



CIVIC HEALTH INDEX 2021:

Citizenship
During Crisis

Authored by

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Executive SUMMARY

Since 2006, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), Civic, and other partners have assembled top experts and institutions to release the Civic Health Index to better understand an array of civic health indicators that are measurable and movable. NCoC defines “civic health” as the way that communities are organized to define and address public problems. Previous reports sought to identify challenges of citizenship and community, including civic deserts, and those working to address them, including “Netizens,” veterans, and millennials.

Right now, the United States is facing some of the most significant challenges in its history. COVID-19 is reshaping institutions and civic life; the nation continues to reckon with its long history of systemic racism; and U.S. democracy is showing cracks.

The country’s ability to address these public problems is paramount. It requires an understanding of present trends in the United States’ civic health, which this report explores in detail.

Overall, most trends in civic health have been on the decline, including stagnating levels of civic education, dwindling community group membership, and worsening interpersonal and institutional trust. At the same time, there are signs of a vibrant civic nation with increased rates of volunteerism, political knowledge, and casting ballots, and millions of Americans joining together to protest police violence against Black Americans and other communities of color. These trends suggest a duality in the nation’s civic health.

Key findings include:

- It is estimated that 15 to 26 million people across 7,750 protests in 2,440 locations took to the streets in support of racial equity and equality in the summer of 2020, **making these protests the largest in the country’s history.** (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020; and Kishi et al., 2021).
- The 2020 elections saw 66.8 percent of Americans cast ballots—**the highest voter turnout of the 21st century.** This marks an increase of 5 percentage points from 2016 and the largest increase in voters between two presidential elections ever recorded, with 17 million more people voting in 2020 than in 2016 (*2020 Presidential Election*, 2021).
- For the first time, it was **less common for voters to cast a ballot in-person** on Election Day than vote early or by mail, in part due to COVID-19. Sixty-nine percent of Americans cast a nontraditional ballot, meaning they either voted by mail and/or before Election Day. This marks the highest rate of nontraditional voting since questions regarding voting method have been included in the Current Population Survey (Scherer, 2021).
- **COVID-19 emerged as another fault line for the American people.** In an international study, Americans were more likely to say they abided by COVID-19 rules “not very closely” or “not

at all closely” than five of the other six countries in the study. Respondents from the United States were also most likely to say that during the pandemic, people’s concern for others worsened, that the country was becoming more divided, and that they feel disappointed about the country’s handling of the virus (*The New Normal?*, 2020).

- **Membership of large-scale civic institutions, including unions, churches and other religious organizations, and daily newspapers, continued to decline.** As membership in community organizations continued to dissipate, the percent of Americans that live alone remains on the rise.

This report explores other important trends in civic health across four broad categories: political and civic engagement, group affiliation, social comity, and information and knowledge.

Throughout, this report shares examples of individuals and institutions working in communities across the nation to expand civic life. In addition, strategies to increase civic engagement are featured, including:

- Boosting civic education through rigorous state standards and expanded funding for civic education in the United States;
- Strengthening national service opportunities through service year fellowships and expanding service-learning in K-12 education;
- Bolstering community institutions through improved civic infrastructure; and
- Harnessing the power of the internet and technology to enhance civic engagement.

The United States is at an inflection point. Crises have emerged that threaten the future of the nation. To emerge stronger, it will require a renewed focus on increasing all aspects of civic health to address our shared problems.

A Historic **MOMENT**

In 2020, Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Barrett Romney released *The Upswing*, showing that when trends in social fragmentation, cultural narcissism, political polarization, and economic inequality are examined together since the beginning of the 20th century, those trends have moved in virtual lock step. There was increasing economic equality, political comity, social cohesion, and cultural solidarity from about 1900 to 1965. Though these trends occurred amid gender and racial exclusion, the period still coincided with increased equality for women and Black Americans. A sharp U-turn in the 1960s followed, however, with racial and

gender progress stalling, and plunges toward extreme inequality, polarization, fragmentation, and narcissism, culminating in today's nearly universal agreement that the country "is on the wrong track."

Since 2006, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), Civic, and other partners have assembled top experts and institutions to release the Civic Health Index to better understand an array of indicators that are measurable and movable. Over the years, this research demonstrated the links between civic health and economic and educational success, public health, safety from crime, and good government. Although the

evidence does not point to leading and lagging indicators, it is evident that civic, political, economic, and social trends are interconnected.

NCoC defines "civic health" as the way that communities are organized to define and address public problems. At a time when a global pandemic is reshaping institutions and civil life and a popular uprising calls for the end of systemic racism, Americans' ability to confront shared problems is critical.

There are worrying signs of United States democracy in decline. In 2010, Freedom House rated U.S. democratic freedoms a 94 out of 100. By 2021, the rating declined 11 points to 83. In particular, Freedom House highlighted worrying trends in the strength of U.S. electoral confidence, government transparency, and increasing levels of political corruption (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021).

In 2017, a survey of over 1,700 political scientists by Bright Line Watch identified experts' views of the essential elements of a democracy (Table 1). These elements are not reflections of how to achieve the best governance or justice, but rather how to prevent autocracy. Among the 15 most important topics, many are currently in question or under direct attack.

A majority of Republicans question the reliability of the 2020 election results, despite any evidence of fraud that would have had a consequential effect on the election. Bills in state legislatures across the nation take aim at equal voting rights seven years after the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated several key provisions of the



Voting Rights Act—a Supreme Court that, according to surveys, majorities of both Republicans and Democrats doubt is independent of political influence. Most troubling, the Capitol riots on January 6, 2021 marked a startling display of political violence uncommon in the United States that threatened to overturn the certification of election results.

In the face of these threats, America has also witnessed historic rates of civic engagement and political participation over the past year. Following the police murder of George Floyd, citizens of all walks of life flooded streets to engage in the largest protests ever recorded. The 2020 election, despite its aftermath, had the strongest turnout in the nation's history. These civic feats are made more impressive considering they occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected how Americans interact with each other, including in schools, businesses, and other gathering places.

This year's Civic Health Index will begin by examining 2020, a year that brought to life the dualities of civic health in America. Many historical indicators of civic health—including membership in community groups and religious affiliation, trust in one's government and fellow Americans, and civic education—continue to decline. Still, the past year saw historic levels of civic engagement through protest and voting in the face of unprecedented challenges. Americans agree on the challenges they face, though consensus on how to turn the tide remains elusive. Evidence of the nation's ability to confront its shared problems is mixed.

The remainder of the report will explore various trends underlying this unprecedented year: social comity and trends in group membership, including religious affiliation and community organizations; news consumptions and the proliferation of misinformation; civic education; social trust and isolation; and political and civic engagement. The report will also spotlight examples of civic innovation throughout the country, and discuss potential solutions to reinvigorate the nation's civic health.

TABLE 1 Essential Elements of a Functioning Democracy **Important + Essential**

Elections are conducted, ballots counted, and winners determined without pervasive fraud or manipulation	99.3%
Government protects individuals' right to engage in unpopular speech or expression	96.5%
Government agencies are not used to monitor, attack, or punish political opponents	96.1%
Government does not interfere with journalists or news organizations	95.7%
All citizens have equal opportunity to vote	95.7%
All citizens enjoy the same legal and political rights	95.2%
The elected branches respect judicial independence	91.6%
Government effectively prevents private actors from engaging in politically-motivated violence or intimidation	89.9%
Executive authority cannot be expanded beyond constitutional limits	89.9%
Parties and candidates are not barred due to their political beliefs and ideologies	89.8%
Government officials are legally sanctioned for misconduct	87.9%
The judiciary is able to effectively limit executive power	87.0%
The legislature is able to effectively limit executive power	86.1%
Elections are free from foreign influence	81.7%
Government officials do not use public office for private gain	77.8%
All votes have equal impact on election outcomes	76.6%
In the elected branches, majorities act with restraint and reciprocity	58.0%
Government leaders recognize the validity of bureaucratic or scientific consensus about matters of public policy	50.1%
Political competition occurs without criticism of opponents' loyalty or patriotism	44.0%

Civic Health IN A TIME OF TRIAL

CIVIC HEALTH & COVID-19

2020 manifested very different experiences of civic health, with enormous peaceful protests throughout the summer and millions casting ballots through the fall. The year, however, began with one of the most significant challenges to communal health the world has ever faced when COVID-19 began its spread across the United States and the world.

Most civic health trends in the United States had long been in decline prior to 2020 (Atwell, Bridgeland, & Levine, 2017). This was exaggerated by a global pandemic that forced people to be physically distant and community institutions to close. As of July 2021, an astonishing 34.8 million people were infected with COVID-19, of which over 600,000 people died (*Coronavirus in the U.S.*, 2021). In addition to the human toll of the pandemic, the unemployment rate hovered at 5.9 percent in June 2021, a decline from the 14.7 percent unemployment rate peak in April 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 2020 & June 2021). To combat the pandemic, especially in the early stages, 42 states and territories issued stay-at-home orders that ultimately affected 73 percent of all U.S. counties (Moreland et al., 2020).

COVID-19 intensified American isolation, a trend that was already deepening and will be explored more in-depth later in this report. There are societal risks of social isolation and loneliness. Recently, social isolation has been linked to domestic radicalization and violent extremism (Wood, 2020), with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

viewing social isolation as a risk factor for radicalizing to violence (*Mitigating Negative Impacts*, 2020). Given recent events in America, domestic radicalization is a threat that must be taken seriously.

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, American confidence in key government institutions and public services was mixed. Public trust in the government itself cratered to 20 percent in September 2020, with significant partisan disparities in evaluation of the government (28 percent of Republicans trusted the government, while only 12 percent of Democrats indicated the same). At the same time, confidence in public services themselves increased, especially those on the frontlines in the fight against COVID-19 (*Americans' Views of Government*, 2020). For example, confidence in the medical and education system swelled 15 percentage points (from 36 percent in 2019 to 51 percent in 2020) and 12 percentage points (29 percent to 41 percent), respectively.

