



Arkansas Appleseed

Regnat Populus:
A Roadmap to Healthier
Democracy in Arkansas

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Author's Note

Growing up in Arkansas, I remember talking to my grandparents about politics and government. There were no politicians in my family. No one ran for office, and just the word "politician" tasted sour. We didn't get appointed to boards or commissions. We didn't march or protest. We didn't have the money to start funds or foundations.

But we were always political in the way that all Arkansans are. We worked hard. We helped our neighbors. We tithed on Sunday. We read the paper every morning. We voted at every election. We volunteered for and contributed to every church or school fundraiser. We knew right from wrong. And we called our representatives when we had something to say that needed to be heard. Back then, those representatives would usually listen.

I remember bickering about whether the Arkansas Democrat or the Arkansas Gazette should be trusted. I remember standing in the curtained booth with my mother and needing both my little hands to pull the lever down to cast her ballot. I remember my grandmother showing me her Christmas card from the Governor, proud and grateful that he had signed it himself despite her meager donation of about \$20 in the last election.

I remember Democrats and Republicans sharing coffee and ribbing each other about balancing budgets and whether churches belonged in government or vice versa. If things got heated, a cadence of "How 'bout them Hogs?" would echo across the table uniting us in either celebration or grief.

When I hear our state motto - "Regnat Populus" - this is what I remember. Arkansans, by nature and tradition, are political. **The People do rule**, and it is a great privilege of my career to have opportunities to push political power back where it belongs: to kitchen tables, potlucks, and coffee in the diner around the corner.

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Introduction

The first thing the Arkansas Constitution does is set the physical boundaries of the state and declare Little Rock as its capitol. The second is to declare, “All political power is inherent in the people and government is instituted for their protection, security, and benefit; and [the people] have the right to alter, reform, or abolish the same, in such manner as they may think proper.”^[1]

The state motto has been “Regnat Populus” (the People rule) for more than a century.^[2] The Arkansas Freedom of Information Act is one of the strongest in the country, requiring the government to answer to Arkansans with transparency.^[3] Arkansas is one of only 26 states that allows citizens to make or repeal laws through a petition and election process, without the approval of the legislature.^[4]

Despite a deep history of firmly protecting the rights of Arkansans to engage directly in their government, Arkansas was ranked dead last in the country for voter turnout in 2024, according to a United Health Foundation analysis of Arkansas Secretary of State voter turnout data^[5]. More recently, only 18.14% of the adult population of Arkansas voted in the March 2026 primary election, the results of which determined the winner of many offices statewide.^[6] Arkansas again ranks 50th in the United States for voter registration, with only 62% of our eligible population registered to vote.^[7]

Arkansans are disengaged from elections and governance. This disengagement paves the way for political professionals to entrench power and advance policies that make the government bigger, politicians stronger, and the People weaker. With the over-arching goal of stabilizing that imbalance, this report contextualizes the driving forces of citizen disengagement, and it considers opportunities for Arkansas state law reform. We’re building a roadmap to a more meaningful rendition of “Regnat Populus,” and these are our first steps.



Four Barriers

Scholars, data analysts, and policy pundits have long measured factors that consistently affect voter turnout, like the competitiveness of the election, whether the election is a primary or general election, voting laws, and demographic or cultural voting trends. It is clear that voter engagement goes up in presidential election years, and voter turnout is higher for general elections than primary elections.

Voter turnout data is generally relied upon as the bellwether for citizen participation in government, because it is easily measured. However, “citizen engagement” includes far more than just voter turnout. There are dozens of non-quantifiable factors contributing to lack of citizen engagement, such as confidence in the election system, confidence in government, access to information and misinformation, an historic weakening of state and local press, campaign spending and rhetoric, and the influence of the political parties during and beyond a campaign cycle. Sociologists and political scientists study these phenomenon – here, we’re focused on what can be done about it.

The Influence of Unpopular Political Parties

Political parties are private membership organizations, not governmental entities. They organize at the county level, have dues, and are not elected by the People. The formal membership of any Arkansas county’s Democratic or Republican Party constitutes a tiny fraction of any Arkansas county’s total population. These party committees are organized to bring together a select group of people with shared ideologies, and they run campaigns and influence public policy for their formal membership.

These party committees influence the whole of our communities by doing things like choosing the commissioners who administer our public elections from their own private membership - but the party committees themselves only represent and answer to those who choose to pay their dues.



