Civic Participation and Voting

Engaging low-income citizens in civic activities, including voting, is a challenge for a number of reasons. Many would-be voters do not understand the process; others fear being called for jury duty if they vote or getting into trouble if they speak out; some have erroneous information about voting eligibility; low-income people often lack dependable transportation or do not know where or how to vote; and, unfortunately, too many people don’t trust that their vote will be counted or their voice will be heard.

Your vote is your voice. Yet, every election cycle, a substantial number of Missourians who have the right to vote, particularly those with limited income, either do not register to vote or do not exercise their right to vote if they are registered.

This Poverty At Issue sheds light on issues that create obstacles to civic participation for people who struggle financially, dispels some of the myths about voting and voter rights, and provides information for those who are working with low-income Missourians to get them engaged in the process. I hope you find this information helpful.

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Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is action in communities; local, state or national politics; and advocacy for an issue or group of people. Civic engagement can take many forms. It can be participating in or attending a rally, researching an issue, or getting directly involved in planning campaigns or events.

As Americans, we have the freedom, and some say the responsibility, to be engaged in our civic processes. This freedom is not guaranteed in many countries, but in the U.S. we have a long tradition of being citizens who take action, individually and collectively, when we feel strongly about something. If you see something you think is unfair, or you care about your community and your country, then take action or empower others. Nothing is more American.

You can help create community and improve the world by investing time and effort to make changes that affect you, your friends and your neighbors. How civic engagement looks depends on who you are and what you want to accomplish. Examples of civic engagement include:

- Creating a campaign to fund domestic violence shelters.
- Working to eliminate unjust laws or rules.
- Creating coalitions, educating the public, and informing citizens about an important issue.
- Teaching your friends and neighbors about environmental hazards.
- Working with your place of worship to promote understanding of immigration laws and how they affect parishioners.
- Participating in Earth Day rallies.
- Informing your community about unmet needs such as health care and insurance.
- And most fundamentally - VOTING!

Being an active and engaged citizen allows you to use the power you have to vote, advocate and inform, and to change the system if you don’t like how things are working.

By getting involved, you can build your community and your circle of friends and family, create support networks and improve the town, state and country you live in. You can make life better for everyone.

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Community Organizer, 53-year-old Fenny Dorsey, votes for the first time in her life.
Don’t Forget to Vote

No system is perfect, and Missouri’s electoral process is no exception. Debates about voting can be contentious and partisan. The public nature of those debates has created some misconceptions about voting and the rights of voters in Missouri.

Registering to Vote in Missouri
In order to register to vote, you must meet these criteria:

• be a citizen of the United States

• be at least 17 ½ years of age

• be a resident of Missouri and a specific county

• have finished serving your entire sentence, including probation and/or parole, if you have committed a felony unrelated to voter fraud

There are no minimum residency requirements, but you must be registered on the 4th Wednesday prior to an election to vote in that election. Your County Clerk’s Office can give you specific deadline dates for each election. You can find contact information for your local County Clerk office or election official at: [http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/countyclerks.asp](http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/countyclerks.asp).

Missourians can register to vote by filling out the Missouri Voter Registration Application:

• at the office of the local election authority (see [http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/register2vote](http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/register2vote) for an application that includes your local election authority’s address)

• at any Department of Motor Vehicles office (see [http://dor.mo.gov/mvdl/offloc](http://dor.mo.gov/mvdl/offloc) to find your local Department of Motor Vehicles office)

• at any office providing a service to the public (WIC, Social Services, etc.)

• by requesting that a Voter Registration Application card be sent to you (see [https://www.sos.mo.gov/firstvote/students/request.asp](https://www.sos.mo.gov/firstvote/students/request.asp) to request one online or contact your local election authority)

Helping Others Register to Vote
Many community groups engage in voter registration campaigns. You can fill out a voter registration application for anyone who meets the necessary criteria. It must be delivered to the local election authority within 7 days of the date on the application. Anyone who gets paid or otherwise compensated (not a volunteer) for collecting 10 or more voter registration applications in one general election cycle is required to complete a Voter Registration Solicitor Form and submit it to the Secretary of State’s office. Failure to register as a “voter registration solicitor” if required is a class three election offense. To be a voter registration solicitor, you must be at least 18 years old and registered to vote in Missouri. See [http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/Voter_Registration_Solicitors.pdf](http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/Voter_Registration_Solicitors.pdf) for the voter registration solicitor form. It can be mailed or faxed to:

Elections Division
P.O. Box 1767
Jefferson City, MO 65102
Fax 573-526-3242
Voter’s Bill of Rights
As a registered Missouri voter, according to the Missouri Secretary of State, you have the right to:

- cast your ballot free from interference in a private and secret way unless you request assistance
- view written instructions on how to get and cast a ballot
- ask for and receive further instructions from election judges concerning the manner of voting
- view a sample ballot in the polling place before voting
- cast a vote if you are in line before the polls close at 7:00 PM, the legal closing time at the polls
- ask for assistance from an election judge or person of your choice if you have any physical disability that hinders your ability to independently cast your ballot
- cast your ballot on an accessible voting system (i.e. equipped with an audio ballot)
- request curbside voting or a more accessible polling location if you need one
- receive another ballot if you accidentally spoil your ballot or if you make an error
- vote by provisional ballot if your name is not on the precinct register and the election judges or election authority cannot determine your registration status
- vote by absentee ballot when permitted by law
- verify that the choices you made on the screen match the attached voter-verifiable paper audit trail if you vote on a “touch screen” system
- file a grievance with the Secretary of State’s office if your rights under the Help America Vote Act, Title III, have been violated

If you believe your voting rights have been violated, contact the Missouri Office of the Secretary of State at (800) 669-8683 or the U.S. Department of Justice at (800) 253-3931.

Are Photo IDs Required to Vote?
On October 16, 2006, Missouri’s Supreme Court struck down a law that would have required all voters to show a State-issued photo ID card before voting, citing the law’s disproportionate burden on the poor. The late ruling, coming less than three weeks before the 2006 election, created obstacles for some Missouri voters, including Secretary of State Robin Carnahan, who was asked for a driver’s license at the polls. Many poll workers mistakenly thought the law was still in effect.

This year, an effort to pass another Missouri photo ID law was bolstered by a United States Supreme Court ruling upholding a 2005 Indiana law requiring voters to show government-issued photo identification before voting. The new Missouri measure failed when the 2008 legislative session ended before backers could get it through the legislature.

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Proponents of photo ID laws claim that they are necessary to address voter fraud. Opponents say that voter fraud is extremely rare and claim the law is intended to create obstacles to voting. The debate will continue in Missouri.

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In order to vote, if you have voted before, you must have one of the following types of identification:

- a Voter ID card (sent by the County Clerk)
- a drivers license from any state
- an ID card from a state agency, including public universities
- a WIC card
- a birth certificate
- an ID Card from a public institution within Missouri, including a student ID card
- a Passport, Medicaid card, Social Security Card or other card issued by the Federal Government
- a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, or paycheck showing your name and address

If you are registered but have never voted before, you will need one of the following types of identification:

- a copy of a valid photo ID
- a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check or paycheck showing your current name and address

Absentee Voting

If you cannot come to the polls to vote, you can register to vote absentee by mailing in your ballot prior to the election.

You can vote absentee if any of the following issues apply to you:

- you are temporarily absent from the county on election day
- your religious beliefs prevent you from coming out to vote that day
- you are absent due to military service
- you are incarcerated but still eligible to vote
- you are confined due to illness or physical disability
Myth or Reality?

Voting Services for Elderly, Disabled and Handicapped Voters
If you are unable to get to the polls, you may register to vote by mail or request that a deputy come to your home to register you. If your polling place is inaccessible:

- you may request an accessible polling place by calling the registrar before election day
- you may vote absentee
- and your disability or illness is permanent, you may sign up for the permanent absentee application list to get a ballot delivered to your home by a bipartisan election team before each election

If you are blind:

- you may have someone of your choosing accompany you to the poll
- you may have a member of the bipartisan election team read and mark your ballot for you
- voting supplies can be brought to your car if you are unable to make it into the polling place

Once you are convicted of any felony, you can never vote again.

