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Providing Voter Registration and Election Information in Libraries: A Survey of Public Libraries in Tennessee

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ABSTRACT

Voter turnout for federal elections in Tennessee is historically lower than in most other states. Public libraries have long been involved in empowering citizens and assisting eligible voters in the registration process as well as steering them toward sources to help them make informed decisions when voting. This article reports on a 2018 survey of librarians working in public libraries in Tennessee. Seventy-one responding public libraries reported about the level of assistance provided to patrons regarding voter registration and accessing desired information about elections and candidates. Respondents also reported the kinds of activities that their libraries provide and what types of election information sources are suggested to patrons. Findings suggest that 97% of respondents provide some level of assistance in this area and 65% were interested in increasing the services they provide.

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Public libraries; voter registration; election information; reference service; civics education; democracy; civic engagement

Introduction

While America prides itself in being a leader in democracy, voter turnout in the United States is lower than many other democratic countries. For example, in the 2016 election, only 55.7% of the eligible population voted. (DeSilver 2018) In comparison, the Canadian federal election held on October 19, 2015, had 68.3% of the eligible voting population turnout and elect a majority Liberal government (Elections Canada 2019). While U.S. elections follow a pattern of higher voter turnout in years where there are both Presidential and Congressional ballots being cast in the same year as opposed to only Congressional elections, voter participation in *any* federal elections has not exceeded 65% since 1908. (United States Elections Project n.d.)

Throughout the last century, the Southern States have historically had much lower rates of voter turnout than any other areas of the country as evidenced by a study of voter turnout and presidential elections from 1920–2000. (Springer 2012, 253) There are many reasons for this, but the lingering effects of slavery and racism have played a large part. A history of

suppressive laws including literacy tests, poll taxes, and excessive residency requirements targeted at African Americans are contributing factors. Although the gap in voter turnout between the South and other areas of the country has narrowed, especially since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a substantial gap remains still. (Springer 2012, 254)

Tennessee in particular has had a lower voter turnout than the rest of the country. In the November 2018 general election, Tennessee's voter turnout rate was 44.7%, which place it 43rd in the country. (McDonald 2018). Even worse, according to The Pew Charitable Trusts (2016), in 2014 Tennessee was one of ten states where voter turnout actually declined between 2010 and 2014. (p. 4) Even now, Tennessee is one of only nine states that requires a photo ID to vote. (Gaughan 2013, 122) As recently as 2012, there was a movement to allow photo library cards from the Memphis Public Library as voter IDs. After a struggle in the courts, it was struck down. (Goldberg 2012, 6)

It is clear that voters in Tennessee do not engage in the voting process as often as voters from most other states. Few would argue that our democracy depends on free citizens exercising their right to vote in fair elections and that civic engagement has always been a cornerstone of America political life through democratic processes such as voting. According to a Pew Charitable Trust report on voting using data collected in 2016, 17% of unregistered voters and 39% of registered voters did not vote because they felt they were not informed enough about the candidates or issues. (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2017, 4) So how can and do libraries help users participate in this "great experiment"? Considering the comparatively low voter turnout in federal, state, and municipal elections held in Tennessee, the primary research question we explore in this paper is: to what extent do public libraries participate in the facilitation of voting for Tennessee voters? We hope our findings will help inform public libraries not only in Tennessee but possibly elsewhere, and in the south particularly, about what they might consider doing to help their communities' citizens engage in the democratic process more regularly and conveniently.

Literature review

In a review of the literature we could find no other surveys of how libraries provide election and candidate information or assist with voter registration at public libraries. In fact, only one study was found on the subject which was a case study on voter registration services at an academic library at Midwestern University in 2014. (Bonnell 2014) Our study appears to be the first of its kind.

The literature does reveal the many ways in which public libraries have been involved in the civic engagement of its patrons since their beginnings in

the United States. Although this process has not been perfect by any means due to voter suppression and the inability of women, African Americans, and Native Americans to vote in this country's earlier years, libraries nonetheless have made an effort to help citizens engage in the democratic process.

