



# DEMOCRACY IS NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT

*Understanding American Democracy — and Your Place in It*

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A Civic Engagement Presentation

## OPENING HOOK

*"A republic, if you can keep it."*

— Benjamin Franklin, leaving the Constitutional Convention, 1787

### What does keeping it require?

*That question is what this presentation is about.*

SECTION I

**Our Political System Was Built  
on One Word:**

**FEAR**

*(And how that fear shaped everything)*

# The Fear Begins: 1763–1776



## The Core Lesson:

Britain had power. Britain had no accountability. **Power without accountability = abuse.**

*The colonists didn't just want independence — they wanted a government that could never do to them what a king had done.*

### Fear #1:

A powerful government will abuse its power — and there will be nothing ordinary people can do to stop it.

# The Declaration of Independence: Three Documents in One

## PARAGRAPH 1

*"When in the course of human events..."*

The philosophical justification — why any people has the right to form a new government

## PARAGRAPH 2

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident..."*

The statement of universal rights — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

## PARAGRAPH 3

*27 specific grievances against the King*

A legal indictment — documented proof of power abused. This is the part most people forget.

# The First Attempt: Articles of Confederation (1781–1788)

## What they built:

- ✓ No president — just a weak Congress
- ✓ No power to tax citizens
- ✓ No federal courts
- ✓ No ability to regulate trade between states
- ✓ States could ignore national laws

## What went wrong:

- ✗ States printed their own money — economic chaos
- ✗ Congress couldn't pay soldiers or war debts
- ✗ States imposed tariffs on each other like foreign nations
- ✗ Shays' Rebellion (1786): farmers armed themselves — near civil war
- ✗ Foreign nations refused to take America seriously

**Fear #2: A government too weak to function is just as dangerous as one too powerful.**

# The Constitutional Convention's Solution (1787)

Two competing fears walked into Philadelphia:

## TOO STRONG

Create too powerful a national government → tyranny returns, king by another name

## TOO WEAK

Create too weak a government → the republic collapses from within (as it nearly had)

**THE ANSWER: Fragment power so thoroughly that no single person, branch, or faction can dominate.**

### Separation of Powers

3 distinct branches

### Checks & Balances

Each branch constrains the others

### Federalism

National vs. state sovereignty

### Bicameralism

Two-chamber Congress

### Bill of Rights

Explicit protections (1791)

## THE FRAMERS' DESIGN

# America Was Set Up Like a Board Game

*"A machine that would go of itself — set up the right machinery, and the government would operate to check its own worst impulses."*

— Historian Michael Kammen

*Rules were designed so that no single player could win everything.*

## Did it work?

The rules have held for ~250 years. But they were written in a horse-and-buggy era — before the internet, before social media, before a modern presidency. Whether they are still adequate for 2026 is one of the most important questions of our time.

SECTION II

# How the System Works Today

## A Three-Dimensional Chess Board

*Three levels of government. Overlapping powers. One very confused citizen.*

# Three Levels of Government

## FEDERAL

National Government

- Foreign policy & war
- Immigration
- Interstate commerce
- Sets national floor for rights

## STATE

50 Sovereign Governments

- Police powers
- Education law
- Criminal & family law
- Property & contracts

## LOCAL

90,837 Local Governments

- Police & fire
- Roads & water
- Parks & zoning
- Schools (day-to-day)

# Federal Supremacy: What It Means in Practice

When federal authority conflicts with state or local wishes — the federal government wins.

## Real Example: ICE Operations in the Twin Cities

- ICE (a federal agency) conducted immigration enforcement operations in Minneapolis and St. Paul
- Minnesota, Minneapolis, and St. Paul opposed the operations
- State and local governments were largely powerless to legally halt or obstruct federal law enforcement operating within their borders
- This is the Supremacy Clause in action — Article VI of the Constitution

## The Complexity — Intergovernmental Relations (IGR):

*For almost any community problem — homelessness, a failing school, water quality — all three levels of government may be involved simultaneously. This is why it's hard to know who to hold accountable.*

**That complexity is not accidental. It's built in — and citizens navigating it need to know who holds which power.**

# Local Government Touches Your Daily Life

500,000+ elected offices in the U.S. — most within 90,837 local governments



**Police & Fire**



**Water & Sewer**



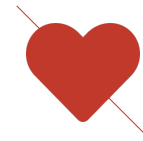
**Parks & Trails**



**Public Schools**



**Roads & Zoning**



**Public Health**

Yet local elections draw the fewest voters. This is the paradox at the heart of American civic life.

