to participate in a Civics Bee. "But it's the ones that don't have that, are the ones that we need to be able to connect with."

The panelists knew they were, as Eastern Star Senior Pastor Jeffrey A. Johnson, Sr., put it, "preaching to the choir" with those who chose to come to a voter engagement panel on a Wednesday evening. So their call to action was simple: Spread this conversation to your friends and family who wouldn't be so inclined.

Desirree France, a 60-year-old Indianapolis resident wearing a Kamala Harris T-shirt, was taking diligent notes with a particular aunt of hers in mind. She was shocked to learn that this aunt was thinking of not voting because she doesn't like what either presidential candidate is saying.

"If we are afraid to speak to people we don't know, we can all speak to our family," France said. "This is one that we *have* to figure out."

'A very big boat to turn'

A decline in civic participation can be as tough to pin down as it is to turn around.

In her decades of work conducting community-based conversations about politics and democracy, Lisa-Marie Napoli, director of IU's Political and Civic Engagement program, has noticed a shift over time: Years ago, conversations about even tough issues felt lighter and more open; over time, conversations have grown more difficult as skepticism and paranoia have crept in over the value of one's vote.

There's some apathy among would-be voters; there's some intimidation that comes from not knowing what's on the ballot; the nation has also been through emotional and psychological

upheaval with the pandemic.

"I think people are overwhelmed," she said.

But she also sees encouraging signs. She sees an enhanced sense of curiosity, especially from her students, who light up, she says, at the prospect of helping others learn more about the voting process.

College students have seen some of the biggest gains in voter turnout. From the 2016 to 2020 presidential elections, Americans overall increased their voting participation by 6 percentage points, but college students jumped by 14 percentage points, according to the 2020 National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. Students at IU Bloomington upped their participation by nearly 22% in that time span.

The Bar Foundation has nearly 12,000 school-aged kids signed up for the Indiana Kids Election, whose polls will close at 6 p.m. Nov. 5, just like they will for the voting-age public. Plenty of kids in Plainfield High School's U.S. History class, which is participating in the program, admit they'd have known little to nothing about the statewide elections had it not been for the mock election. Call, the aforementioned junior, said the assignment even motivated him to watch the gubernatorial debates in early October.

"Once I actually started to learn about it, I was intrigued to learn more," he said.

There are some promising features of these 2024 elections. The governor's race has taken a competitive turn in recent weeks. The race for attorney general appears competitive in some polling. On the first day of early voting in Indiana, 35,000 people showed up to vote in person, which is the 2nd highest amount in history, according to the Secretary of State's office.

"It's a very big boat to turn," Dunlap said. "So you take the incremental change, and you celebrate it, and you focus on the next thing. And there's always a next thing."

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