Andrew Carnegie, who was an immigrant from Scotland to America, believed that libraries were great equalizers and helped create better citizens (Mickelson 1975). As waves of immigrants poured into the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries, public libraries were recognized as civic institutions with the duty to help these immigrants become "Americanized" and good citizens. (Murphy 1916; Walker 1918). In 1952, the American Library Association (ALA) urged participation in National Nonpartisan Register and Vote Campaign. By "[p]articipating in the 1952 election campaign, libraries established their role as the community source for serious, nonpartisan information on a central issue of the day." (Preer 2008, 19) As a more "local" example, in 1978 the Public Library of Columbus & Franklin County, Ohio, provided voter registration at all its branches and also via drive-thru service at its main library. ("Libraries offer", 1978).

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 further involved libraries by allowing states to designate public libraries as official agents of registration, which several states chose to do. (Pub L. No. 103-31, as amended, 42 U.S. C 1973gg-5) Tennessee was not one of those states. In 2000, the first online voting was allowed in the United States in the Arizona Democratic Party election. Many voters cast their votes from the local public library. (Kranich 2000) More recently, the San Antonio Public Library started a marketing campaign called "Feed your freedom" and urged citizens to register to vote at its branch locations around the city. (Coward 2017). The Louisville Free Public Library in Kentucky hosted the League of Women Voters and offered a civics class. (City of Louisville 2016)). The Boulder Public Library in Colorado processed more than twelve hundred voter registrations in one day, which was attributed in part to the efforts of local libraries. (Bear 2018) Finally, this year, libraries in Memphis, Tennessee, and Pittsfield, Massachusetts, hosted "speed-repping" where local patrons had a chance to meet with and speak to local political leaders in an environment similar to the speed-dating concept, while the Skokie (Illinois) Public Library ran a "Dear Elected Official" program. (Udell 2019) Regardless the format used, the goal was the same: to facilitate and improve direct civic engagement between political leaders and the community's citizens via the public library's facilities.

ALA urges librarians to help inform citizens about registering to vote and election information. Instituted under ALA President Nancy Kranich in 2000, the Smart Voting@ Your Library initiative was started and still stands today. (Kranich, 2000). John Berry, editor-at-large of Library Journal put it this way: "Ensuring that the electorate gets the information it needs to vote is

part of the ancient founding mission of U.S. public libraries.” (Berry 2016, 10) Public libraries are seen as the primary instruments for civic education (Cohen 2017) due in part to being “trusted, stable, apolitical, safe institutions, and accessible to everyone.” (Young 2012, 30) The Urban Libraries Council sees public libraries as fulfilling five crucial roles including delivering supplemental civics education and creating civic conversations. (Critchler Lyons 2016). Kranich, Bossaller, and Buschman expand on this rich history of civic engagement in libraries in their respective, expansive articles. (Bossaller, 2017; Buschman 2018; Kranich 2017). Generally, the library literature is rich with examples, exhortations, and encouragement in the area of libraries promoting civic engagement by serving citizens in this way.

Method

We constructed the questionnaire for our survey using Qualtrics survey software. Prior to distributing the survey to our sample, we had three public librarians pretest the questionnaire while encouraging them to provide to us any feedback about potential deficiencies in the question order, its wording, etc. Once revisions to the questionnaire were complete, we sent out 249 e-mail invitations in December 2018 to participate in our survey to libraries/library systems across Tennessee. The survey was open for two weeks to allow those who chose to participate time to respond. E-Mail addresses of directors or managers of public libraries in the state were obtained from the Tennessee State Library and Archives as the primary contact points to receive our survey invitations. Recipients were encouraged to forward the e-mail on to those librarians who could best complete the survey in their library if necessary. We received 71 completed questionnaires, a 28.5% response rate. This response rate means that we may be 95% confident about the data from our respondents with a margin of error of $\pm 9.85\%$. As a result of this rather large confidence interval, we must be cautious to not overgeneralize our findings. However, we feel that the responses provided by the participating libraries warrants reporting in this paper regardless.

Limitations

This survey was conducted of all the public libraries in Tennessee who had current e-mail addresses on file with the State Library and Archives. The participation rate reflects that there are many libraries who did not respond, so it is impossible to tell how those responses might or might not change the outcomes. This study also does not reflect necessarily what is happening in other states.