In addition to the impact of COVID-19 on communities, the response of U.S. citizens has highlighted major societal fault lines. An international study by More in Common of seven countries, including the United States, conducted at the height of the first COVID-19 wave showed that Americans were more likely to say they abided by COVID-19 rules “not very closely” or “not at all closely” than five of the other six countries. Respondents from the United States were also most likely to say that during the pandemic people’s concern for others worsened, that the country has become more divided, and that they feel disappointed about the country’s handling of the virus.

Overall, the report says, “Compared to other countries, the U.S. reveals the most severe levels of disappointment in politics and other people, as well as the deepest sense of division.” As other nations took the crises as a moment of national unity and shared humanity, for Americans it has been yet another dividing line (*The New Normal?*, 2020).

In total, it is estimated that 15–26 million people across 7,750 protests in 2,440 locations took to the streets in support of racial equity and equality, making these protests the largest in the country’s history.

A YEAR OF PROTESTS

Even with COVID restrictions in place, the summer of 2020 included widespread protests over police violence against Black Americans. In total, it is estimated that 15 to 26 million people across 7,750 protests in 2,440 locations took to the streets in support of racial equity and equality, making these protests the largest in the country’s history, according to estimates on participation and scholars (Buchanan et al., 2020; Kishi et al., 2021).

In addition to the geographic diversity, these protests stretched across all demographic groups (though protesters

tended to be younger), occurred in all 50 states, and arose in more than 40 percent of counties in the United States. Nearly 95 percent of counties that held a protest were majority white, showing the cross-demographic reach of the movement (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020).

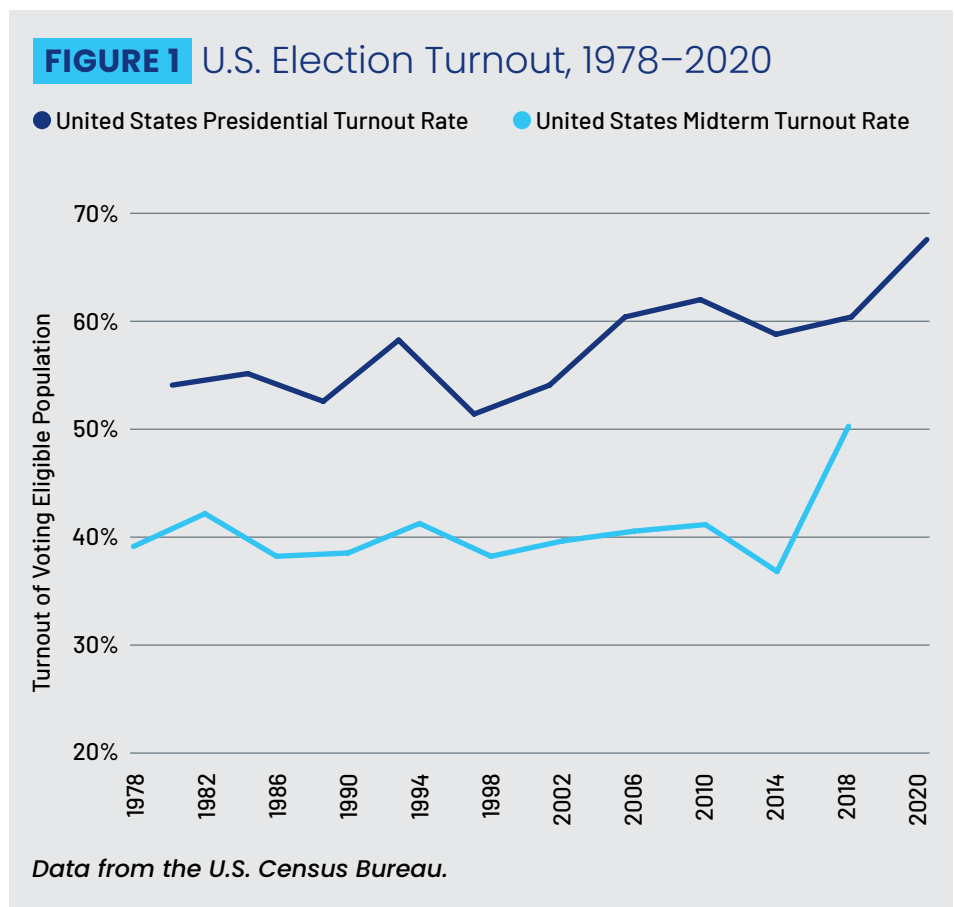
The protests also sparked high levels of engagement on social media. In 2016, at its peak, #BlackLivesMatter was used over a million times in a single day (Anderson et al., 2018). In 2020, #BlackLivesMatter reached almost 9,000,000 uses in one day. In fact, #BlackLivesMatter continued to gross around a million uses per day for the entirety of June 2020, effectively sustaining peak engagement of the 2016 protests during its lowest points in 2020 (Anderson et al., 2020).

In recent years, the Black Lives Matter movement has become more popular. In 2016, just 43 percent of Americans somewhat or strongly supported the movement, while at the height of the protests in June 2020, 67 percent of U.S. adults somewhat or strongly supported the Black Lives Matter movement (Horowitz & Livingston, 2016; Parker et al., 2020).

These protests and online engagement show potential for robust civic health in the U.S. In 2020, vestiges of America's long history of systemic racism were the impetus for involvement and protest, but understanding how to sustain civic engagement is essential to foster civic health going forward.

During 2020, right wing groups also protested social distancing mandates at state houses across the country. The disparate response by police to these different protests bears scrutiny.

Despite the Black Lives Matter protests being overwhelmingly peaceful (estimates say 95 to 96 percent of the nearly 8,000 protests were entirely peaceful), they were disproportionately met with police and military force (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2020). This is more startling when compared to the fact that protests over COVID-19 restrictions were rarely met with the same level of force. Black Lives Matter-related protests were twice as likely



to be broken up by police than protests associated with the right wing, despite no discernible difference in the propensity for the former protests to be violent. When police did intervene in protests, they used force on 51 percent of Black Lives Matter protests compared to just 33 percent of right wing demonstrations, including demonstrations against COVID-19 lockdown restrictions (The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2020).

A HISTORIC ELECTION AND AFTERMATH

The 2020 election was historic for many reasons, not least of which was the number of Americans that submitted a ballot—and how that ballot was submitted.

Despite COVID-19 challenges, 66.8 percent of eligible Americans voted in 2020, the highest voter turnout of the 21st century. This marks an increase of 5

percentage points from 2016 and the largest increase in voters between two presidential elections ever recorded, with 17 million more people voting in 2020 than in 2016.

Turnout in 2020 increased for Americans of every walk of life—men, women, and all age and racial groups. Young voters (18–34 years-old) had the largest percentage point gain of any group, up 8 percentage points from 2016 (2020 Presidential Election, 2021).

Data from the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) emphasizes the surge of young voters (2021). It is estimated that 50 percent of young people ages 18 to 29 voted in the 2020 election. This amounts to an 11-percentage point increase from 2016 (39 percent). In addition, voter turnout among young people ages 18 or 19—the newest eligible voters—was 46 percent.¹

Alternative voting methods have been gaining popularity for several election

¹ Note: These figures are based on the Catalist voter files rather than Census based figures.

cycles now. Yet, for the first time in 2020, it was less common for voters to cast a ballot in-person on Election Day than vote early or by mail, in part due to COVID-19. Sixty-nine percent of Americans cast a nontraditional ballot, meaning they either voted by mail and/or before Election Day. This marks the highest rate of nontraditional voting since questions regarding voting method have been included in the Current Population Survey (Scherer, 2021).

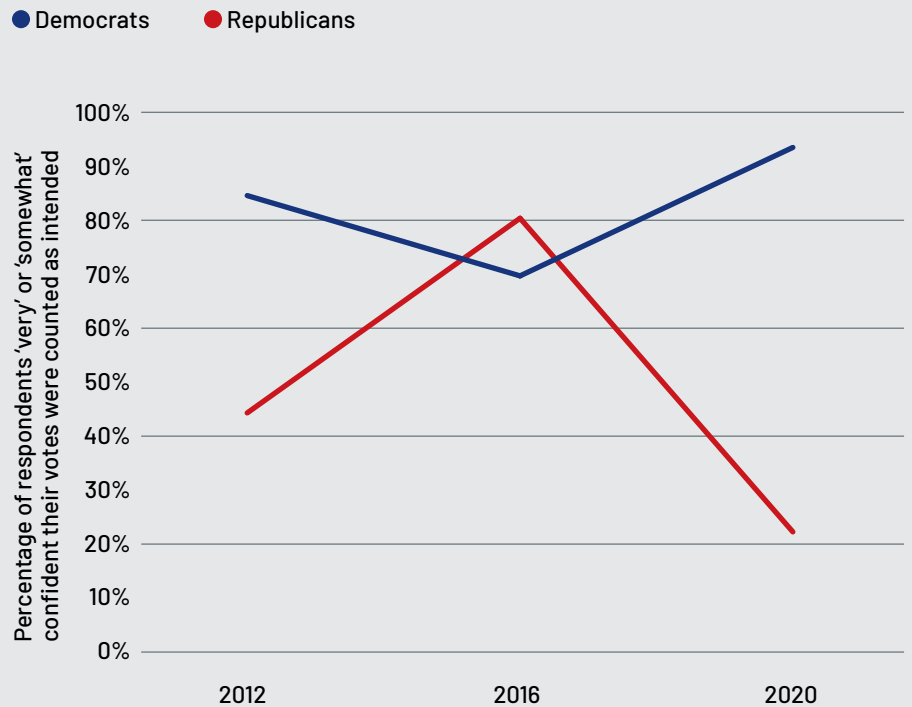
Data suggest nontraditional voting as a potential way to expand ballot access. According to U.S. Census data, people living in the quartile of states that used nontraditional voting at the highest rate in 2020 also saw a larger increase in turnout from 2016. In addition, youth voter turnout was highest and experienced the largest increases over 2016 in states that automatically mailed ballots to voters. Conversely, youth turnout was lowest in states with the most restrictive vote-by-mail laws (CIRCLE, 2021).