In recent years, the parties have grown in power and become more polarized. Partisan identity-rhetoric and finger-pointing are impossible to ignore, and so is the rising percentage of Arkansans who affiliate with neither the Republican nor Democratic Party. It is the job of our elected officials to represent all of us, and the growing sense that office-holders give their allegiance to their party above all else contributes to a distaste for participation in governmental processes, especially among the growing “unaffiliated” population.

Confidence in Elections and Government

People who have confidence that their vote will be counted and confidence that the election is secure are more likely to vote.^[8] Extreme accusations are standard fare across all media platforms today. “The Left” accuses “the Right” of intentionally prohibiting women and minorities from accessing the polls. “The Right” accuses “the Left” of letting noncitizens vote en masse. Theories abound online about election tampering, and partisans capitalize on these fears to increase their own visibility.

Election administration officials fail to effectively and transparently counter misinformation about the security of our elections. That failure is feeding fears and eroding confidence in the integrity of American elections.

American distrust doesn’t stop at elections. The percentage of Americans expressing trust in government has not been higher than 30% since 2007.^[9] Arkansans wade through red tape at every contact point with government. Taxpayers’ questions are seldom met with straight answers, and public officials regularly delay and devalue compliance with Freedom of Information requests.

Standard government practices that put workplace efficiency ahead of the Arkansans they are meant to serve are deteriorating civic engagement. It is critical that the government meet legitimate concerns with reform and illegitimate concerns with forthright and transparent communication and education.



Weakened State & Local Press in the Information Age

This information age is overwhelming. With access to endless sources of information has come equal access to misinformation. Couple that with the rise of AI-generated fictional content that is increasingly difficult to discern from factual content, and Arkansans are struggling to know what is true and what sources they can trust.

The most common immediate reaction is to accept as truth whatever agreeable soundbite floats across our screens. Clicks and engagement numbers reward individuals and organizations who rush to react with even flashier soundbites. Arkansans no longer know what or who to believe. That general confusion about trusted authorities makes it a hardship to engage directly and effectively in their government.

And at this time when Arkansas needs steady leadership in messaging and reform in how we use communications technology, local papers are struggling. The number of newspapers published in the United States has dropped from 7,325 in 2005 to 4,490 now.^[10] This phenomenon has played out in our state, too. Arkansans hear more than they want about what is happening in Washington, D.C., but struggle to access locally sourced, trusted information about what their state and local governments are doing.

State and local press have long been trusted sources of information in our communities. Most Arkansans have no idea what the city council or school board is spending their tax dollars on until they read the Wednesday morning paper after the Tuesday night meeting. The journalist who sits through that meeting every other Tuesday is a vital link between the People and their representatives, and his reporting is crucial to accountability and integrity in governing.

The influx of biased media further complicates the trust relationship between the press and its readers. Professional journalists have been honing standards for professional ethics and journalistic integrity for decades, but the average Arkansan has no way to know which media platforms are honoring those standards or what 'facts' have been verified before publishing. The lines between opinion and fact have been blurred, and the general public has been given no roadmap for discerning between information and misinformation.



Campaign Spending and Pay to Play

As of May 1, 2026, the total spending by United States Senate candidates running in the 2026 cycle is \$449,028,640.^[11] The total spending so far for United States House candidates running in the 2026 cycle is \$813,608,930.^[12] Total spending as of May 1, 2026, in just the Arkansas Governor's race exceeds \$4.2 million.^[13]

In the United States post-Citizens United, money equals speech. Those that have it get heard, and big political spending in Arkansas quickly dampens the voices of everyday working Arkansans.

Arkansas's private political parties go so far as to charge exorbitant fees (sometimes tens of thousands of dollars!) just to run for office with their party label attached. Here, money equals political speech to the extent that if you don't have enough of it, you are barred entry from the most basic of political expressions – putting your own name on a ballot and asking your neighbors to vote for you.

The power of money in Arkansas politics contributes to the sense that our heavily partisan politics is not for everybody; that perhaps the people do not in fact rule, because the money does.



Clearing Barriers to Healthy Democracy

“All political power is inherent in the people and government is instituted for their protection, security, and benefit.”^[14]

It is our state government’s constitutional duty to lessen the impact of these barriers to Arkansans’ civic engagement. Whether that engagement point is as a candidate, in the voting booth, in a public meeting, through the petition process, or just a day when government bureaucracy intervenes in a person’s home or business – Arkansans should rest assured that their government works for them, and not the other way around.