Findings

In terms of the geographic distribution of responses to our survey, 16.9% of our responding libraries were in West Tennessee, 38% in Middle Tennessee, and 45.1% were in East Tennessee. A plurality (47.9%) of responding libraries were located in what the Census Bureau defines as an Urban Cluster (2,500–49,999 residents), whereas 16.9% of these responding public libraries were in an Urbanized Area (50,000+ residents), and 35.2% were located in areas considered Rural (<2,500 residents). [Table B1](#) shows the distribution of our responding libraries based on how the Tennessee State Library and Archives classifies its public libraries.

Only 8.5% of valid responding libraries ($n = 6$) indicated that they have served as a polling place for elections at some point in time. These same libraries have served as polling places for the three types of elections encountered by the public (municipal ($n = 6$), state ($n = 6$), and federal ($n = 5$)). The majority of these libraries are found in middle Tennessee, but this is not a statistically significant geographic pattern. Between public libraries or library systems being in urbanized areas (population 50,000+), urban clusters (2,500–49,999) and rural (<2,500), there is no distinctive statistical difference of whether public libraries are more likely or not to serve as a polling site for elections based on Census Bureau population center classification.

Regardless, public libraries *do* provide many other services to help educate the public on election issues and assist them with registering to vote.

We asked Tennessee public libraries to select from a list of related activities that they participate in that provide assistance with voter registration or election information. The responses to this question are presented in [Table B2](#).

“Other” types of activities included: “placing voter information on bulletin board;” “we post sample ballots and hand up the voting poster;” “reminders on our Social Media sites talking about early voting, registration deadlines, and election day reminders;” “about the only thing we haven’t done is host a voter registration drive. We are open to it, but it would have to be non-partisan;” and, in an activity that mimics what Tennesseans may encounter at their local Department of Motor Vehicles, “offer voter registration to patrons when they get a new library card.” Only two responding public libraries in the state responded that they do not provide any of these services with one of these libraries stating that they do not do so because of not enough staff, staff not being trained properly to do so, and patrons not being interested in this type of service.

While there are a wide variety of different election related services and activities offered by Tennessee public libraries, would a library visitor be more likely to encounter certain activities in certain types of libraries based on demographic factors? We tested this hypothesis using the Chi-square

inferential statistical test that allows data analysts to determine whether two nominal variables have some sort of relationship, or no relationship, between each other. Unfortunately, the low response rate to our survey affected these tests due to there being a larger number of resulting expected values being lower than the accepted expected count cutoff of 5 while also comprising more than 20% of the crosstabs' cells. It is when we look at each of the activities provided in [Table B2](#) in relation to the geographic area of Tennessee (East, Middle, or West) where the respective libraries are located that we begin to see some patterns emerging. For instance, the most glaring difference we see in our data is that libraries in Middle and East Tennessee appear to be significantly more likely to direct patrons to online voter information than in libraries located in West Tennessee ($X^2 = 13.080$, $p = .001$). However, whether a library is based in a rural or an urban area also affects their likelihood of participating in the activities listed in [Table B2](#). Libraries located in urbanized areas (50,000+ population) and urban clusters (2,500–49,999 population) are significantly more likely to provide reference service to library visitors asking about election and voter information compared to rural libraries (<2,500 population) ($X^2 = 8.558$, $p < .05$). This difference is noted also with “providing information on voting and elections on your Web site,” where libraries located in rural or urban clusters are significantly *not* likely to offer this voting information than libraries in urbanized areas ($X^2 = 9.212$, $p = .01$). Other than these three exceptions we detail above, a library visitor is likely to find the other election- and voting-based activities in [Table B2](#) in any of our responding libraries regardless of geographic area or whether the library is located in an urban or rural setting.

While providing the election-oriented services listed above, are there particular information sources that Tennessee libraries rely on for information about elections and/or political candidates? We provided our responding libraries with six such values to select and an “Other” option that allowed for textual entry, similar to the survey question we analyze above. Our descriptive findings are presented in [Table B3](#).