Ninety-three percent of Democrats were “very” or “somewhat confident” votes were counted as intended, an increase of 24 percentage points from 2016. Conversely, only 22 percent of Republicans were “very” or “somewhat confident,” marking a 58–percentage point fall from 2016.

The significant rise in 2020 voter turnout mirrors that of the midterm election cycles. After consecutive declines in 2010 and 2014, the 2018 midterm elections eclipsed 50 percent of the voting-age population for the first time since 1982, reaching 53.4 percent. This increase was propelled by young voters between the ages of 18 and 29.

Even more notable than the 2020 election turnout, however, has been the aftermath. For months preceding the election, President Donald Trump

FIGURE 2 Voter Confidence, 2012–2020



Data from MIT Election Data and Science Lab’s 2020 Survey of the Performance of American Elections.

suggested the use of mail-in ballots would cause the election to be illegitimate. President Trump repeated these claims immediately following the election despite overwhelming evidence that voter fraud was nearly nonexistent and certainly not enough to shift the balance of the election (Bastian et al., 2021; Eggers et al., 2021; Levitt, 2007).

These claims were echoed by a majority of Republicans in Congress during the transition between the Trump and Biden administrations, and trickled down to their supporters, impacting voter confidence in the accuracy and legitimacy of the election.

Voter confidence is defined as the level of trust in the correct tabulation of votes. The promise of peaceful transition of power—a hallmark of democracy—depends on it. The MIT Election Data and Science Lab’s 2020 Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ) found that while 90 percent of 2020 respondents

were at least somewhat confident their own votes were counted as intended, far fewer trusted the tabulation across the country. Only 61 percent of respondents were at least partially confident that votes nationwide were counted accurately, while nearly one in four respondents were not at all confident. This is a significant increase from four years ago, when just nine percent of respondents were not at all confident that votes nationwide were counted as voters intended.

Survey results also indicate a widening partisan gap about the prevalence of voter fraud and confidence. While historically, voters tend to be more skeptical of election results if their preferred candidate loses, results from the SPAЕ are still striking.

Ninety-three percent of Democrats were “very” or “somewhat confident” votes were counted as intended, an increase of 24 percentage points from 2016. Conversely, only 22 percent of Republicans were “very” or “somewhat

confident,” marking a 58-percentage point freefall from 2016. This leaves Republicans 71 percentage points less likely than Democrats to be very or somewhat confident that votes nationwide were counted as intended.

Again, swings in voter confidence are routine when a voter’s chosen candidate does not come out on top. For example, 84 percent of Democrats were “very” or “somewhat” confident votes were counted as intended during President Obama’s reelection in 2012, while that number decreased to 69 percent in 2016 when President Trump was victorious. This is commonly referred to as the “winner effect.” But the level of decline in Republican voters’ confidence from 2016 to 2020 was unprecedented in the history of the SPAE.

It is likely that the steep decline is due in part to the drastic increase in alternative methods of voting, including mail-in ballots. Overwhelming Republican conviction in 2020 election fraud has led to a concerted effort to restrict access to the ballot box, particularly through limiting alternative voting methods—restricting mail-in ballots, curbing ballot drop off locations, curtailing absentee voting, and limiting days or hours polling locations are open for in-person voting—that have helped to expand turnout in recent elections. Arizona, Florida, Georgia, and Iowa all passed laws in early 2021 that will make it harder to receive and cast mail-in ballots or utilize ballot drop box locations (Viebeck, 2021).

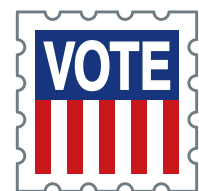
Lack of confidence in the election results came to a head on January 6, 2021, when a mob protesting the election stormed the U.S. Capitol. The attack resulted in the death of a Capitol Police Officer, while Senators and U.S. Representatives were forced to evacuate the Capitol and many of their offices looted and vandalized.

The riots of January 6th were an amalgamation of many trends: a decline in voter confidence that has been ratcheted up by a decline in trust in government and democratic institutions. Dwindling trust in media and the news has



coincided with increases in the spread of misinformation, contributing to a decay in shared belief in objective facts. Increased partisan tribalism has led to significant political animosity toward those from a differing party.

The United States’ democracy has been thrust into question in the past year. This decline in civic health, however, is juxtaposed with the largest protests ever recorded and the strongest voter turnout of the 21st century, both driven by younger Americans, seeding signs of hope for improving civic health in place of the divisiveness witnessed and anger at the Capitol in January.



69%
of Americans cast a nontraditional ballot, meaning they either voted by mail and/or before Election Day.

OTHER TRENDS

in Civic Health

The remaining report will focus on trends in civic health across four broad categories: political and civic engagement, group affiliation, social community, and information and knowledge. Each of these will explore subcategories in the nation's civic health. The final section of the report provides an overview of potential policy options to foster U.S. civic engagement.

POLITICAL & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The beginning of this report highlighted key statistics illustrating that political and civic participation in the United States has

never been higher. People cast ballots in 2020 at rates never before seen, while the nation came together to demand an end to state violence against Black Americans.

For Americans to participate in their democracy and community, however, it requires trust in key institutions and politicians that are responsive to voters, as well as policymakers removing as many barriers to the ballot as possible. If not, some citizens might believe their voice is not heard or ignored and feelings of inefficacy and disenfranchisement could be the basis for disengagement.

This section shows that while trends in civic and political engagement show

promise, they require deeper trust in government efficacy to be sustained.

Trust in Government

The percent of Americans who say you can trust the federal government to do the right thing “just about always” or “most of the time” has been on the decline since the mid-1960s with periods of brief respite in the 1980s and late-1990s to early 2000s. Following an increase in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, however, public trust in Washington has declined consistently, from a high of 54 percent believing the government can be trusted “just about always” or “most of the

FIGURE 3 Public Trust in Government, 1958–2021



Public Trust in Government: 1958–2021. (2021 May 17). Pew Research Center.
www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/

time” to a low of 14 percent in 2014. The past few years has seen public trust fluctuate around 20 percent (*Public Trust*, 2021).

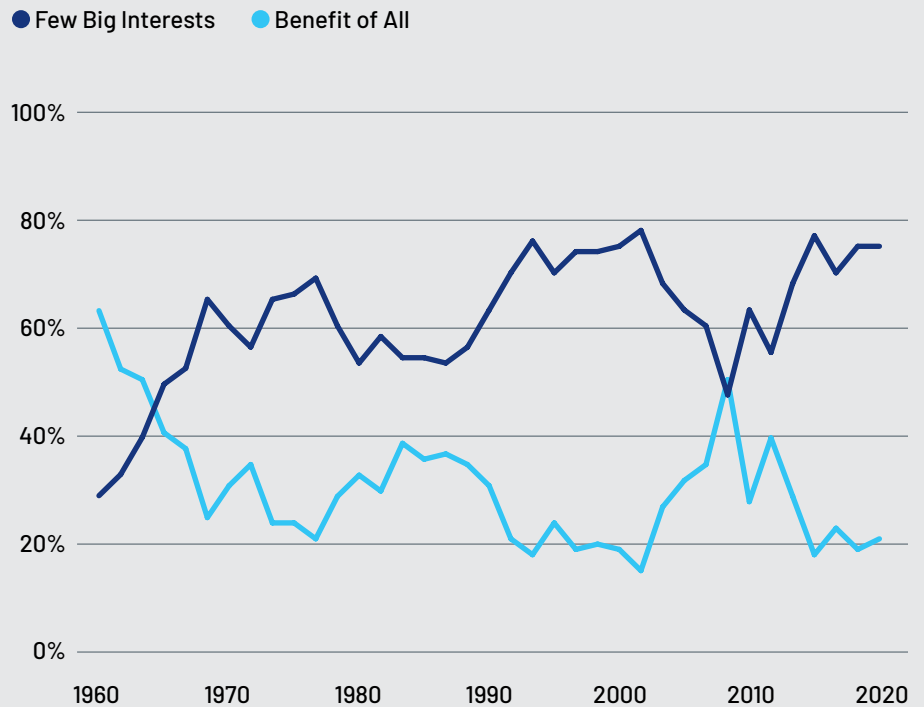
This is striking when compared to citizens trust in state and local governments. In 2018, 72 percent of Americans trusted their local government a great deal or fair amount, while 63 percent said the same for their state government (McCarthy, 2018).

Moreover, citizens are less likely to believe the federal government is responsive to the needs of the populace. This follows the same trend previously described. In the mid-1960s Americans were much more likely to say government is looking out for the benefit of all (64 percent in 1964) compared to a few big interests (29 percent). By 2019, however, those proportions essentially flipped, with 76 percent believing government looks out for a few big interests.

Belief in federal government efficacy and responsiveness has deteriorated with declining trust for government. A Pew Research Study showed 64 percent of adults believe low trust in the federal government makes it harder to solve many of the country’s problems (*Partisan Antipathy*, 2019). American National Election Studies (ANES) data shows the percent of Americans who agree people don’t have a say in government exceeds those who disagree for the first time in 2008 and the proportion of “agreeers” has continued to climb. Similarly, the percent of Americans who believe public officials do not care what people think now outpaces those that do, while nearly two thirds of Americans find it difficult to assess the veracity of public speech (Rainie et al., 2019).