SECTION III

# Voting: The Foundation



*Who shows up — and who doesn't — shapes everything.*

# Minnesota: A National Leader in Voter Participation

**76.4%**

**2024 Pres. Turnout**

#1 in the nation

**80%**

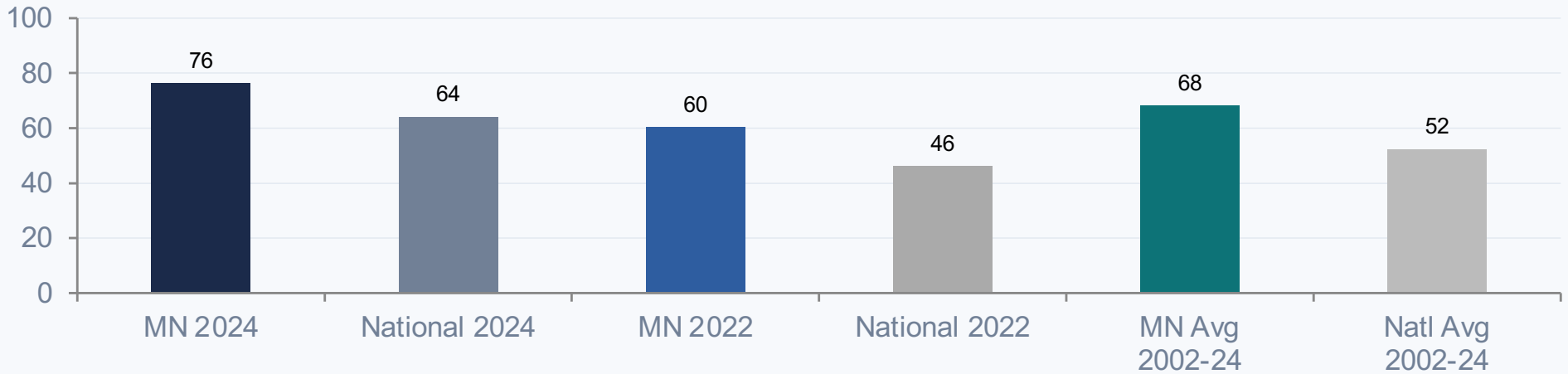
**2020 Record Turnout**

Highest in MN history

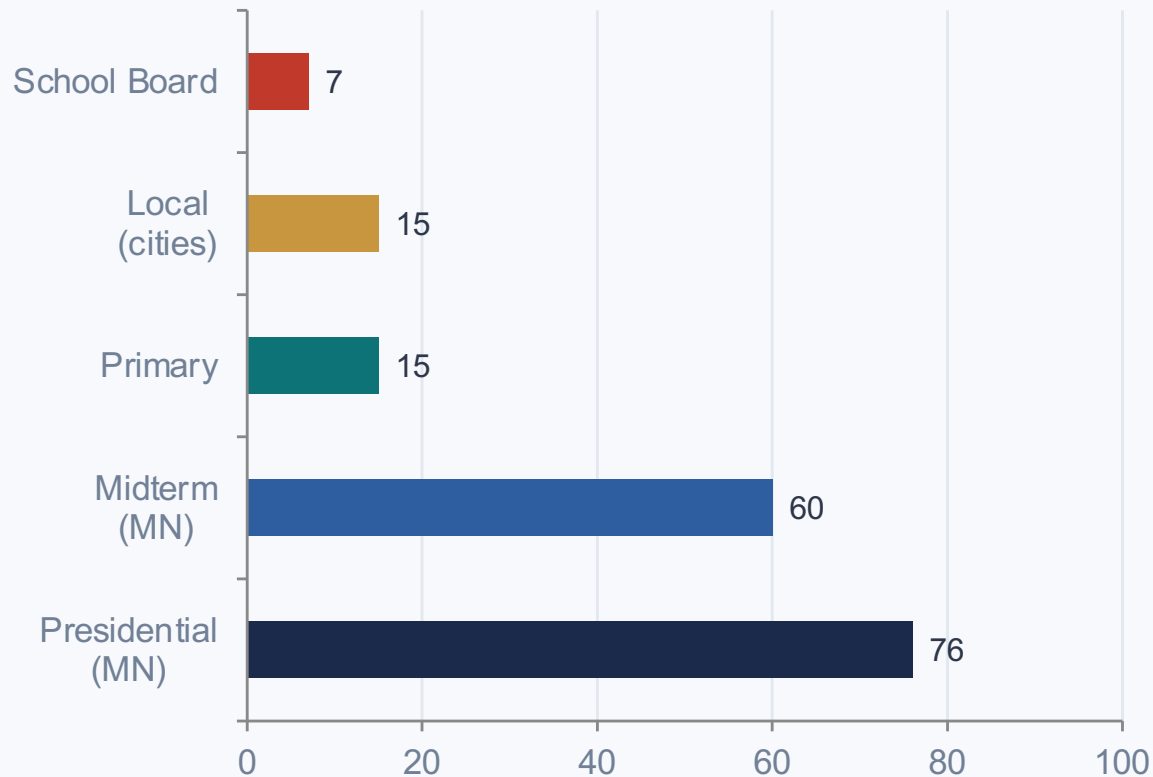
**62%**

**Youth Turnout 2024**

Ages 18–29, #1 nationally



## The Turnout Cliff: As Elections Get More Local, Participation Collapses



### Do the math:

If 10% of eligible adults vote in a school board election in a city of 50,000, only 5,000 people decide who runs your schools.

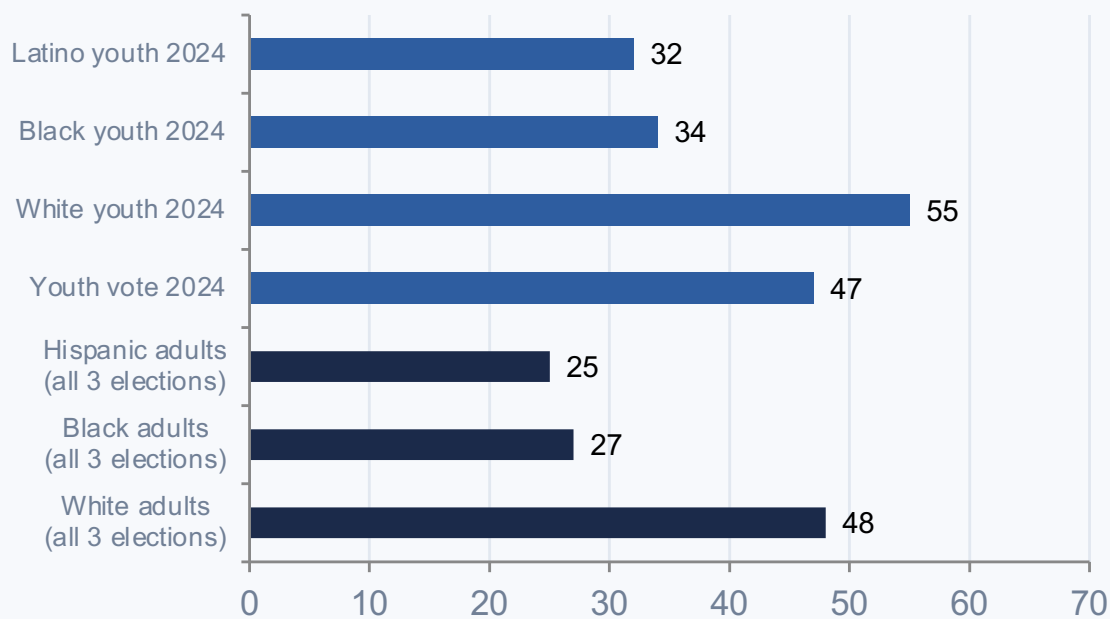
### A single organized group of 500 people —

a church, a neighborhood association, a workplace — can be decisive in a local election.

**You don't need a movement.  
You just need to show up.**

# Who Stays Home — and Why It Matters

The turnout gap is not random. It is demographic — and it shapes who gets heard.



**56% vs 25%**

Non-voters vs. voters with only a HS degree

**27% vs 58%**

Non-voters vs. voters earning \$100K+

**-13 pts**

Turnout gap: MN voters of color vs. white voters (2020)

**2x**

**When communities don't show up, they lose their voice. It's not a conspiracy — it's arithmetic.**

THE CHICKEN AND THE EGG

## The Special Interests Paradox

*"I don't vote because special interests have too much sway."*



*"Do special interests have sway because you don't vote?"*

**Your vote certainly won't matter if you don't show up.**

The way to break the cycle is participation — not cynicism.

