



Civic Engagement



... is defined as individual or collective actions designed to identify and address the issues we care about.²⁶ It's how we act about the issues that matter. Usually, we think about civic engagement as political systems, voting, or elected positions. But there are both formal (government and political systems) and informal (movements and organized community action) ways to influence policies and laws, the rules that shape our world. Civics is engaging in our community. It isn't just the legislative system, it's school boards, churches, and mutual aid.

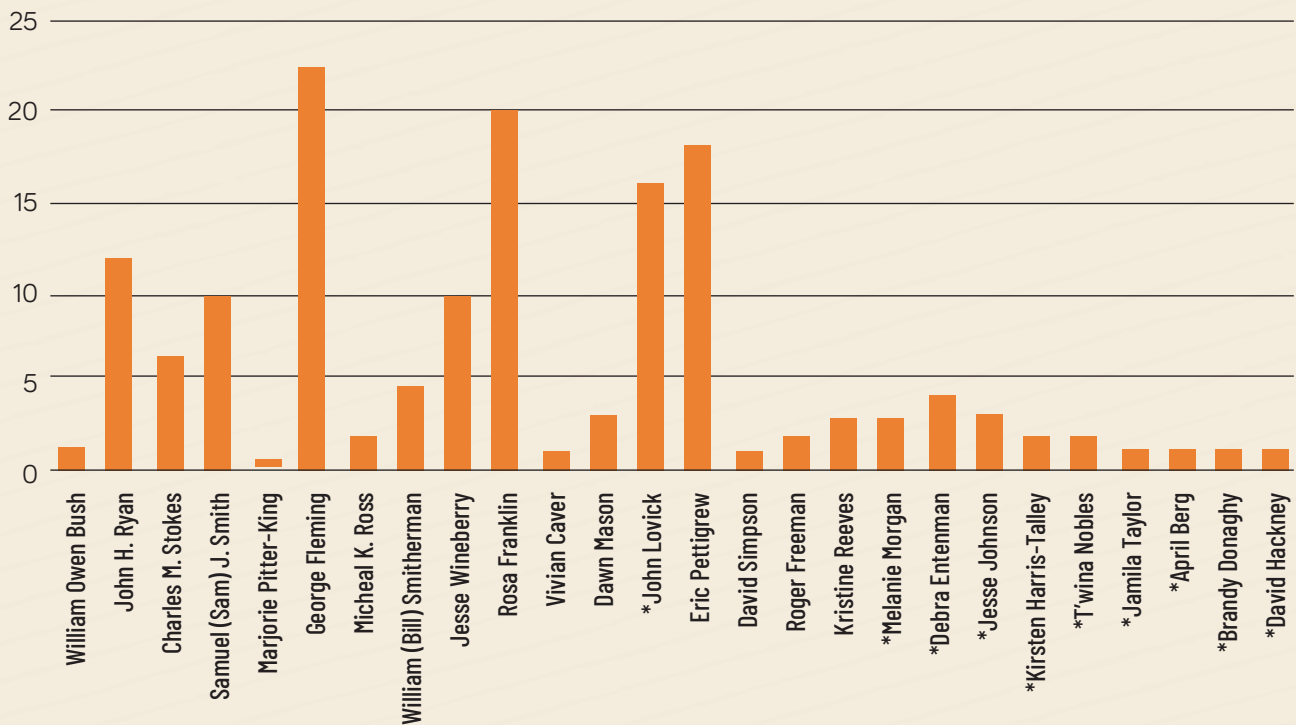
Contextual Factors Related to Civic Engagement

Who has a seat at the table

The conversation about a “seat at the table” has shifted dramatically. Among various tactics, polls show that working to get more Black people elected has been viewed as a less effective strategy to achieve equality.²⁷ The reality is, representation matters, but it does not function alone — the social and political environment impacts what is possible.

For generations, we’ve worked to influence fellow decision-makers with reason, empathy, and proximity. We’ve focused on representation — Black voting rights and positioning Black political leaders. Representation can be an important way to have our needs raised and advocated for in the legislature. In 2022, we have eight representatives and two senators, more Black legislators in office at the same time than we’ve ever had in the history of the state.²⁸

Washington State’s Black Legislators’ Time In Office ²⁹



*Indicates legislators in office through 2022.