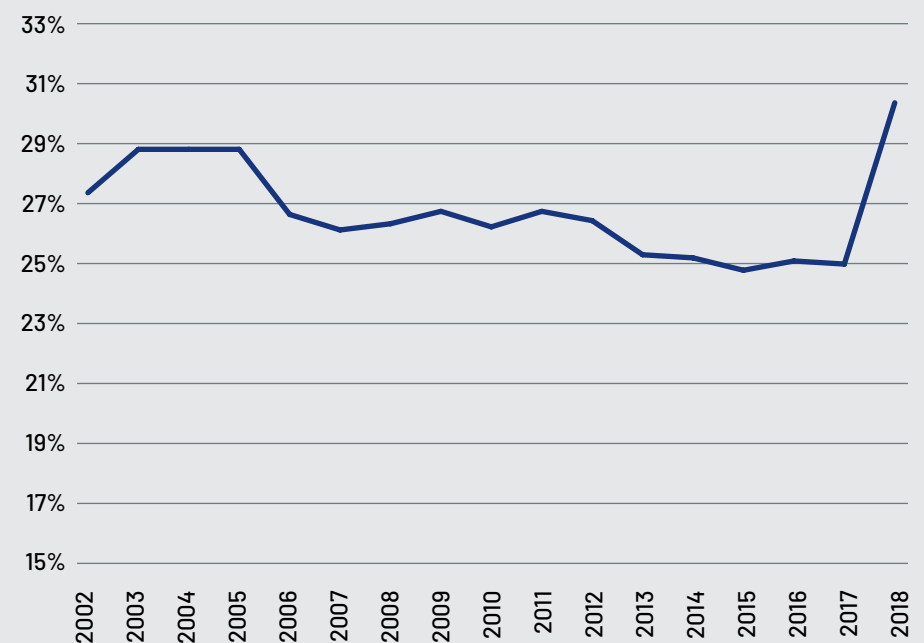
The 2021 Edelman Trust Index also showed troubling levels of faith in the U.S. government to do what is right on several issues, including the pandemic and racial justice. Just 33 percent of U.S. respondents trust leaders to do what is right, less than any other group listed. Sixty-two percent of Americans go as far as to believe government leaders purposely seek to mislead people. Across 27 countries included in the Trust Barometer, America’s score of 48 out of 100 indicates general distrust, placing it behind 20 nations, below the global average, and marks a 5-point decrease from May 2020.

FIGURE 4 Who is Government Looking Out For?



Data from American National Election Studies.

FIGURE 5 Volunteering Rates in the United States, 2002–2018



Data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Volunteering in America Supplement.

BRIGHT SPOT

Party at the Mailbox

In response to COVID-19, [Party at the Mailbox](#)—a Black Girls Vote Initiative sponsored by the National Conference on Citizenship—partnered with local artists and organizations in several metro areas, from Baltimore to Detroit, to send “party boxes” that contain vote-by-mail materials. The aim is to make voting a “celebration” not a “chore.” Black Girls Vote is a non-partisan nonprofit with a mission to represent the concerns of and boost the political engagement of black women.

Volunteering

Volunteering rates in the United States have held relatively consistent over the past decade. In 2018, however, the rate jumped 5 percentage points to 30.3 percent, the highest since 2002 (National Volunteer Week, 2021). This is an encouraging sign, especially given the political climate in recent years. President Trump frequently sought to reduce funding for national service programs and eliminate the Corporation for National and Community Service (Green, 2017; Khatami, 2019).

The immediate aftermath of 9/11 brought a concerted effort to increase national service opportunities. This effort yielded results, with increases in the Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps, NCCC, Senior Corps, Conservation Corps, and a new Citizen Corps for disaster preparedness and response. Post-9/11 service efforts also resulted in four consecutive years of increases in the volunteering rate following 2001. These results portend potential to boost national service opportunities through focused interventions.

National service remains popular with members of all parties and brings significant benefits to the economy and participants. A conservative estimate

suggests taxpayer benefits exceed costs by a two-to-one ratio (Belfield, 2013). Meanwhile, volunteering during adolescence and young adulthood is linked with improved health and well-being, and contributes to educational development (*Investing in the Health*, 2015).

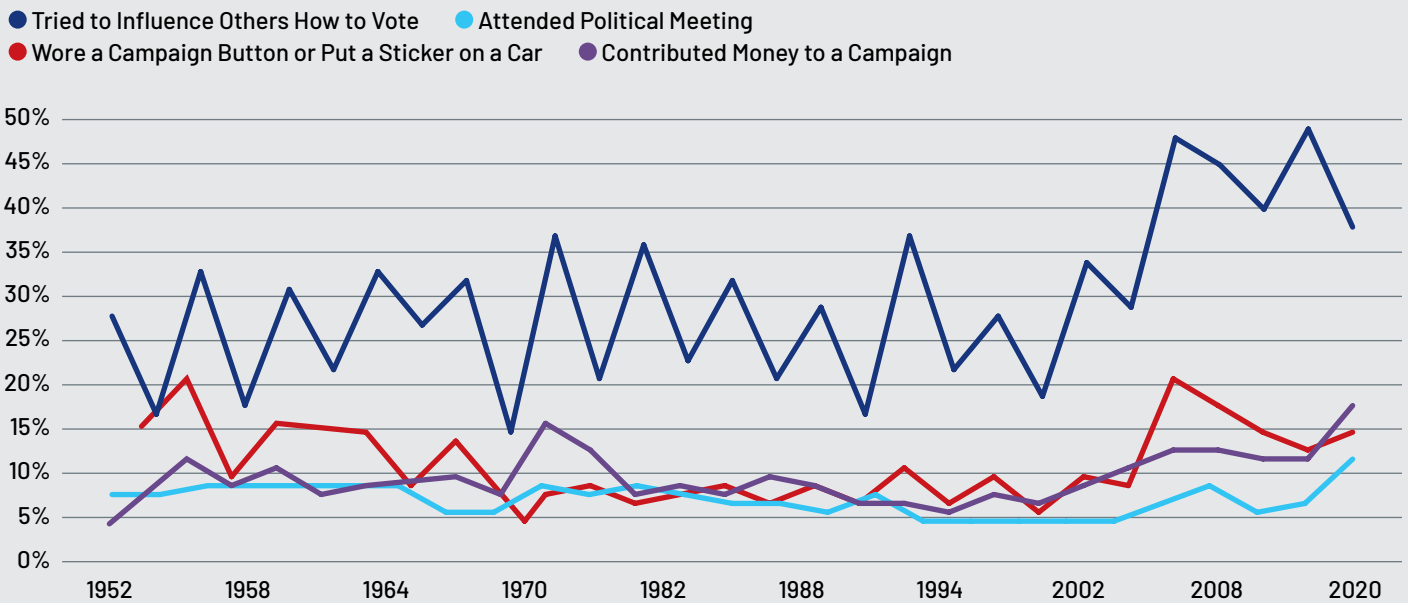
Electoral and Political Engagement

As the beginning of this report covered, the 2020 election brought historic levels of voter turnout. It is also important to understand whether voters engaged in other ways. Data from ANES indicate heightened levels of political engagement beyond casting ballots in the 2020 election.

Since the 2000 election, there has been a sustained increase in the percent of Americans who try to influence how others vote. While the percent of people who tried to influence others declined from 49 percent in 2016 to 38 percent in 2020, this still represents a sizable growth.

Political engagement increased across three other indicators in the 2020 election cycle, including attending political meetings, displaying a campaign button or sticker, and contributing to a campaign.

FIGURE 6 Political Participation in the United States, 1952–2020



Data from American National Election Studies.

Trust in government continued on a downward trajectory. In 2021, the United States saw first-hand how dangerous low levels of trust in institutions and elections can be. Conversely, the 2020 election cycle showed promising signs of increased political engagement by Americans. Not only did more citizens

cast ballots, but they also donated money, attended meetings, and supported their candidates in other important ways. Moving forward, it will be necessary to monitor efforts to curb alternative voting to ensure any new laws are safeguarding the ballot box, not erecting artificial barriers.

In 2021, the United States saw first-hand how dangerous low levels of trust in institutions and elections can be.



BRIGHT SPOT

Every Day Democracy

Everyday Democracy (ED) works with hundreds of communities to provide tools and resources that help foster civic engagement with racial equity through efforts focused on education, youth engagement, civic engagement, community-police relations, early childhood development, diversity, mental health, and immigration.

“What we do is provide tools and resources for communities to address community issues using dialogues,” said Matthew Walker, Program Director. ED’s approach is a process called “dialogue-to-change,” in which groups of diverse people meet for several weeks to help participants build trust and solidarity through open discussions, learn about the complex issues in their communities, and collaborate on solutions.

Dialogue-to-change programs also include nuanced discussions of racism through a focus on the effects of structural racism and other inequities on democracy. ED provides discussion guides, how-to handbooks, trainings, advice, and other resources to carry out its work to help communities advocate on their local issues and help them create a more democratic and inclusive community.

One example of ED’s work is the Connecticut Civic Ambassadors Program, a group of everyday people who care about and engage others in their communities by creating opportunities for civic participation and leadership that strengthens the state’s “Civic Health.” A key focus of the program is to increase civic leadership and engagement among people of color and youth. The program now engages a diverse group of 125 civic ambassadors across the state.