Similar to our above analysis, we used Chi-square tests to determine if there were any relationships between our demographic variables (Census Bureau rural/urban classification, geographic area of Tennessee, and Tennessee Library and Archives Public Library type) and the various types of information sources public librarians consult for election information requests. Our findings indicate that a significant relationship exists between Census Bureau rural/urban classification and using the *League of Women Voters* (LWV) as such a source ($X^2 = 18.382$, $p = .00$). This result is because of the overwhelming reliance on the LWV as an information source (66.7% vs. 33.3%) by public libraries located particularly in Urbanized Areas. However, there is an even more overwhelming *under* reliance on it as an information source by libraries in smaller urban clusters (79.4% not relying

on it vs. 20.6%) and rural areas (96% not relying on it vs. 4%). The same urbanized vs. urban cluster/rural area difference may be found in the use of the *GoVoteTN* application ($X^2 = 7.051$, $p < .05$) and the *VoteSmart.org* Web site ($X^2 = 7.50$, $p < .05$) by public libraries, indicating perhaps an instance and then a pattern of the ‘Digital Divide’ between rural and urban Tennessee. Then, paradoxically, “*Local Government Web site*” ($X^2 = 10.244$, $p < .01$) shows close to unanimous usage by libraries in rural, urbanized cluster, and urban areas as an information source for voters.

The other two demographic variables that apply as to where public libraries are located in Tennessee also show some similar patterns to what has been seen thus far. For instance, the location of a public library in either West, Middle, or East Tennessee appears to have a significant impact on whether the LWV is used as an information source for elections ($X^2 = 8.518$, $p < .05$). Public libraries in East Tennessee appear to rely on this source considerably more than public libraries in the state’s two other geographic regions. The same is true also with public libraries in East Tennessee relying significantly more on the *GoVoteTN* application than those located in Middle and West Tennessee ($X^2 = 8.282$, $p < .05$). However, unlike our analysis above, the geographic location of public libraries does not impact whether *VoteSmart.org* is used significantly more in one or more regions over any other.

Unfortunately, we are unable to determine if type of public library as classified by the *Tennessee Library and Archives* classification (e.g., Level I, under 5,000 people; Level II, 5,000–9,999; etc.) could be used as a second variable for Chi-square analysis. Our small sample size, combined with the fact that there are five values in this variable, continuously invalidated this test. Thus, to keep the rigor of our analysis at a high level, we do not report any inferential analysis in this paper using this one independent variable. However, even descriptive analysis of this variable shows some similar patterns when compared to our analyzes above, although again we do not wish to over generalize this finding due to our sample size. For instance, a majority of Level IV and V-type libraries, which are found in the larger population centers (in other words, urban and urban cluster-type municipalities), use the LWV as an election’s information source. However, the same pattern does not emerge for *VoteSmart.org* or the *GoVoteTN* application. Again, there is no statistical significance in these findings, and further research based on larger sample sizes may be needed to determine if such patterns occur regularly or purely by chance.

We also asked our responding libraries what types of voter information service they would like to provide in the future that they do not offer now. Our findings to this question are tabulated in [Table B4](#). Tennessee public libraries seem to desire offering a variety of different services and activities related to voting, including a willingness to serve as an early voting location

or just as a polling place (as revealed through text in relation to the “Other” value). A fairly large portion of public libraries are happy with the election-based information and services they offer, although this appears still to be a minority of Tennessee libraries.

Survey respondents were allowed to enter some textual responses at various points of our questionnaire. Not surprisingly, concerns over serving as an impartial and neutral site for providing election information and services emerged as a priority (e.g., “As a government facility we are not allowed to host candidates, ballots, etc.” “About the only thing we haven’t done is host a voter registration drive. We are open to it, but *it would have to be non-partisan* (*emphasis added*).”). However, concern also was raised about being able to find information about candidates’ platforms and where they stood on various issues (e.g., “It is very difficult to find the candidates’ platforms in a concise and easy to understand format. It would be very helpful if the candidates supply information on how they have voted and what they promote.” “We’re always looking for good information on the local candidates. That can be harder to find some years.”). Concern also was raised by our respondents regarding being able to educate their patrons further about the importance of voting, especially because of the perception that libraries should serve as a natural community space, given their mission, to help educate the public at large (e.g., “I have found it is very hard to convince the people who do not vote the importance of it. Though it is not impossible, but it is very difficult.” “The library is a great community space to be used for educating the public on elections, the electoral process, voting laws, and voters’ rights. I hope to see more of this in the future.” “We strive to educate our patrons regarding voter registration and elections.”). However, as with other initiatives that are explored or proposed for public libraries to consider implementing, all of this is moot if Tennessee public libraries do not have sufficient human and intellectual capital to engage the public in elections and voting (e.g., “We would be more involved with this service if we had adequate staff. Sadly, we do not, so we are limited to what we can do.”).