Whose voices are heard

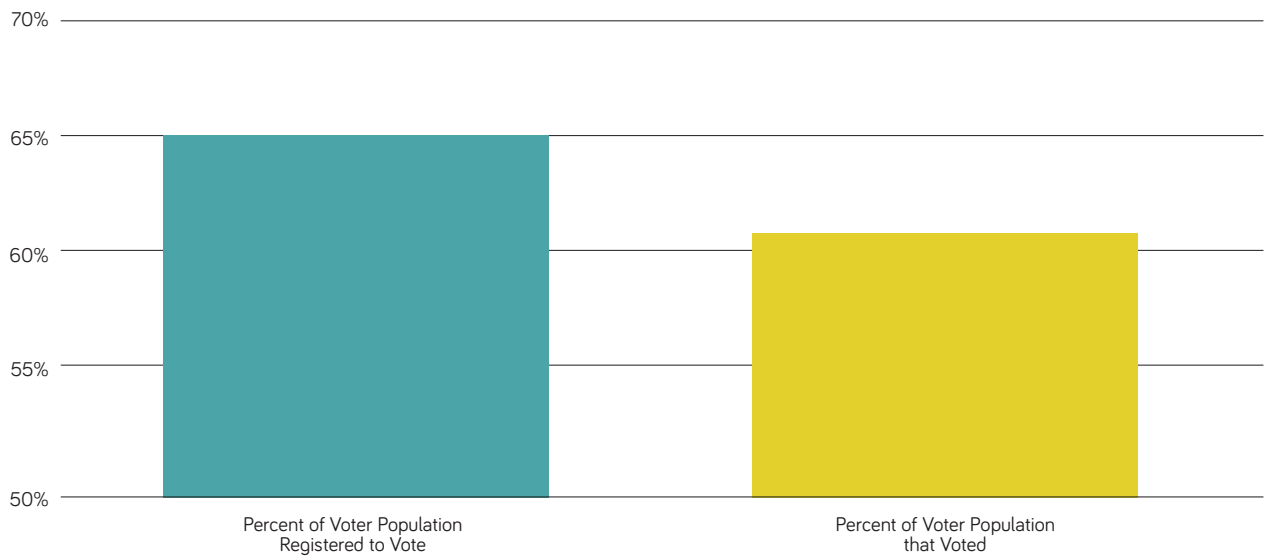
From 2015 to 2020, the percentage of Black Washingtonians who were registered to vote decreased by 3%. Still, Black people were the highest percentage of registered voters among other people of color at 65%.³⁰ Of that number, 61% voted in the 2020 elections.³¹ And in 2021, the Voting Rights Restoration bill (HB 1078) passed, restoring voting rights to people convicted of a felony who are not serving a sentence in total confinement,³² increasing the number of Black voters.³³

A 2022 audit by the Office of the State Auditor “discovered that the votes of Black residents were rejected four times more often than white voters. The main reason was problematic signatures, which disqualified one out of every 40 mail-in votes from Black residents. Overall, 29,000 ballots were rejected for signature problems.”³⁴

Despite the perception that young people don't vote, young people stepped up to vote in recent federal election years. In King County alone, voter turnout for 18- to 24-year-olds was 65.5% in 2016 and grew to 77.4% in 2020.³⁵



Percentages of Black Voting Age Population (2020)