## The Hidden Crisis: Uncontested Elections

70%

of all races uncontested

2024 — highest on record (Ballotpedia)

53%

school board seats uncontested

2023 national figure

1/3

of state legislators

win just by filing to run

### What it means:

Voters aren't choosing between competing visions — they're **rubber-stamping whoever bothered to file.**

*Every uncontested race is a seat that someone like you could have run for.*

The far-right has learned to exploit this. Moms for Liberty endorsed 166 school board candidates in 2023 and 54 won — specifically targeting low-turnout, off-cycle races where a small organized group dominates.

SECTION IV

# Beyond Voting:

## The Full Menu of Democratic Participation

*A ladder of civic engagement — from the easiest entry point to the most committed.*

# The Civic Engagement Ladder

1

## Stay Informed & Show Up

Register, vote in EVERY election, attend public meetings, contact reps

2

## Volunteer

Campaigns, poll work, voter registration drives, community organizations

3

## Serve on Boards & Commissions

Planning, parks, library, human rights, budget, public safety and more

4

## Run for Office

City council, school board, county commissioner, water district and more

5

## Organize & Advocate

Public comment, neighborhood organizing, civic education, local journalism

# Rung 1: Stay Informed & Show Up

## Register to vote — and help others do the same

MN has same-day registration. Help elderly neighbors, new citizens, and young adults turning 18. Host a registration table at your church, workplace, or community center.

## Vote in EVERY election

Set calendar reminders for primaries, midterms, and local elections. Bring a friend. Make it a social event. The off-cycle elections are where your vote has the most power.

## Attend public meetings

City council, school board, zoning hearings, budget sessions — all open to the public, many now online. The public comment period is one of the most direct forms of participation.

## Contact your representatives

A phone call to a city council member is noticed. A handwritten letter even more so. Don't wait for a crisis — build relationships with officials before you need something.

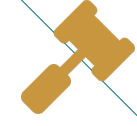


## Rung 2: Volunteer



### On Campaigns

Local campaigns are always short-staffed. Canvass, phone bank, write postcards, host events, drive voters to the polls.



### Work the Polls

Election judges are needed at every polling place. Contact your county election office to sign up. Some states pay a stipend.



### Voter Registration

Partner with a library, school, or faith community. Organizations like the League of Women Voters and NAACP coordinate drives.



### Civic Organizations

Neighborhood associations, PTAs, Lions Club, Rotary, faith communities. These spaces build civic relationships and identify community needs.

## RUNG 3 — Serve on a Board or Commission

### The Most Underused Pathway to Civic Influence

*These are almost always unpaid volunteer positions.  
They are one of the most powerful ways to shape your community without running for election.*

