



The Council of State Governments

CSG Healthy States National Task Force Civic Health Subcommittee

Summary of Meeting Three, July 11, 2022

The third meeting of the CSG Healthy States National Task Force – Civic Health Subcommittee took place during the Annual Meeting of The Council of State Governments (CSG) Southern Legislative Conference in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on Monday, July 11, 2022. The subcommittee explored issues related to **American electoral history**, factors affecting **modern voter turnout** and state government options for **making elections more competitive**.

“America in Peril – How We’ve Dealt with Civic Crises in the Past”

Dr. Andrea Benjamin, professor at the University of Oklahoma, presented to the subcommittee on political conflict throughout American history, as it relates to voting enfranchisement. Dr. Benjamin asserted that much of American political conflict boils down to “who gets to participate” in our version of democracy and “how.” Dr. Benjamin laid out an argument for why meaningful political participation, particularly through an accessible and competitive voting system, can be a strong measure of civic health. A few highlights:

- Many of the organizations that allowed people to see how politics works behind the scenes, and more importantly included them in the decision-making process at a local level, have lost membership in recent decades. Robert Putnam’s 2000 book *Bowling Alone* first pointed out the decrease in civic and social institutions. Participation in groups like churches, unions, leagues, clubs and daily newspapers has continued to decline since then.
- Dr. Benjamin said the United States is a nation that was founded during political crisis. Current systems of governance and representation came from the Connecticut Compromise that fused proportional representation (House of Representatives) with equal representation (Senate). Since then, the nation has continued to ask questions about representation as different demographic groups have fought for the right to vote. This is because so many Americans were excluded from the franchise at the nation’s founding.
- Dr. Benjamin then discussed what she called *the fall of formal political parties*. Starting with the Reform Era, Dr. Benjamin discussed how the power of political machines – once a moderating, albeit less democratic force in American politics – paved the way for the fringes of the liberal and conservative movements to rise to political power.



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- Dr. Benjamin concluded by highlighting what matters in the effort to improve state civic health:
 - 1) Electoral rules.
 - 2) How much the public knows about and understands its government.
 - 3) How easy it is to participate in elections and politics.
 - 4) How competitive elections are and how much the public feels each individual vote makes a difference.

Civic Health Subcommittee Work Session

Civic Health Subcommittee members met in a working session after Dr. Benjamin's presentation to discuss the content and brainstorm additional policy themes to consider for the subcommittee's bipartisan recommendations for improving the civic health of states. A summary of the subcommittee's conversation follows:

- There is not always a linear relationship between how easy it is to vote and voter turnout in every state. Competitive races are also needed to spur engagement in the electoral process.
- It is important to take election integrity seriously and not dismiss all concerns over voting fraud. Voter list maintenance was noted as an example of a necessary election integrity safeguard.
- Modernizing electoral systems may look different in different states but should be a bipartisan goal.
- A long-term strategy of improving civic education is needed so that young Americans are knowledgeable about their government and take seriously their duty to participate in civic activities.
- A preamble is needed for Policy Recommendations 1-3 passed in the June 2022 Working Session that reads; "Public education should prepare young Americans for active citizenship."
- The Council of State Governments should work more closely with secretaries of state to disseminate election best practices.

Civic Health Subcommittee Policy Themes

The Civic Health Subcommittee proposed the following policy themes as potential recommendations to consider during the final working session:

- Policy Theme 1: States should investigate and invest in youth engagement activities that encourage future electoral participation and familiarize youth with the mechanics of the state's election system (e.g., process, voting machines and system safeguards against fraud).
- Policy Theme 2: States should investigate and invest in activities that bring voting machines and elections personnel to public events across the states to allow residents the opportunity to practice using the machines and give them the



opportunity to ask questions about how state elections officials ensure access and secure the principle of one person, one vote.

- **Policy Theme 3:** The Council of State Governments should work with the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) to create an Elections Best Practices report that communicates efforts made by Republican and Democrat secretaries of state that successfully expand voting access, strengthen electoral security and increase public trust in the electoral system. This report should be disseminated to leaders nationwide, across all three branches of state government.
- **Policy Theme 4:** All state policymakers and elections officials should strive to make voting as accessible, convenient and secure as possible through whatever means best fit the context of their respective states.

Resources

- [The Civic Health Index 2021](#) (Report)

Policy Examples Highlighted by Task Force Members, Partners and Staff

- In **Maine**, 16-year-olds can be [pre-registered to vote](#), a measure intended to increase the number of young people learning about and preparing for democratic participation in the state.
- During past elections in **Ohio**, the Secretary of State's office has issued a [press release](#) letting the public know how many elections were decided by a single vote to show residents how much their participation in the electoral system matters.
- Also in **Ohio**, through a program called [Grads Vote](#), every high school receives voter registration packets to distribute to graduating seniors. The goal of the program is to enable young people to become full electoral participants.
- In **Virginia**, the Department of Education's Civics Commission, in collaboration with the Virginia Civics Coalition and Virginia Civics, produced the report, [A Virginia for All Virginians: Recommendations to Improve the Civic Health of the Commonwealth](#). The report contains a survey of public high school student experiences with civic education in the state and features recommendations for state and local entities to build a stronger culture of civic engagement.

Civic Health Subcommittee

- Secretary of State Shenna Bellows, ME (co-chair)
- Secretary of State Frank La Rose, OH (co-chair)
- Sen. Jennifer Boysko, VA
- Assemblywoman Catalina Cruz, NY
- Sen. Sal DiDomenico, MA
- Senior Policy Advisor at Office of the Speaker, Tommy Druen, KY



- Chief Service Officer Josh Fryday, CA
- Lt. Gov. Deidre Henderson
- Sen. Joan Lovely, MA
- Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, NM
- Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton, IL
- Justice Alisa Kelli Wise, AL

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