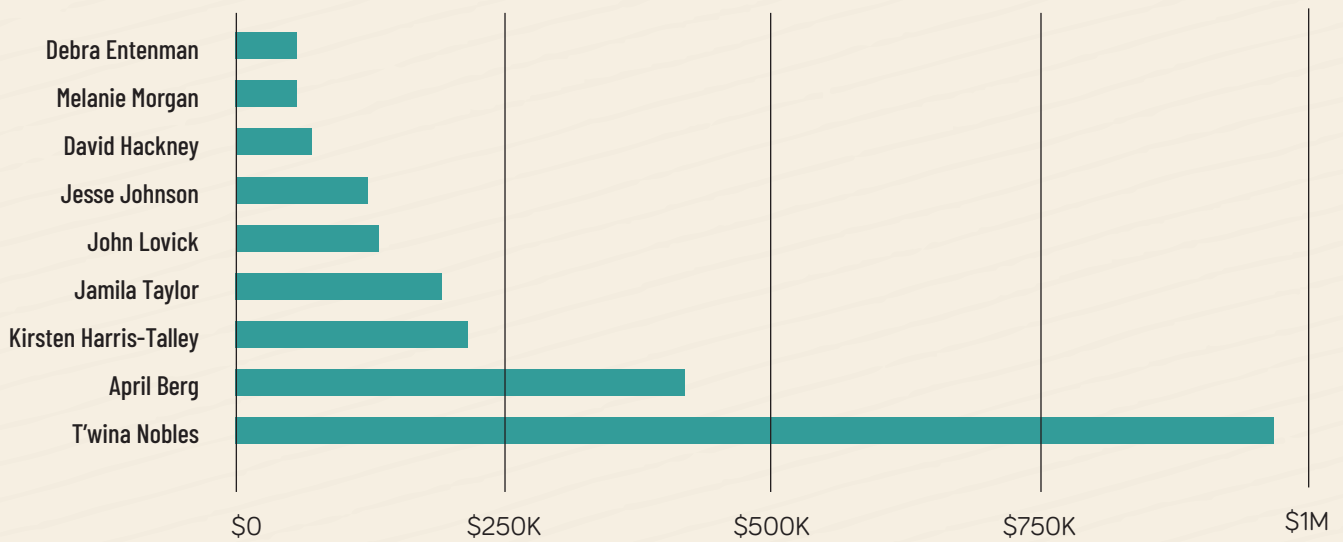


Source: www.kff.org/state-indicator/voting-and-voter-registration-as-a-share-of-the-voter-population-by

The price of admission

Today we're clear — representation is necessary, but alone will not get us to change. The 2015 report talked about how wealth inequality shapes who gets voted in and what they are “allowed” to vote for. The barriers for working class people to enter politics are not new and are not unintentional.³⁶ Originally designed for the agricultural worker who had the resources to travel, the way our legislature works needs to shift to include participation from today's working class people. The typical salary for a legislator is \$57,876.³⁷ The average campaign in Washington state costs \$87,634.³⁸ For Black candidates, in 2020, it looked like this:

Campaign Spending by Black Legislator in 2020 Washington State Election ³⁹



Once elected, we are pressured to make “necessary” compromises for the promise of change a later day. When we don't compromise, there are consequences. Systems of oppression have always required complicity. Leaders who step outside of party lines are silenced, and as history goes, often by our own — a practice that is as old as slavery and colonization itself. The transactional nature of politics is dehumanizing. The hours are grueling. During the legislative session, it is not uncommon to work 20 hours a day. And the working norms are rooted in whiteness — urgency, perfectionism, not showing emotion, written word over everything, paternalism, and fear of conflict.⁴⁰ Holding a role within politics or government is not a job that can be done in isolation. We must work side-by-side to make change with our communities, or we risk our legislators becoming unaccountable gatekeepers who unintentionally cause harm.⁴¹



Inadequate civics education

Ensuring we all understand civics, how society functions, and our political system has not been a high priority within school districts or our political system. Until the 2020-21 school year, Washington state was one of 11 states that did not require a stand-alone K-12 civics class.⁴² As with all curriculum, districts are free to create their own as long as they meet Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)'s content standards. Despite a lack of systemwide implementation, there are examples within Seattle and Spokane school districts of civics classes that are interdisciplinary, racially inclusive, and hands-on.⁴³

Community demystifying civics

To change our society, we must help each other make the connection between civics, politics, and people's everyday experiences. Today, we are stepping up to educate our own community. And it isn't majoritively schools, politicians, or government employees creating accessible spaces for learning. It is Black journalists, writers, radio hosts, religious leaders, barbers, artists, teachers, actors, tiktokers, dancers, and athletes who are speaking up about the issues and creating space for discourse. Powerful Black-led coalitions and initiatives like the Washington Build Back Black Alliance, Washington Community Alliance, Washington Black Lives Matter Alliance, and King County Equity Now have been formed. They are moving forward policy agendas that speak to a vision of Black well-being with a focus on educating people and mobilizing them to act.