Planning & Zoning

Parks & Recreation

Library Board

Human Rights Commission

Housing Authority

Charter Commission

Budget Advisory

Environmental Committee

Public Safety Advisory

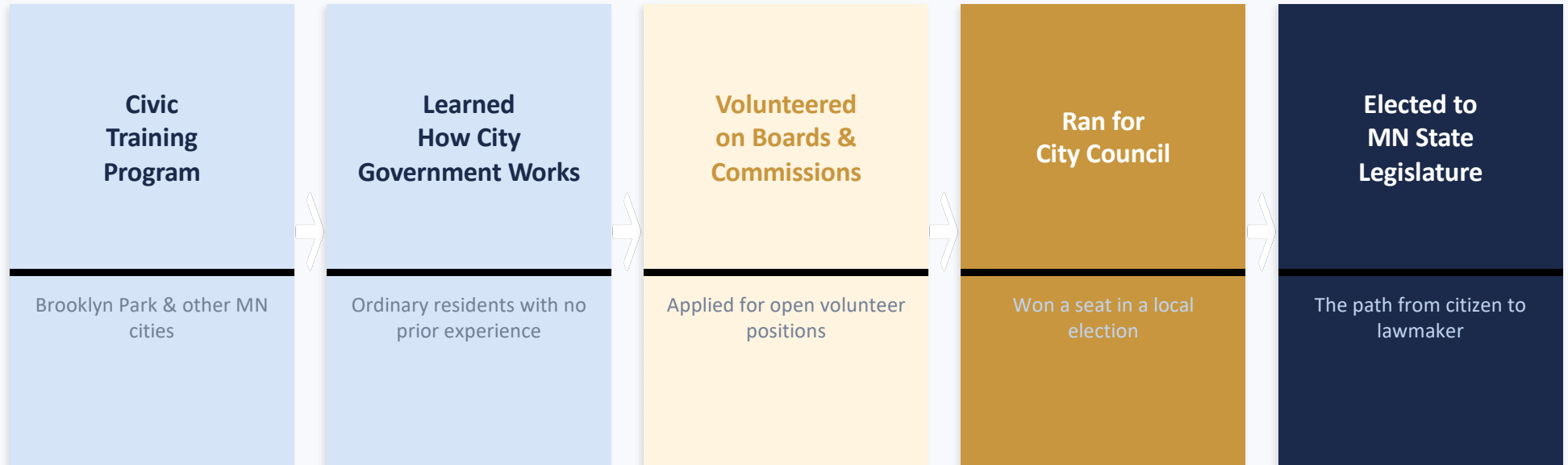
Arts & Culture

Civil Service Board

Youth Commission

How to find openings: Search "[your city] boards and commissions" or call your city clerk's office.

# From Living Room to Legislature: A Minnesota Story



*"The path from informed citizen to elected official is shorter than most people imagine. The door is open. Most people just don't know it."*

# Rung 4: Run for Office

## Local offices you can run for:

### City Council / Alderman

Shapes local ordinances, budget, police and fire policy

### School Board Member

Curriculum, superintendent hiring, budgets, school boundaries

### County Commissioner

Social services, public health, jail, courts

### Township Board

Roads, planning, and basic services in rural townships

### Soil & Water District Supervisor

Directly controls local environmental policy

### Water District Board

Manages local water and sewer infrastructure



In many communities, filing to run IS winning. 70% of races were uncontested in 2024. The only reason those seats are empty is that not enough people know the door is open.

# Resources for Aspiring Candidates

You don't have to figure it out alone — training programs exist specifically for first-time candidates:

## Run for Something

[runforsomething.net](http://runforsomething.net)

Trains young, diverse progressive candidates for local office. Has helped over 100,000 candidates.

## She Should Run

[sheshouldrun.org](http://sheshouldrun.org)

Nonpartisan support and community for women considering running at any level. Free resources.

## Vote Run Lead

[voterunlead.org](http://voterunlead.org)

Nonpartisan candidate training for women. Intensive programs with mentorship.

## Emerge

[emergeamerica.org](http://emergeamerica.org)

Trains Democratic women to run for office. State-based chapters including Emerge Minnesota.

## League of Women Voters

[lww.org](http://lww.org)

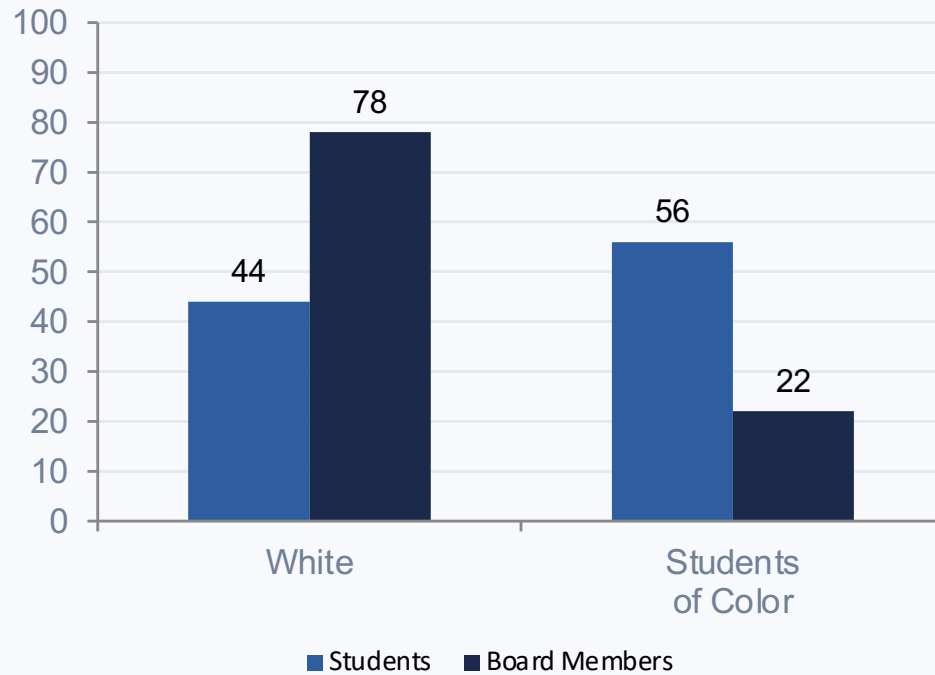
Nonpartisan civic organization offering candidate guidance and voter education. Local chapters in most communities.