GROUP AFFILIATION

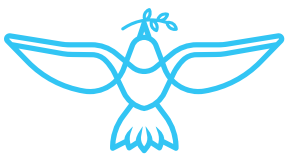
For years, membership in community organizations has been declining across America (Putnam & Garrett, 2020; Putnam, 2000). These groups traditionally served as hubs for civic engagement and community participation. As membership in these traditional, large-scale community and civic organizations declines, it is important to understand if there are other organizing groups taking its place and the role the internet plays in filling the gap left. As is laid out below, the story is overwhelmingly one of declining social organizations and chances for diverse groups of Americans to come together.

Religious Affiliation

American religiosity continues to decline, dating back to the 1970s. Now, according to Gallup, a majority of the nation is not a member of a religion. In 2020, 47 percent of the U.S. said they were members of a church, synagogue, or mosque, the first time that proportion has dipped below 50 percent since Gallup first asked the question in 1937 (Jones, 2021).

Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) confirms this. The percent of Americans that report “no religious preference” or “no religious affiliation” has risen steadily since the early 1990s, with a brief exception following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Edelman, 2021).

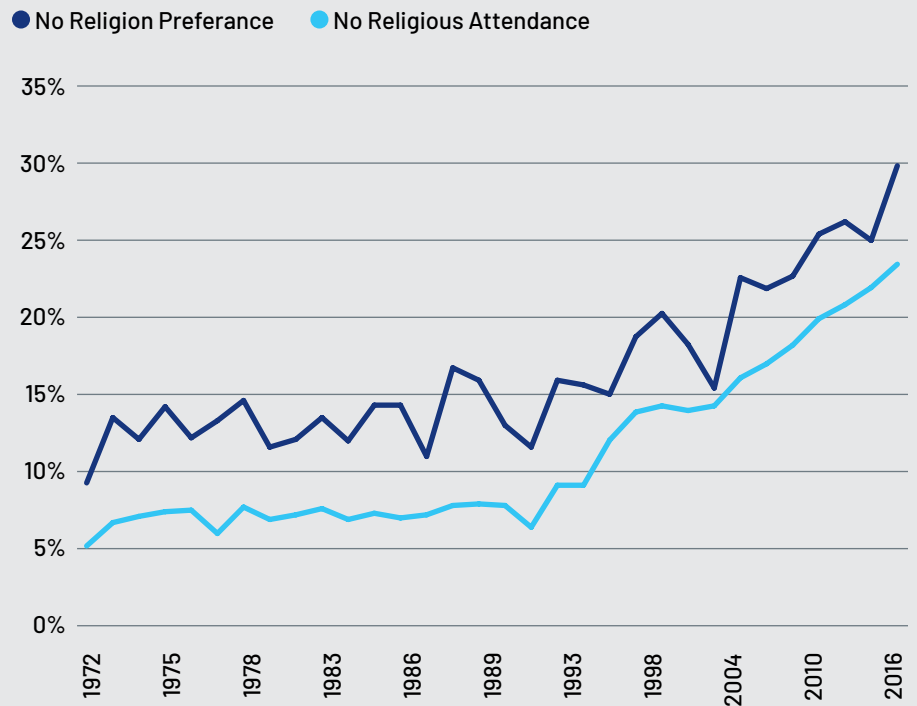
Past research indicates civic health benefits associated with religious participation. Specifically, regular religious



47%

of Americans said they were members of a church, synagogue, or mosque in 2020.

FIGURE 7 Religious Attendance & Preference, 1972–2018



Data from the General Social Survey, 1972–2018.

Religious involvement has also been linked to volunteering and philanthropy, even when excluding contributions to religious causes.

attenders are more likely to attend club meetings or belong to sports, professional, academic, school, service, political, or youth groups (Putnam, 2000). Religious involvement has also been linked to volunteering and philanthropy, even when excluding contributions to religious causes (Putnam & Campbell, 2012; *Religion's Relationship*, 2019).

Union Membership

In addition to religious congregations, daily newspapers, and political parties, unions were one of four large-scale civic institutions that were hallmarks of

community in the 19th century. Unions not only provide vital protections to workers, but also encourage civic ties and political participation.

Here, too, we see dramatic declines in association. ANES shows union membership declining consistently since the 1970s from 26 percent to 13.5 percent in 2021. The General Social Surveys (GSS) show a similar decline in union membership over a similar period, falling from 38.8 percent in 1973 to merely 13.8 percent in 2018.

This has serious ramifications for worker solidarity and earnings, but also for political and civic participation. Unions offer the ability for workers to exert greater political influence. Their absence contributes to the growing sense that voters cannot influence public officials.

To this point, according to the Economic Policy Institute in 2020, 58 percent of union members reported being engaged politically by their coworkers (e.g., being

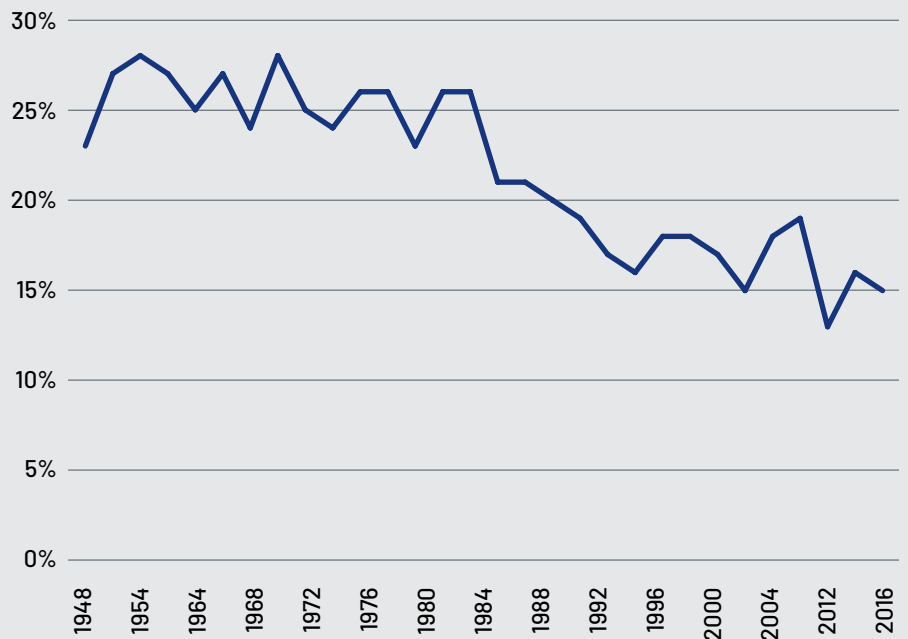
Unions not only provide vital protections to workers, but also encourage civic ties and political participation.

reminded to vote, being asked to support a particular candidate, etc.) compared to just 36 percent of non-union members (Hertel-Fernandez, 2020). The decline in union membership is not purely an economic phenomenon. On top of losing bargaining power in the workplace, it has “meant that many workers—above all, more socioeconomically disadvantaged workers—lack opportunities for building civically relevant skills, discussing politics with coworkers, and learning about ways to get involved in political causes and campaigns (ibid.).” A 2013 study also found that union members were more likely to engage in a variety of political and civic actions. They were more likely to vote in a presidential election, volunteer for a campaign, join in a protest, and join a volunteer association. This was most pronounced for those with lower levels of education (Kerrissey & Schofer, 2013).

Americans understand declining union membership is detrimental. A 2021 survey by Pew Research Center found that most Americans say the reduction has been “somewhat” or “very” bad for the country, while 60 percent say it has been bad for working people (Van Green, 2021).

On top of losing bargaining power in the workplace, it has “meant that many workers—above all, more socioeconomically disadvantaged workers—lack opportunities for building civically relevant skills, discussing politics with coworkers, and learning about ways to get involved in political causes and campaigns

FIGURE 8 Union Membership by Households, 1948–2016



Data from American National Election Studies.



BRIGHT SPOT

National Urban Indian Family Coalition

The National Urban Indian Family Coalition (NUIFC) is a Seattle-based nonprofit born from the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation. Recognizing that urban Natives are an underrecognized, underprivileged community, the NUIFC works to partner with local, urban-based organizations across the country that share in their mission to create thriving American Indian & Alaskan Native communities nationwide.

Most recently, the NUIFC sponsored a nationwide initiative to increase urban Native participation in the electoral process and the 2020 Census. To spur civic engagement, the NUIFC and a coalition of 24 urban centers combined to create one of the most comprehensive Native American Get Out The Vote efforts in history. Thanks in part to NUIFC efforts, Native American turnout soared by 21 percent from 2016 to 2020. NUIFC primarily utilized digital mediums because of COVID-19, with methods ranging from creating artwork and videos to selling merchandise. To publicize both their political and Census outreach, the NUIFC published a report titled [“Democracy is Indigenous”](#).

The NUIFC also has partnered with numerous organizations to combat the ailing state of urban Native education. Through the Resurgence Urban Indian Education Initiative, the NUIFC hopes to reimagine the K-12 experience for Native students by renewing the presence of Native values and pedagogies into the curricula. To accomplish this, the NUIFC partners with both practitioners and schools themselves to serve as incubators for innovation in this civic space, while simultaneously launching nationwide advocacy efforts for education reform.



Community Organizations

Social scientist Robert Putnam crystallized declining participation and membership in community organizations throughout the U.S. with his essay and subsequent book by the same name, *Bowling Alone*, and more recently through the book, *The Upswing*: “Over the last half century or so card-carrying membership in civic organizations has edged downward by perhaps one quarter. More importantly, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has been sliced in half” (p. 127).

Dwindling group membership spells trouble for the rest of American society. American civic life occurs largely within the context of social networks. For example, while it is tempting to think of voting as an individual decision, studies indicate that the decision to participate in the political process is highly dependent on social networks and group membership (Campbell, 2013).

Emerging evidence does indicate some groups may be emerging to fill the void left by traditional community organizations. For instance, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has seen its membership grow exponentially in the past two years, though it continues to remain relatively small. The growth of DSA probably partially reflects an ideological shift within the American Left (Godfrey, 2020). While political in nature, groups like the DSA fulfill some of the same functions as civic organizations of years past, including education, community organizing, and mutual aid.