In our effort to restore and secure grassroots citizen access to and engagement with government, we at Arkansas Appleseed have reviewed Arkansas law to identify readily accessible and impactful legislative reforms in three primary categories: (1) Elections and Campaigns; (2) Transparency; and (3) Accountability and Ethics.

Elections and Campaigns

Election Dates

- **Barrier:** Most, but not all, elections are held on one of four dates a year as designated by law.^[15] Elections not held on these dates see shockingly low voter turnout and voter participation. These elections, held on other than the four dates designated each year, are also unnecessarily costly for taxpayers.
 - **Resolution:** Require all elections to be held on one of those four designated dates.



Nonpartisan elections for judge and prosecutor

- **Barrier:** Nonpartisan Elections for judge and prosecutor are currently held on the primary election date when voter turnout is traditionally low. The runoff election is held 4-6 months later with the November general election.^[16] The delayed runoff is unnecessarily burdensome to candidates and discourages candidate participation.
 - **Resolution:** Hold nonpartisan general elections for judge and prosecutor with the November election. Style the ballots in the same manner as UOCAVA ballots; so that the voter casts his vote for his preferred candidate and simultaneously casts his vote for his preferred candidate if a runoff is necessary. Votes in the election and the runoff can be tabulated and certified within two weeks of the election. This increases voter turnout for the election, and it eliminates the election and campaign finance costs of a runoff election.

Voter Turnout

- **Barrier:** Election Day voter turnout in Arkansas is the lowest in the country.
 - **Resolution 1:** Recognize Election Day as a statewide holiday.
 - **Resolution 2:** Require an early voting location in all cities with a population of at least ten thousand people. There are only 39 cities in Arkansas that meet this population threshold. Current law requires an early voting location in any city with a population of fifteen thousand or more.^[17]

Voter Registration

- **Barrier:** Arkansas has the lowest voter registration rate in the United States.
 - **Resolution:** Provide for secure electronic voter registration. Secure e-signatures rather than prohibiting them.



Partisan influence on election administration

- **Barrier:** The county boards of election commissioners, who run election day voting, pre-election proceedings, and tabulation of ballots, are appointees and representatives of the private political parties.^[18] Similarly, a substantial portion of the membership of the state board of election commissioners, who oversee, train, and assist county boards, and who review and sanction election law violations, are appointees and representatives of the private political parties.^[19] Partisan influence in election administration and the enforcement of election law violations impairs public trust in the integrity of our elections, and opens the door to fraud and misconduct.
 - **Resolution option 1:** Remove the political party appointment system, and replace it with a nonpartisan appointing authority.
 - **Resolution option 2:** Abolish county boards of election commissioners. Replace county boards with an election coordinator in each county that works in the county, but is employed and trained by the Secretary of State. This would remove the partisan influence and increase consistency in election administration from county to county.

Access to candidacy for office

- **Barrier:** The political parties set their filing fees.^[20] The political parties also receive the funds from those filing fees. This incentivizes high fees that are unaffordable for many potential candidates who wish to run for office.
 - **Resolution:** Set the filing fees for all parties by statute at a consistent and reasonable amount. Direct the funds collected from those filing fees to pay for administration of the party primary elections. This reduces the amount of taxpayer dollars spent on the parties' nomination proceedings and ensures fair and equal access to the ballot for candidates.



Absentee Ballots

- **Barrier:** Arkansas law is unclear about the discretionary limits on the county board of election commissioners, when they are reviewing absentee ballots against voter registration information and the request form for the absentee ballot. Some absentee ballots are disqualified on the basis of technical errors in the paperwork that is submitted with the ballot, even if the error does not evidence voter fraud.
 - **Resolution:** Require that if after review of the voter registration information, the request for absentee ballot form, and the information submitted with the absentee ballot, the county board believes the ballot was cast by the listed voter, that the voter is qualified and registered to vote the ballot, and that it is the only ballot to be counted for that voter – the county board shall count the ballot.

Ballot Initiative and Referendum Process.

- **Barrier 1:** Current law allows the General Assembly to amend a constitutional amendment that was adopted by a majority of the voters by a two-thirds vote of both houses of the General Assembly. The General Assembly should not be able to override the will of the voters.
 - **Resolution 1:** Prohibit the repeal or amendment of a ballot initiative or referendum by the General Assembly.
- **Barrier 2:** Various Arkansas laws demand the nullification of signatures of Arkansas voters on petitions for ballot measures without notice or an opportunity to be heard being granted to the signor in violation of their due process rights.
 - **Resolution 2:** Create a voter cure period, where the voter is able to appear before the Secretary of State or county clerk, verify their signature is their own, verify that they are qualified to vote and sign, and have their signature counted upon verification.



