



Kentucky Chamber

Op-ed: Civic Engagement is More Important Now Than Ever



The following is an op-ed piece authored by Kentucky Chamber President and CEO Ashli Watts



I love politics. I always have. I remember growing up in the 90's watching presidential debates between Bill Clinton, George Bush and Ross Perot, and was a college freshman during the Bush/Gore election and learning all about "hanging chads." This part of history was so formative for me that I received not only a bachelor's degree, but a master's degree, in political science.

Being a student of politics, I learned to appreciate civil discourse, differing views of arguments and spirited, passionate debate. I learned that we arrive at better decisions if we hear the other side. Unfortunately, a lot has changed over the past few decades. I'll be the first to admit, politics is not as much fun as it once was. Gone are the days of disagreeing with someone on a policy issue but still walking away with respect, and dare I say, friendship.

More and more young people are turned off from government and politics because of the increasing divisiveness. We see proof of this in the [Edelman Barometer](#), where it shows trust in government has plummeted among Americans and further proof is voter turnout. [In 2022, only 19% of Kentuckians voted in the primary election](#), with some counties seeing turnout under 10%, meaning some legislative seats were decided by a few dozen votes.

And though these trends are disturbing, I believe our democracy is worth fighting for, and we must take action to reverse this concerning downturn in civic engagement. It's not only the right thing to do, but our responsibility as Americans.

The Kentucky Chamber has taken a larger role in this space because, over the course of the last few decades, civics education has lessened. We believe civics education is an essential part of the solution, as it offers the ability to provide young people with the knowledge, skills, and disposition they need to be engaged citizens in a democracy. This is why the Chamber has held the National Civics Bee Kentucky State Finals over the last three years, where over 800 Kentucky middle school students have competed to be the state civics champion.

This past legislative session, the Kentucky Chamber was a strong supporter of House Bill 535, sponsored by Rep. Robert Duvall, which will enhance civics education in our public schools. The measure passed with broad bipartisan support. Currently, 39 other states require civics education as a year-long or semester-long course, and I am optimistic this bill will be a step in the right direction for Kentucky.

With the Kentucky primary election being held on November 5, Kentuckians have an opportunity to make their voices heard. Big issues are decided at the state legislative level, and we all should do our part to ensure we are represented. And the good news is, voting is easier than ever before in Kentucky thanks to early voting, giving citizens more options on how and when to vote. In addition to voter resources, the Kentucky Chamber is encouraging employers to help their employees vote by providing resources and incentives to show their level of commitment to our democracy.

As we approach election season, let us remember the power of civil discourse and the importance of every single vote. Take the time to learn about the candidates running for office in your district, ask them questions, look at their policy positions, and engage in respectful dialogue, especially with those who may disagree with you. If you are not registered to vote, there is still time with the deadline quickly approaching on October 7 at 4:00 p.m.

As a lifelong student of politics, my hope is that we can try to mute the "noise" surrounding politics and see that our nation was built on the cornerstone of civil discourse. Although we may disagree on issues, we are all Americans working toward a common goal — a healthy and thriving democracy.