Other social groups show signs of growth as well. For example, book club membership has ticked upward from 3.5 percent in 2012 to 5 percent in 2017, and in 2019, 12 percent of Americans reported engaging in a book club at least “sometimes,” though this remains a small sliver of the population (*The Humanities*, 2020).

SOCIAL COMITY

Declining group membership has hazardous effects. As Americans increasingly keep to their progressively homogenous enclaves (and news sources, as the following section

will highlight), they have less opportunities for shared experiences with those who look, think, believe, or worship differently than them. This undermines social comity—Americans coming together for their mutual benefit. With less shared experiences, it is easier to vilify those different than you and harder to trust one another.

As this section lays out, these factors contribute to a decline in social trust, and rise in tribalism and social isolation that have dangerous impacts on American health and civic society.

Broadly speaking, Americans feel disenchanted with their communities and neighborhoods. Only 45 percent of Americans feel that they belonged to a community of any kind, and over one-in-three (36 percent) indicated that they only felt part of a community once or twice at most in the past month (Ipsos, 2021).

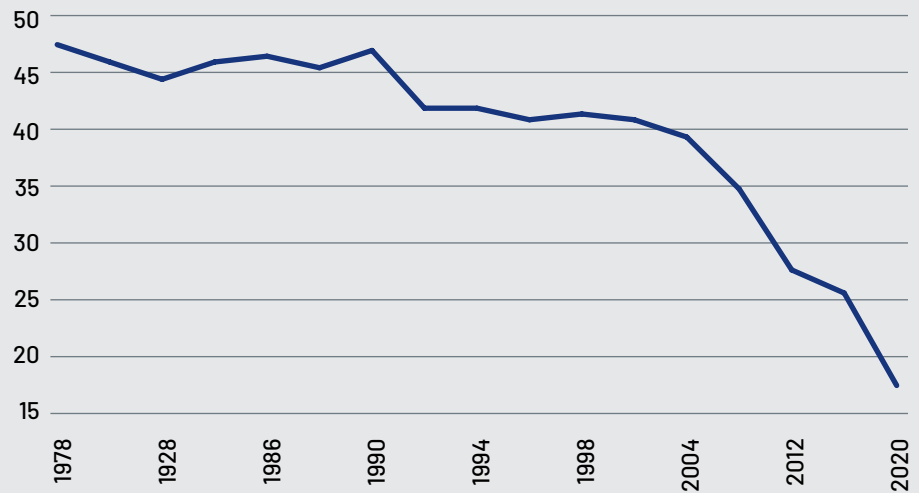
Partisan Tribalism

Research has shown that group membership strongly influences opinions more so than policy preferences or ideology (Zaller, 2012; Achen & Bartels, 2016; Barber & Pope, 2019). With a politically polarized American society, this tribalism has begun to manifest in ascribing negative feelings or character traits to members of the opposing party.

Data show heightened animosity toward members of the opposite party. ANES asks respondents to rank certain groups from 0–100 on a feeling thermometer. Feelings towards members of their own party have hardly changed, yet interparty feelings have cooled considerably. In addition, Americans are increasingly likely to oppose a family member marrying a member of the opposing party, or even having friends from a member of that party (*Political Polarization*, 2014; Ballard, 2020).

Recent studies point to political animosity beyond disagreements. One 2021 poll from CBS News showed more than half of Republicans and 40 percent of Democrats think of the other party as “enemies,” while a majority of respondents believe other people in the United States are the biggest threat to the “American way of life.” In January 2021,

FIGURE 9 Average Feeling Thermometer Score for Opposing Party, 1978–2020



Data from American National Election Studies.

American Enterprise Institute’s American Perspectives Survey revealed that 56 percent of Republicans support the use of force to stop the decline of the traditional American way of life (Cox, 2021).

These trends have ramifications that extend past interpersonal and societal trust in America. Increased tribalism makes it easier to vilify political rivals, undermining belief in shared humanity and common purpose. This makes it easier to believe voters from the opposing party or election administrators are committing fraud.

In addition, new evidence suggests heightened political polarization may be the root of increased misinformation. For instance, a 2021 study found ignorance was not a primary motivator for spreading misinformation—rather it was partisan polarization. Moreover, individuals who report “hating” their political opponents are most likely to share fake news (Osmundsen et al., 2021).

Americans recognize the danger of polarization. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer showed majorities of both Biden and Trump voters believe the degree of political and ideological polarization in the U.S. has gotten so extreme that the U.S. is in the midst of a cold civil war.

New evidence suggests heightened political polarization may be the root of increased misinformation. For instance, a 2021 study found ignorance was not a primary motivator for spreading misinformation—rather it was partisan polarization.

BRIGHT SPOT

Black Futures Lab



Alicia Garza of the Black Futures Lab

Created by Black Lives Matter Co-Founder Alicia Garza, the [Black Futures Lab](#) (BFL) is an organization that focuses on transforming Black communities for the better by building Black political power. BFL engages advocacy organizations and legislators to advance local, state, and federal-level policies that will empower Black communities. By building political power at the community and individual levels, BFL works to make Black communities more active, interdependent, and responsive public partners that change the way power operates.

“Alicia Garza saw the

importance of sustained organizing to challenge the issues facing Black communities and wanted to create space for more Black folks to be engaged within this work,” said Nife Olufosoye, Organizing Director of BFL. He added, “at the federal level and at the state level, we are putting pressure on elected officials to address the issues facing Black communities.”

BFL acknowledges challenges facing the Black community such as state violence, mass incarceration, voter suppression, and disproportionate poverty; engages Black voters on a long-term basis; and empowers black voters to shape policy discussions. To better understand these challenges, BFL launched the [Black Census Project](#) in 2018, the largest survey of Black people conducted in the United States since Reconstruction. The survey garnered over 30,000 Black respondents from across the country on their views, experiences, political beliefs, concerns, and aspirations. The data was used to identify policy priorities and the variety of issues that Black Americans are concerned about.

In addition to building political power, BFL embraces a strategy of enhancing civic engagement in these communities. In response to changes in voting methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, BFL and Demos published [Black to the Ballot](#), a report that analyzes vote-by-mail policies in three Black to the Ballot target states: Alabama, Nevada, and Texas. BFL and Demos advocate for immediate expansion of vote-by-mail policies in these states.

Policing

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, protests across the country erupted in calls for police reform. The relationship between police and the communities they serve is vitally important for the nation’s civic health. For communities to come together to address shared problems, including public safety, it is essential that community members trust one another and feel safe.

Research supports this. When the public trust police, they are more likely to call on them for help and work together to solve community problems (*Interim Report*, 2015). For too many Americans, especially from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) communities, however, that trust has been broken. The specter of police brutality makes the possibility of collaboration impossible.

In 2020, Americans’ confidence in police reached an all-time low. According to polling from Gallup, confidence in police fell to 48 percent in 2020. This represents a drop of five percentage points from the previous year and the lowest point ever recorded in the 27 years Gallup has surveyed Americans about policing (Brenan, 2020).

The overall trends mask significant differences across racial lines. Fifty-six percent of white adults say they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in police compared to just 19 percent of Black Americans. This is the largest racial gap across 16 major institutions rated in Gallup’s annual Confidence in Institutions poll (Jones, 2020).

While these numbers are unsettling, they are unsurprising. In addition to consistent images of police violence, a 2016 study by the Center for Policing Equity showed African Americans are far more likely than other racial groups to be the victims of police force (Goff et al., 2016).

Due to the lack of trust and disproportionality in force, many across the United States have called for a reimagining of public safety and the formation of Peoples Commissions to help shape policy and practice. Some have suggested investing in alternatives to traditional police, including an office of neighborhood safety

and traffic enforcement (Pearl, 2020).

ACT NOW, an initiative of the Office of American Possibilities, is in the process of a year-long listening and learning tour in 16 communities representing the diversity of the United States, the beginning of a five-step process to identify ideas for policing and public safety that serve all Americans.

What is clear is that public safety must be re-envisioned for the 21st century in a way that allows all citizens in this country to feel safe in their community.

Social Trust

A large-scale study from Pew Research Center in 2019 explored Americans social trust in great length. The survey organized people into three categories: high, medium, and low “trustees.” High trustees chose the pro-trust response to all questions; low trustees gave non-trust answers to each question; and medium trustees fell somewhere in the middle, with mixed answers across the survey instruments.

The Pew survey also indicated that younger generations tend to be less trusting than their elders. Young adults ages 18 to 29 were most likely to be “low trustees.” Similar trends were seen for Black and Hispanic respondents. While just 31 percent of white people were low-trusters, 44 and 46 percent of Blacks and Hispanics were, respectively (Public Trust, 2021).

