



ACCR commissioned the report, *How Alabama Democracy Compares*, from the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA). Read the report: parcalabama.org/how-alabama-democracy-compares

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Democracy in Alabama

— By Christopher Tyler Burks and Cathy Randall

In 2024, the Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform engaged the highly-respected Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama to create a series of reports on the ways that Alabama's Constitution impacts the everyday lives of Alabama citizens. Although the constitution was recompiled by the electorate in 2022, reorganizing the massive document and removing its racist language, there remains much to be done to improve the fairness and effectiveness of Alabama's government. Alabama's new constitution removed discriminatory provisions but still describes voting as a "privilege" rather than a right.

ACCR/PARCA's first report, *Democracy in Alabama*, analyzes how Alabama's democracy compares to other states. It discusses aspects such as voter turnout, representation in government, and policies affecting democracy. The report provides insights into areas where Alabama is excelling and where there is room for improvement in terms of democratic processes and practices. Overall, the report offers a comprehensive evaluation of Alabama's democratic system and highlights areas for potential reform to enhance voter participation and competitiveness in elections. Below are highlights from the excellent research provided by PARCA on the impact of Alabama's Constitution on democracy in Alabama. Future reports will examine how the Constitution impacts the wellbeing of Alabama citizens across other policy areas.

Current State of Democracy in Alabama

Public opinion indicates a lack of trust in government responsiveness, with over 50% of respondents feeling their voices are not heard in Montgomery. Indeed, in 2022, only 37% of the voting population turned out to vote, ranking Alabama very low in voter participation.

High Cost of Voting

Alabama ranks 46th in ease of voting. Barriers include no early in-person voting, restrictive absentee voting requirements, and a lack of automatic voter registration.

Voter Registration

Alabama's voter registration rate is below the national average. The state has improved registration accessibility but does not offer automatic registration like 25 other states.

Making Voting Easier

Alabama does not allow early in-person voting, unlike 46 other states. It also has restrictive absentee voting rules, requiring specific excuses and witness signatures.

Competitive Elections

Alabama's electoral competitiveness is low due to gerrymandering and straight-ticket voting. Racial polarization and the dominance of one party contribute to low voter turnout in general elections.

Encouraging Participation

Other states have adopted measures like independent redistricting commissions, top-two primaries, and ranked-choice voting to enhance competitiveness and participation, whereas Alabama lacks direct democracy like initiatives and referenda, limiting citizen involvement in legislative changes.

Conclusion

For a more vibrant democracy, Alabama could examine and adopt best practices from other states to ease voting, increase competitiveness, and allow for greater citizen participation in government reforms.

Gerald Johnson

— By Dell Witcher

The book, *A Man for The Ages: A story of the Builders of Democracy*, highlights Abraham Lincoln’s qualities of leadership and perseverance. Here in Alabama, one such man, Dr. Gerald Johnson, is retiring from the Board of Directors of Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform (ACCR) at the age of 85, after 50 years of perseverance and leadership.

Gerald, a native of West Virginia, came to Alabama at the age of 30 to teach political science at Auburn University, including courses on state and local government and the Alabama Constitution. He describes it as an awakening.

“To get ready to teach the Constitution I needed to understand it,” he says. “But it turns out it wasn’t something I could just pick up and read. It was volumes and it was hard to decipher. I was shocked. I saw that the Alabama Constitution actually prohibits internal improvements. That’s insane!”

Way back then, Gerald waded through the Constitution in all its many forms from the original 1819 Statehood document, which he describes as progressive, to subsequent iterations that went from bad to worse.

“The prohibition against state funds being used for internal improvements is still in there, as are restrictions on local governments,” he explains. “To get around that, if a city or county wants to accomplish something they must amend the constitution. Local governments, especially counties, have limited authority. All the power is in Montgomery.”



He believed that a constitution should provide for the hopes and aspirations of its citizens—that it should define organs of government and how the government relates to the people. He didn’t find that in the Alabama Constitution. Rather, he found a code book, the longest constitution in the world, approaching a thousand amendments. So, over the next five decades, Gerald worked steadily to help reform the document. He taught, researched, conducted studies and polls, and participated in activities to support several Constitutional Commissions by several different Alabama governors who believed that Alabama citizens deserved a better state constitution.

And early on, Gerald joined ACCR, a not-for-profit organization founded by a group of likeminded citizens who were advocating for constitutional reform. Gerald reflects that ACCR has had many great leaders like Bailey Thomson, Tom Corts, Albert Brewer and others.

“It was a mission for these people,” he says. “We’ve been working for this for so many years with so little success, that we could have said: Let’s just quit and go home. But what we have done is to create an entity that is a recognized and valued voice for constitutional reform. Without ACCR, where would we have that voice? We haven’t been successful in the amendment process or in a constitutional convention, but we have kept the flame of constitutional reform burning, alive.”

ACCR was part of the effort that led to the passage of the Constitution of 2022 that removed racist language from the Constitution and reorganized the document to make it easier to understand. ACCR is currently, based on a proposal developed by Gerald and adopted by the ACCR Board, engaged in a collaborative project with the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) to produce a series of research reports that examine the ways in which the Alabama Constitution impacts the lives of everyday Alabamians. The reports will help define ACCR’s agenda for the future.

Unquestionably, with both the wins and the losses, Gerald has left a legacy. As he retires from the board of ACCR, he is grateful for the experience. “Alabama has made substantial progress in spite of the constitution, not because of it. I cherish my personal and professional journey with ACCR, and I am eternally thankful for the opportunity to make that journey with all of the past, present and future travelers on the road to a better Alabama through a better constitution.”

Help ACCR fund efforts to make the Alabama Constitution work for Alabamians

ACCR is working with the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) to study how the Alabama Constitution impacts the wellbeing of our citizens. Your donation will help ACCR develop and implement a statewide action plan to address specific problem areas.

Donate Today: constitutionalreform.org