Myth
This may be true in some states, but in Missouri, you can vote again as soon as you have completed your sentence and are no longer on probation or parole, with one exception, which is extremely rare – you can never vote again if you have been convicted of a misdemeanor or felony election offense.

You can register to vote as soon as you start living in Missouri.

Reality
There are no minimum residency requirements for you to be able to vote in the State of Missouri.

If you move after you register to vote, you cannot vote in an election if you have not filled out a change of address form by the registration deadline.

Part Myth and Part Reality
If you move within the county where you are already registered, you are allowed to change your address on Election Day and vote. It is a good idea to change your address beforehand, because election officials are extremely busy on Election Day. If you are registering for the first time or have moved from another county, you must register to vote by the close of business (usually 5:00 PM) at any building where registration is allowed by the deadline of the fourth Wednesday prior to an election.

You have to register to vote before each major election.

Myth
As long as you live at the address where you lived when you registered, you do not need to register again. Once you are registered to vote, you only have to register again if you move to a new county. If

For answers to common questions about voting, go to [www.sos.mo.gov/elections/faqs.asp](http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/faqs.asp).
if you move within your county of residence, you can fill out a change of address form up to the day of the election. It is easier if you do it before Election Day.

**Potential jurors are pulled only from the Missouri voter registration files, so voting means you may get called for jury duty.**

**Myth**

Jury service is a duty required by law. The courts can draw names of potential jurors from any public list. The most commonly used lists are provided by the Department of Revenue motor vehicle offices and the Board of Election.

**You need to show a photo ID at your polling place to vote.**

**Myth**

Even though would-be voters are sometimes asked for a photo ID, it is not necessary for voting as long as you are registered. (See *Are Photo IDs Required to Vote?* above for more information.)

**When you register to vote, you must declare your political party and vote for that party in Primary Elections.**

**Myth**

Missouri has open primaries, which means that you can request a ballot for any party and vote for the candidates in that party.

**Anyone can assist you with voting, whether or not they work for the election authority.**

**Reality**

This is true. You can take anyone to the polls with you to assist you with voting. If you do not have someone to assist you, you are entitled to get assistance from election judges at the polls if you ask. Two election judges from different parties will assist.

**You have to vote on every item on the ballot.**

**Myth**

You can skip any item you don’t want to vote on, and all your other votes will still count.

**If you have been convicted of a felony, you can vote again as soon as you have completed your sentence and are no longer on probation or parole.**

**You can get a voter registration application online.**

Go to [http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/Register2Vote/](http://www.sos.mo.gov/elections/Register2Vote/) and pick your county from the drop-down menu. The form cannot be submitted online, but it will include the address of your local election authority and instructions for submission.

**If you don’t pick up your ballot at the polling place before 7:00 PM, you cannot vote.**

**Myth**

As long as you are standing in line at the polls by 7:00 PM, you must be allowed to vote. Polls are open in Missouri from 6:00 AM to 7:00 PM.
Get Involved in the Political Process

Voting is not the only way to change the world, although it is a basic right in a democracy. Freedom of expression is part of our Constitution, and speaking out also is your right. When you see a rule or law you want to change, or when you think something is just not right, get involved.

You can volunteer with a political party or candidate, help draw attention to an issue that matters to you, expose an inequity, or petition the government to put an issue on the ballot for a public vote – your local election authority or the Missouri Secretary of State’s Office can tell you how.

It is easier to make change when you join with others who think like you do. Your local library or League of Women Voters can provide assistance if you want to find a group or campaign to get involved with. If there is no group working on an issue you care about, start one!

Write letters to the editor. Start making phone calls. Contact your own representatives in government and ask them for help. They are there to serve you; calls, e-mails and letters from individual citizens often get their attention more than contacts from entrenched groups. If you don’t like what elected officials are doing, then consider running for office yourself. Contact your local election officials to find out how.

Elected officials are not the only people who can make changes. Sometimes, appointed officials can be influenced to make changes without a change in the law. Make an appointment to tell them why you think the rules need to be applied differently, and take others with you to the meeting.

Government belongs to everyone, so claim your power, speak out and vote!