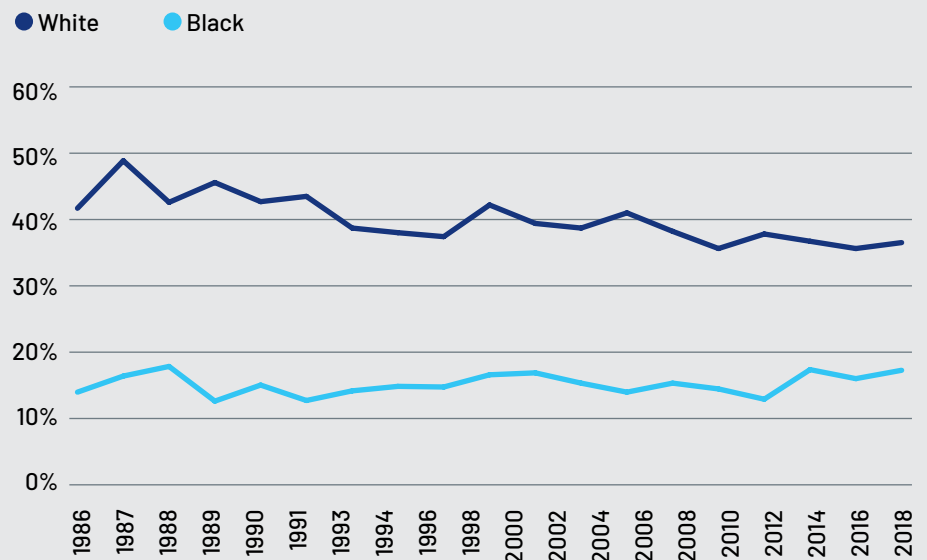
GSS data also points to a trust gap in the American populace. White Americans are much more likely than their Black peers to say people can be trusted to do the right thing by more than 22 percentage points. This gap has grown in recent years.

Levels of personal trust are important indicators of how likely people are to have confidence in leaders and institutions in general. Respondents who ranked lower on Pew’s trust scale had lower levels of trust across various levels of society and institutions, including in scientists and police.

Social Isolation

Declining group affiliation portends less opportunities for people to connect and cultivate relationships. This has negative

FIGURE 10 Percent Who Say People Can Be Trusted, 1986–2018



Data from the General Social Survey, 1986–2018.

impacts on community and civic health but is also detrimental to individuals.

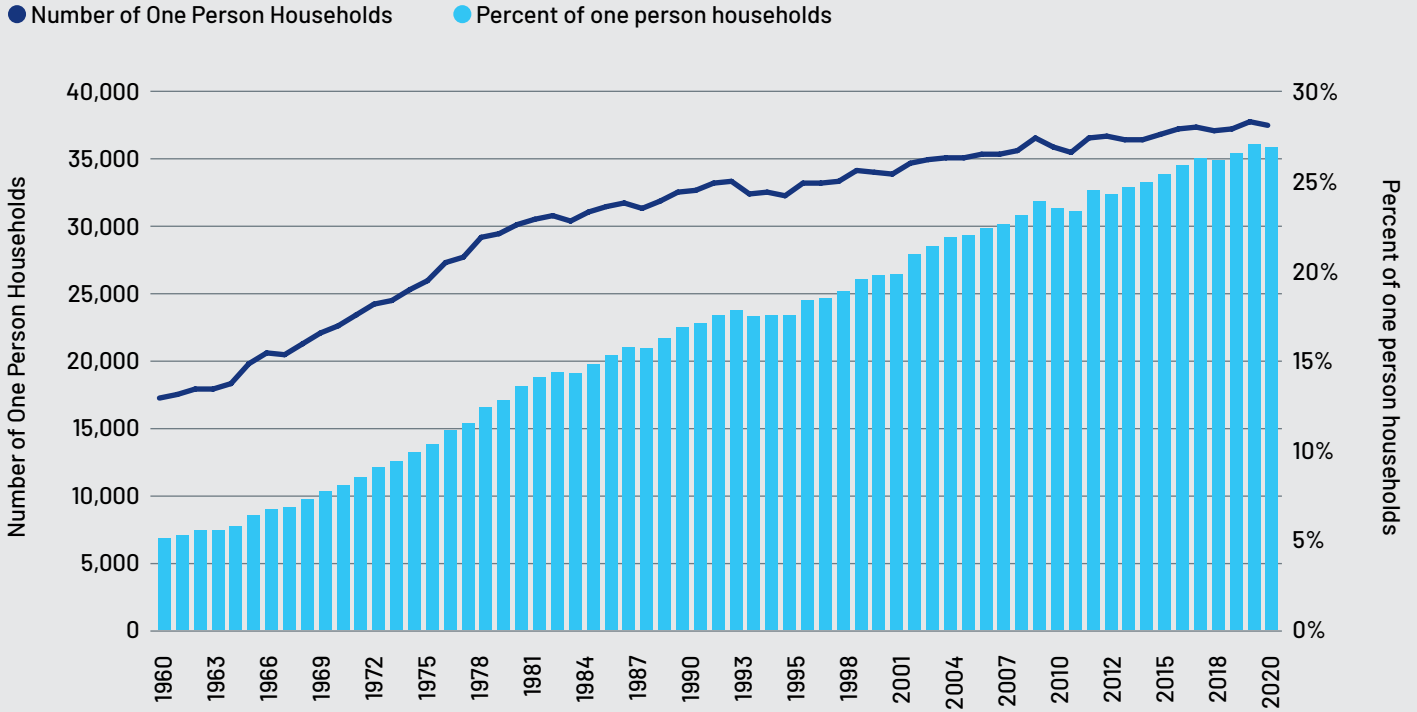
Increasing rates of social isolation mean Americans have less people to lean on in times of need. Surveys confirm this. Fewer people say they have someone they can go to or a neighbor they routinely communicate with. This is paired with rising numbers of adults who live alone, a trend documented at length in the 2017 *Civic Deserts* report and has continued to tick upwards. There are many factors beyond community and religious organizations impacting this development. But no matter the cause, there is an increase in the percentage of Americans who feel isolated and lonely.

As much of society shifts online, both during the pandemic and outside of it, broadband and internet connections become necessary to participate in everyday life and community. Unfortunately, many communities continue to lack access to broadband. FCC data claims that just 4 percent of Americans do not have broadband, but other sources, including Pew, indicate that number may be as high as 23 percent (*Internet/Broadband*, 2021).

The problem is more stark for BIPOC and low-income communities. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has found that up to 13 percent of American Indians, 19 percent of Black students, and 17 percent of Hispanic students lack in-home internet access (Kewal-Ramani et al., 2018) and a study by the Brookings Institute indicates poor Americans are less likely to have broadband access (Tomer et al., 2017).

The problem worsens when the sample is isolated to remote, rural communities. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reports significant gaps for Americans living in rural areas (82.7 percent have access to broadband) and on tribal lands (79.1 percent) (Fourteenth Broadband Deployment Report, 2021). This is troubling in light of the pandemic, for reasons beyond the homework gap. Without internet access, these communities cannot sidestep social distanced isolation through digital socialization. They are cut off from communal institutions like libraries that have shifted to an entirely digital format (99 percent of libraries reported closing at the beginning of the pandemic) and are

FIGURE 11 The Rise of Living Alone, 1960-2020



Data from the U.S. Census Bureau: *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2020*.



94%

of respondents who reported never having in-person interactions with other people reported feeling lonely.

essentially isolated from the rest of their communities (Riley, 2020).

In January 2020, Cigna released a survey expanding on previous findings by AARP on American loneliness. Using the UCLA loneliness scale, Cigna found that 61 percent of respondents were lonely, an increase of 7 percentage points from 2018 alone. The survey found low-income respondents (\$25k annually or less) were lonelier than high-income respondents (\$125k annually or more), by a margin of 50.6 percent to 43.3 percent. Type of community also played a role, though less than expected; urban (46.7 percent) and suburban respondents (44.7 percent) were slightly less lonely than rural respondents (47 percent). Particularly jarring was the age differences. Huge majorities of Generation Z and Millennials reported being lonely (79 percent and 71 percent), while only 50 percent of Baby Boomers did.

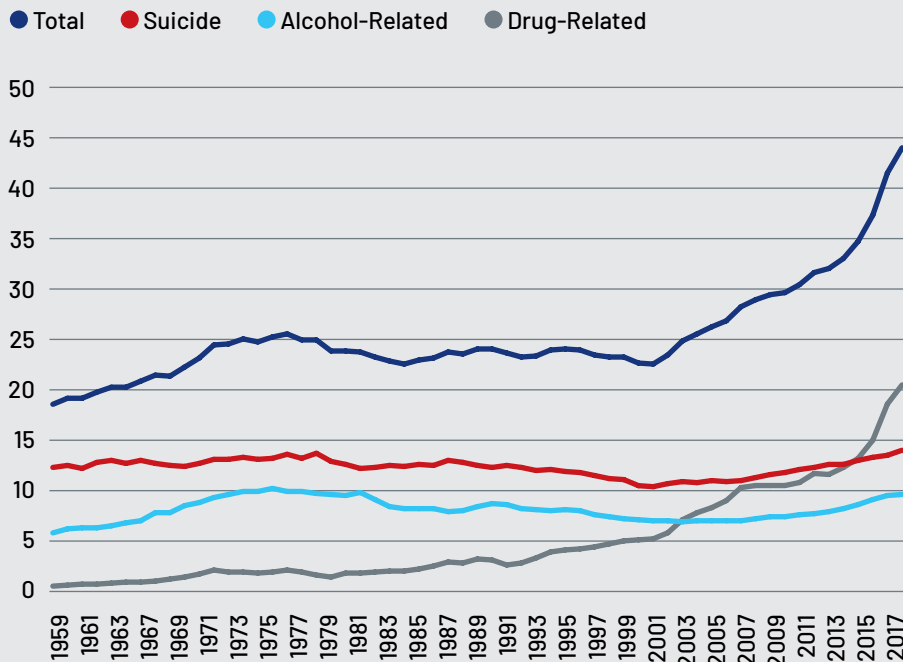
Prior to COVID-19, remote workers were more likely to indicate that they sometimes or always felt isolated or a lack of companionship, compared to those who work in-person (Cigna, 2020).

In the context of COVID-19, the realities of isolation continue to complicate teleworking trends.

Unsurprisingly, the quality of personal relationships further impacted loneliness. Many Americans feel dissatisfied with the number of close relationships they have in life. Thirty-eight percent indicated they lacked these important personal relationships with other people, though the likelihood of this decreased with age, income, and educational increases. Additionally, 25 percent of respondents said they felt that no one shared their interests or concerns, revealing a type of mental isolation from other people that left them feeling lonely and disconnected (Cigna, 2020).