Certainly, the respondents to our survey are very engaged civically when considering their own participation in elections in Tennessee. Nearly 93% of responding librarians reported in the questionnaire that they participated regularly in elections by voting for various candidates, regardless of the level of government which is significantly higher than the general population.

Discussion

Given the history of public libraries’ involvement in educating the public about civic issues and encouraging participation in the democratic process, our findings about Tennessee public libraries may not appear to be particularly surprising, but they do provide a clearer view of what is already being done. In answer to the question, “To what extent do public libraries

participate in the facilitation of voting for Tennessee voters?”, the answer is quite a lot, and they want to do more.

Libraries identified several ways they are already providing assistance and what they would like to offer. Further research, possibly using qualitative methods, might discern other ways in which these same libraries might offer these services in the future. Issues of staffing and resources must be addressed particularly in smaller, more rural libraries.

There seems to be at least a few librarians who are confused about the public libraries’ role in assisting voters with election and registration information. Perhaps further education on the role of the library through professional development initiatives could help clear up that issue and allow them to proceed with assisting their patrons in this area.

In addition, further research into disparities between public libraries in certain areas of the state or even the country could yield valuable insights. Since this study was confined to public libraries in Tennessee, perhaps a more comprehensive study could be conducted by either expanding further on this study or by using other data collection methods to determine to what extent public libraries in other states participate in assisting patrons with election related activities and information.

Conclusion

Public libraries in Tennessee are largely active in assisting eligible voters with registration and providing sources that help them make informed decisions when voting. A significant number of libraries would like to provide more services, including offering classes on civics which will foster better understanding of the election process and how it works. All libraries in the state should be congratulated for the services and assistance they offer already. This area is just one of many ways that public libraries provide invaluable services to their patrons. To quote Nancy Kranich, past president of the American Library Association, “The library is the one institution whose sole function is to provide for the free exchange of information and ideas. As such, the library is one of the few places where citizenship can come to life.” (Kranich 2000, 2)

Notes on contributors

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Appendix A. Survey questions

(1) In which category does your library fit by population served according to Tennessee Standards?

- ☐ Level I – Under 5,000 people
- ☐ Level II – 5,000–9,999 people
- ☐ Level III – 10,000–24,999
- ☐ Level IV – 25,000–49,999 people
- ☐ Level V – 50,000–300,000 people

(2) The Census Bureau defines urban and rural accordingly: There are two types of urban areas: Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people; Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. “Rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area. Do you consider your library branch to be located in a rural or an urbanized/urban cluster area?

- ☐ Urbanized Area (50,000+)
- ☐ Urban Cluster (2,500–49,999)
- ☐ Rural (less than 2,500)

(3) Which area of Tennessee is your library located in?