Social change has and always will take all of us

Social change will take all of us recognizing and activating our personal power in the spaces we occupy — on the job, in community spaces, and with our loved ones. It has been those of us willing to accept the risks of truth telling, and usually outside of the political system, who have shifted the ways we understand what is possible and build the courage to demand it. None of the Black people referenced in mainstream historical accounts acted alone, despite what we are told. Throughout history, Black people — especially queer, disabled, women — have organized, acted, and inspired to shift the reality of our lived experience.

Community Identified Approaches to Civic Engagement

We continue to grow wiser in this moment, having learned from our ancestors — living and passed. We're moving more boldly toward creating the world we want to see: exercising individual and collective power, stepping into our joy, having time to be and rest so that we heal and dream, and listening, learning, and organizing intergenerationally with attention to healthy interdependence.

Interrogate and shift harmful narratives

"A Color Of Change and Family Story study finds that Black families represent 59% of stories about poverty in news and opinion outlets like CNN and Fox News — even though they make up just 27% of poor families in the country," according to Media 2070. In a society where you can pay to have the microphone, looking at how thought is shaped, our own and that of the collective, is an important starting place. The information we receive has an impact on how we feel about what changes are possible through the vehicle of civic engagement.

- Learn to identify anti-Black narratives; start with understanding history.
- Get curious about the information you receive. Who wrote it, what's their motivation, where'd they get their information, how are Black people characterized, what aren't they saying?
- Invest in and elevate Black-led media and media makers.
- Fund communications work for Black-led organizations.
- Hold media outlets and institutions accountable for narratives that harm Black people.
- Put Black people in senior leadership roles.

Stop looking to a small handful of Black leaders to represent us

We're moving away from the narrative that one or two leaders are positioned to "save" us. Many of us work within these systems, where the unspoken way to get ahead is not to challenge the way things are done. We put our head down, do our jobs, don't rock the boat, focus on getting our paycheck, and go home. How much of this is born from trauma and rooted in survival? How are our decisions on the job rooted in trauma? How willing are we to disentangle ourselves from it?

- Refuse to be tokenized. Assess what power you have to make decisions. Make it a requirement of your presence that more of us stand beside you.
- Stop tokenizing Black people.
- Resource Black communities to participate in civics as a form of repair.
- Create and fund ongoing, community-designed spaces for dialogue.
- Pay attention to unintentionally causing harm and practice repairing relationships.
- Define, seek out, and practice accountability.

Increase and enhance civic readiness

Youth have always been catalysts of change, today is no different. And their feelings about civics are shaped early. Beyond reading, writing, math, and science, our youth should understand the dynamics of power and how it is expressed through laws and policy. Formal education is only one way we learn. We want forums, spaces, and organic opportunities for conversation for and by Black people to learn about the ideas on which people are acting.

- Prioritize intergenerational dialogue about civics, starting at the earliest of ages.
- Utilize integrated curricula that connect the “issues” to a person’s everyday life.
- Rework the curriculum in all educational spaces to include hands-on, racially attuned learning about how societies are constructed and shaped.
- Teach the totality of Black history from Black perspectives.
- Invest in community-led spaces to discuss politics: places of worship, schools, dinner parties, community organizations and centers, and block parties.

Center the arts because they are foundational to civic engagement and therefore social change

Art is essential to our being. It’s an important way for us to make sense of the world and express ideas and concepts that have yet to conjure words. It is the language of evolution and self actualization, bringing together all our senses, including our intuition. We need the holders and shapers of culture to successfully move anything strategically.

- Pay Black artists well. On top of already low pay, during the pandemic, they were hit especially hard.
- Make sure artists retain rights to their work.
- Seek out artists early to shape strategy work — as the saying goes, culture eats strategy for breakfast.
- Bring arts back to educational, healing, civic, and work spaces.

Community plans and leads, governments and systems fund our plans

Much research has studied the limited effectiveness of solutions born from government agencies. It isn’t only that we often are not represented at the decision-making tables, it’s also that government structures are not conducive to making effective decisions. They are siloed and force solutions into funding boxes that usually aren’t tailored to community needs and result in inflexible tools or programming to get the job done.

- Fund community to organize, plan, and architect the solutions.
- Re-envision governments and large institutions’ roles in implementing community-directed strategies.
- Break down silos and work across systems.
- Build timelines and write contracts that speak to the capacity and strengths of organizations.