## Local Party Offices

*Contact your county DFL or GOP office*

Both major parties have resources, mentorship, and candidate recruitment programs at the local level.

# Why Representation Matters: The School Board Gap



## What the gap means:

- School boards control \$37.5B+ budgets (NYC alone)
- They draw school boundaries that determine access for students of color
- They hire superintendents who shape curriculum
- They approve policies on discipline, diversity, and inclusion
- A board that looks like the community serves it better

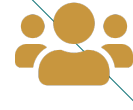
**68% of school board members have no children currently enrolled in a public school — yet they make decisions for 50 million students.**

# Rung 5: Organize & Advocate



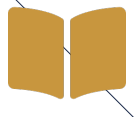
## Participate in Public Comment

Environmental reviews, zoning changes, budget hearings — all require public input by law. A dozen people at a public hearing can change an outcome.



## Organize Your Neighbors

Neighborhood associations and block clubs aggregate resident voices. Organizing a forum on zoning, policing, or a school closure is a powerful act of citizenship.



## Support Civic Education

Mentor a young person. Talk to teachers. Nearly 50% of U.S. adults can't name all three branches of government. Civic literacy is a community responsibility.



## Support Local Journalism

Subscribe and donate to local news outlets. Local journalists are the primary watchdogs of local government. When local news dies, local government operates in the dark.

THE PARADOX AT THE HEART OF AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE

# The level of government that affects you most is the one you pay the least attention to.

## Local government decides:

- Whether your street gets plowed
- What your property taxes are
- Who polices your community
- Where new housing gets built
- What your children learn
- Whether your water is clean

## Yet:

- School board turnout: 5–10%
- Most local races: uncontested
- >1/3 of VA school board races decided by <500 votes
- Organized groups of 200–300 can dominate local elections

*A small, organized group who consistently shows up can determine outcomes year after year.*

# Case Study: What Low Turnout Looks Like in Practice

## Virginia Beach City School Board, 2025

1

An off-cycle school board election takes place with 20% voter turnout.

2

Four board members win their seats. All four are white, in a district where students of color are the majority.

3

The board votes 6–5 to acquiesce to federal demands to roll back DEI programs — affecting diverse teacher recruitment, curriculum, and school assignment.

4

Students of color make up 60% of enrollment. They had no meaningful voice in the election that produced this outcome.

**This isn't a story about a bad election — it's a story about who showed up and who didn't.**

## By the Numbers: Democracy & Participation

**76.4%**

**MN presidential turnout 2024**

#1 in the nation

**5–10%**

**School board turnout nationally**

Sometimes as low as 3–4%

**70%**

**Races uncontested in 2024**

Highest ever recorded

**53%**

**School board seats uncontested**

2023 — more than half

**78%**

**School board members are white**

vs. 56% nonwhite students

**~50%**

**Adults can't name all 3 branches**

Of U.S. government

## TWO CALLS TO CITIZENSHIP

*"Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."*

— President John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

*"A republic, if you can keep it."*

— Benjamin Franklin, Constitutional Convention, 1787

*What you do for your community is also what you do for yourself and your family.*

# The System Was Designed to Require Active Citizens

The framers built an elaborate machine for checking power. But they assumed the machine would be operated by engaged citizens.



## Citizens Engage

- Checks and balances function
- Power stays fragmented
- Officials are held accountable
- Republic endures



## Citizens Disengage

- Checks weaken
- Power concentrates
- Organized minorities dominate
- Republic frays

The question isn't whether you have time to participate. It's whether you can afford not to.

# DEMOCRACY

## IS NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT

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*It is not something done to you.*

**It is something you do.**

*"A republic, if you can keep it."*

— Benjamin Franklin, 1787  
Thank you.