- **Barrier 3:** Current statutes allow for the disqualification of thousands of signatures of qualified and registered voters if the sponsor of a measure makes a minor technical error in the paperwork required by the Secretary of State upon filing.
 - **Resolution 3:** Require the Secretary of State to notify the sponsor if such error occurs, and allow the sponsor a period of time within which to correct the error after notification.

Campaign Finance

- **Barrier:** Corporate dollars and “dark money” have flooded the political system after Citizens United v. FEC. Unlimited spending through shell groups and corporations are shielding dark money and buying influence over policy decisions, shutting grassroots efforts and voters out of political access and influence.
 - **Resolution:** Remove empowerment of rights to corporations. Amend Arkansas corporations laws so that corporations are not granted the powers to spend in politics in the first place.

Election Information

- **Barrier:** Access to information about the candidates is found on multiple platforms and requires individual research by voters, with interruption by misinformation and public interest groups.
 - **Resolution:** Require a website run by the Secretary of State which includes candidate information, opponent lists, and sample ballots in an easily searchable format.



Transparency

Archives

- **Barrier:** FOIA compliance routinely takes more than the legally allowed three days due to poor maintenance of documents and records by governmental entities.
 - **Resolution:** Create an archival system of storing and digitalization of official government documents in the State Library. Require that official documents generated going forward be submitted to the State Library, and that the State Library create a platform on its website that is accessible to the public, free, and allows those documents to be searched by and immediately available to the public. Also, create a long-term system for incorporating historical governmental documents into that record.

News deserts

- **Barrier:** Local papers, essential to public information and governmental oversight, are disappearing across the country.
 - **Resolution 1:** Offer newspapers refundable tax credits based on their retention of newsroom employees.
 - **Resolution 2:** Simplify processes for and alleviate costs of moving from profit-based to not-for-profit corporate models.
 - **Resolution 3:** Increase accessibility to government processes and documents to local media.



Empowering Information over Misinformation

- **Barrier:** Arkansans need help distinguishing between trusted news sources and biased media.
 - **Resolution:** Create a board comprised of professional journalists, publishers, and Arkansans who read the news to (1) develop a list of professional standards that prioritize trusted, verified, and fact-based sources and separate opinion/editorialization from reporting; and (2) adopt a consistent mark or brand to be awarded to state and local media sources or news divisions that meet those professional standards. Provide legislative incentives to media sources or news divisions that meet those standards, such as tax incentives or increased access.



Accountability and Ethics

Following the money

- **Barrier:** The lack of federal regulation of cryptocurrency allows for the movement of dark money in political funding.
 - **Resolution:** Require disclosure and reporting of blockchain and cryptocurrency holdings and exchanges by public officials.

Citizen-led compliance actions against government

- **Barrier:** When governmental officials refuse to comply with the law, citizens' only recourse is to hire a lawyer and bring a mandamus action requesting the courts to order constitutional compliance. This is cost-prohibitive for most Arkansans and enables a "so-sue-me" response from government actors.
 - **Resolution:** Authorize the courts to order attorneys' fees to successful citizen plaintiffs in mandamus actions where government entities willfully refuse to comply with the requirements of law.

Political retaliation

- **Barrier:** Governmental officials are threatening retaliation, and may be retaliating, against state employees for first amendment protected speech engaged in outside of the workplace.
 - **Resolution:** Create a system of penalties and enforcement against political officials who retaliate against state employees for exercising their constitutionally protected rights.



Conclusion

At Arkansas Appleseed, we take the state constitution seriously, and we believe the rights carved out in it are worth defending. The policy proposals above are far from exhaustive - they do not include heavy, pro-democracy lifts that would require a multi-year strategy, or constitutional amendment language designed to clarify and defend Arkansans' constitutional rights.

We are building a policy roadmap to a more meaningful rendition of "Regnat Populus," and these are our first steps. They are pragmatic reforms that address elections and campaigns, transparency, and government accountability and ethics. The people of Arkansas deserve a healthy democracy and good state government.

Our theory of the case is that when more and more Arkansans enjoy the sense that state government is designed for them, our civic health will improve. By intentionally redesigning components of our state's democracy, we can return greater ownership of government back to the People.



Contributors

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- Nate Bell
- John Brummett
- Dr. Bobby Howard

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