- ☐ West Tennessee
 - ☐ Middle Tennessee
 - ☐ East Tennessee
- (4) Is your library branch a polling place for elections?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- (5) If your library branch is a polling place, please indicate which types of elections are held there. Select all that apply.
- ☐ Municipal/County
 - ☐ State
 - ☐ Federal
- (6) Does your library participate in any of the following activities? Select all that apply
- ☐ Provide reference service to those asking about election and voter information
 - ☐ Provide information on voting and elections on your website
 - ☐ Provide print voter registration forms for patrons
 - ☐ Direct patrons to voter registration information online
 - ☐ Hold voter registration drives
 - ☐ Hold candidate forums
 - ☐ Other – Please explain
 - ☐ No. Our library does NOT participate in any of the activities listed above or any other possible election-related activities.
- (7) If your answer to question 7 was no, my library doesn't participate in any of these activities, please choose the reasons why. Select all that apply.
- ☐ Not enough staff
 - ☐ Staff not trained
 - ☐ Staff not interested in providing this kind of service
 - ☐ Patrons not interested in this kind of service
 - ☐ Other – please explain
- (8) Which person/body decided to have your library not participate in election-related activities? Select all that apply.
- ☐ Library Director
 - ☐ Library Board
 - ☐ Municipal Government Official
 - ☐ State Government Official
 - ☐ Other (please list)
- (9) If you direct patrons to information about elections and/or candidates which sources do you use? Select all that apply
- ☐ League of Women Voters
 - ☐ Ballotpedia
 - ☐ GoVoteTN App
 - ☐ Tennessee Secretary of State Website
 - ☐ VoteSmart.org
 - ☐ Local Government Election Website
 - ☐ Other – please explain
 - ☐ We do not help patrons with election information

(10) What kind of voter information service, if any, would you like to provide in the future that you do not provide now? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Candidate Forums
- ☐ Classes on the basics of voting, how government works, etc.
- ☐ Provide reference service to those asking about election and voter information
- ☐ Provide information on voting and elections on your website
- ☐ Provide print voter registration forms for patrons
- ☐ Direct patrons to voter registration information online
- ☐ Hold voter registration drives
- ☐ Hold candidate forums
- ☐ Other – Please explain (9)
- ☐ None. We are happy with the service that we provide. (10)

(11) Do you personally often vote in elections?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

(12) Please add any other thoughts/comments you might have about your library's involvement in elections.

Appendix B

Table B1. Types of libraries responding to survey.

TSLA Classification	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Level I – Under 5,000 people	11	15.5	15.5
Level II – 5,000 to 9,999 people	10	14.1	29.6
Level III – 10,000 to 24,999 people	16	22.5	52.1
Level IV – 25,999 to 49,999 people	14	19.7	71.8
Level V – 50,000 to 300,000 people	20	28.2	100.00
Total	71	100.00	

Table B2. Election-based activities Tennessee public libraries offer their communities.

Activities	Yes n=	No n=
Reference service for election and voter information	60 (84.5%)	11 (15.5%)
Provide voting & election information on library website	14 (19.7%)	57 (80.3%)
Provide print voter registrations forms for patrons	66 (93%)	5 (7%)
Direct patrons to voter registration information online	52 (73.2%)	19 (26.8%)
Hold voter registration drives	8 (11.3%)	63 (88.7%)
Hold candidate forums at the library	60 (84.5%)	11 (15.5%)
Other	5 (7%)	66 (93%)
Library does not participate in any of these activities	2 (2.8%)	69 (97.2%)

Table B3. Voter information sources used by librarians in Tennessee public libraries.

Source	Yes n=	No n=
League of Women Voters	16 (22.5%)	55 (77.5%)
Balletopedia	4 (5.6%)	67 (94.4%)
GoVoteTN app	29 (40.8%)	42 (59.3%)
Tennessee Secretary of State website	39 (54.9%)	32 (45.1%)
VoteSmart.org	15 (21.1%)	32 (45.1%)
Local government website	55 (77.5%)	16 (22.5%)
Other	4 (5.6%)	67 (94.4%)
Do not help patrons with election information	4 (5.6%)	67 (94.4%)

Table B4. Types of civic engagement services libraries might like to offer in the future if they are not already doing so.

Types of services	Yes n=	No n=
Candidate forums	7 (9.9%)	64 (90.1%)
Civics classes	19 (26.8%)	52 (73.2%)
Reference service for election and voter information	12 (16.9%)	59 (83.1%)
Provide voting & election information on library website	11 (15.5%)	60 (84.5%)
Provide print voter registrations forms for patrons	8 (11.3%)	8 (11.3%)
Direct patrons to voter registration information online	12 (16.9%)	59 (83.1%)
Hold voter registration drives	16 (22.5%)	55 (77.5%)
Hold candidate forums	64 (90.1%)	65 (91.5%)
Other	2 (2.8%)	69 (97.2%)
None, libraries are happy with service they provide	26 (36.6%)	45 (63.4%)