Most relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person interactions were a key indicator of loneliness. Overall, 94 percent of respondents who reported never having in-person interactions with other people reported feeling lonely. Those who interacted with others in-person on a daily basis had an average loneliness score that

FIGURE 12 Deaths of Despair, Age Adjusted, 1959–2017 (per 100,000)



Data from *The Social Capital Project, "Long-Term Trends in Deaths of Despair"*

was 20 points lower than those who never did. Similarly, those who reported heavy use of social media were lonelier than those who used it less (ibid.).

The rise in social isolation has serious societal and health ramifications. “Deaths of despair”—deaths due to suicide, alcoholism, and drug overdose—have seen a rapid rise coinciding with declines in social connectivity and increases in Americans living alone. One study from the Well Being Trust corroborated this, predicting another uptick in deaths of despair due to the social isolation and stress as a result of the pandemic (Petterson et al., 2020).

The health risks of social isolation and loneliness extend beyond deaths of despair, recently being linked to domestic radicalization and violent extremism (Wood, 2020). For instance, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security views social isolation as a risk factor to radicalizing to violence (Office for Targeted Violence & Terrorism Prevention, 2020). In addition, many experts warned that COVID-19 social distancing

measures may also lead to a rise in extremism and recruitment. As one recent article put it, “isolation exacerbates already existing grievances, leaving individuals vulnerable to extremism” (James & Hardy, 2021). Given recent events in America, domestic radicalization is a threat that must be taken seriously.

Dwindling group affiliation, including religious participation and union membership, could be making shared experiences across party or socioeconomic lines rarer in the United States. Cross-cultural experiences have significant effects on political and cultural opinion formation. For example, one study conducted on labor unions in 2021 found that union membership was positively associated with racial tolerance and support for policies that benefit African Americans. As community groups like this recede, social trust is undermined, contributing to growing American isolation and animosity. In turn, these trends increase the likelihood of “deaths of despair,” doubt in elections, and even violent extremism (Frymer & Grumbach, 2021).

BRIGHT SPOT

Weave: The Social Fabric Project

Weave: The Social Fabric Project, created by David Brooks, is a community partnership and social movement that seeks to fight back against a “hyper-individualist” culture and encourage people and communities to embrace “relationalism.” It illuminates stories of those who connect with others across racial and ideological divides, provides opportunities for in-person and online convenings, and provides resources for developing relationship skills. “Weavers” work to combat feelings of isolation by bringing members of communities together to learn from one another and form relationships.

Weavers share their message through social media campaigns and partnerships with other organizations. In practice, a few ways Weavers grow community relationships are through volunteering, neighborhood events, and helping others. Although these efforts are local, the **Relationalist Manifesto** serves as the Weave Initiative’s creed that unites the group in its common purpose and work.

The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer showed that just 22 percent of Americans have good information “hygiene,” meaning they have strong levels of news engagement, avoid information echo chambers, verify the information they read, and do not amplify unvetted information.

INFORMATION & KNOWLEDGE

A well-informed citizenry is necessary for a properly functioning government. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “wherever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government.”

On some measures, Americans seem to be failing this test. For example, the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer showed that just 22 percent of Americans have good information “hygiene,” meaning they have strong levels of news engagement, avoid information echo chambers, verify the information they read, and do not amplify unvetted information.

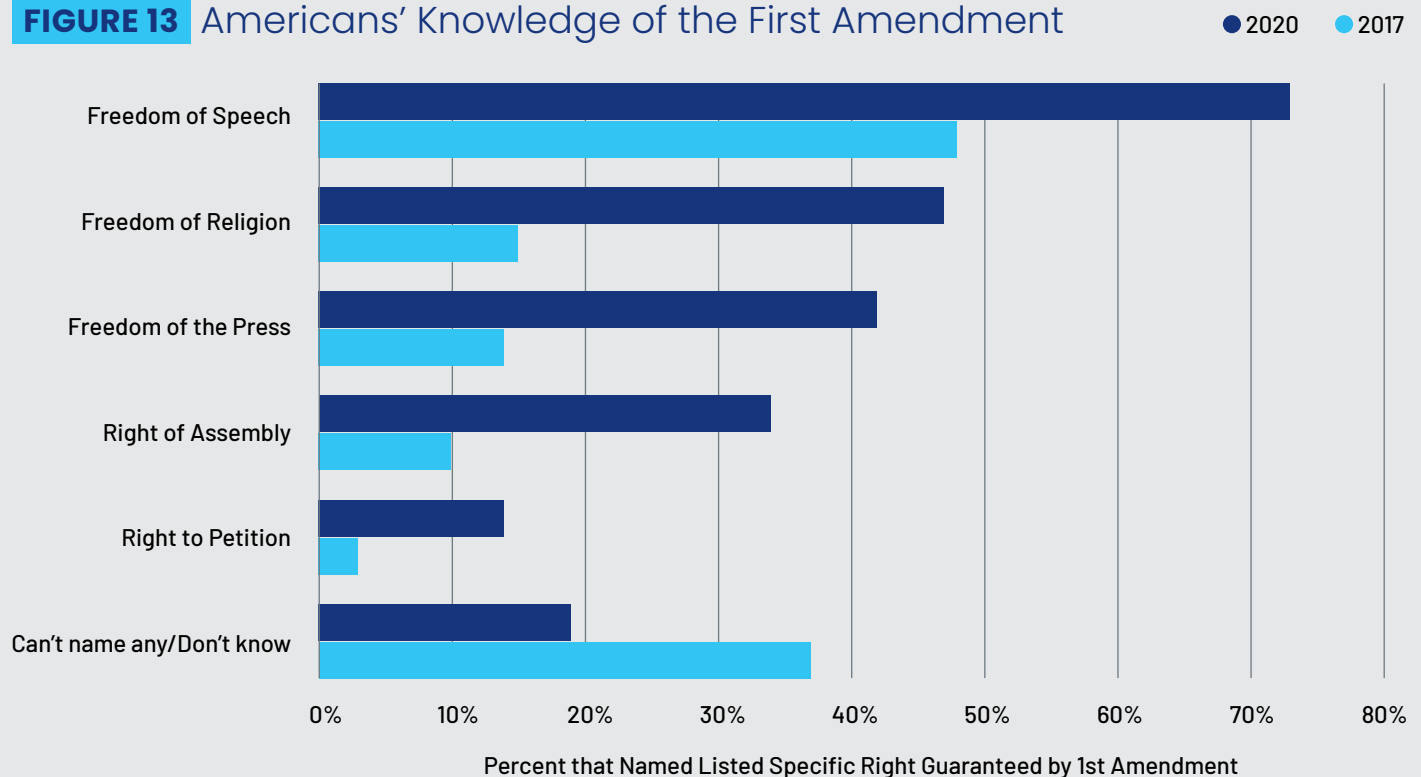
Yet, there are encouraging signs that the public has become more informed in recent years. Since 2006, the Annenberg Public Policy Center has conducted an annual Civics Knowledge Survey on Constitution Day. The 2020 survey yielded encouraging results on American’s knowledge of their government and basic rights. Fifty-one

percent of respondents were able to name all three branches of government. At first blush, this may seem low, but it represents an 11-percentage point increase from 2019 and an all-time high in the poll’s history.

In addition, poll results displayed greater understanding of the First Amendment. Seventy-three percent of Americans knew that freedom of speech was guaranteed by the First Amendment, up 25 percentage points from 2017. Freedom of religion (15 percent in 2017 to 47 percent in 2020), freedom of the press (14 to 42 percent), right to assembly (10 to 34 percent), and right to petition (3 to 14 percent) all saw sizable increases as well. Meanwhile, the share of respondents who could not name any of the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment shrank from 37 percent in 2017 to 19 percent in 2020 (Annenberg Civics, 2020).

While this displays promising growth, trends in news consumption and trust in the press, as well as trends in civic education, suggest there is a need to bolster the civic knowledge of the nation.

FIGURE 13 Americans’ Knowledge of the First Amendment



Data from Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey. (2020).

News Consumption

News consumption in the United States has undergone a fundamental shift. Citizens across the nation increasingly utilize alternative news sources in place of traditional print media. Television, meanwhile, remains the most common place for Americans to get their news despite slight decreases in viewership.

The percentage of Americans who receive a daily local newspaper has declined slowly since the late 1990s, but nosedived after 2008 and never recovered (Gallup, n.d.). Data from Pew Research Center and the General Social Survey show similar trends. GSS indicates daily newspaper readers declining from 70 percent in 1972 to 12.1 percent in 2018 with the percent of Americans that “never” read a newspaper spiking recently, up 10 percentage points from 2014 to an all-time high of 29.8 percent.

Similarly, Pew data shows total U.S. daily newspaper circulation, including print and digital, declined 6 percent for weekday and Sunday publications from 2019 to 2020. These trends, however, may be overly general. Digital circulation is difficult to accurately estimate and is made even more challenging by nationally syndicated papers such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* opting to not fully report their digital circulation to the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM). Both the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* report online circulation elsewhere. Utilizing these numbers actually show digital newspaper circulation on the rise (*Newspaper*, 2021).

Even with this more encouraging data, more newsrooms continue to shut their doors every year. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Employment Statistics, 41,580 people worked in newsrooms in 2020. This marks a decline of 9 percent from 2015 and a 31 percent fall from the industry’s peak in 2006.

In addition, data from the UNC Hussman School of Journalism confirms a troubling decline in the number of newspaper outlets. Since 2004, the U.S. has lost 2,100—about one fourth—of its newspapers outlets. More recently, the number of

counties that have zero newspapers has grown from about 5.4 percent in 2018 to at least 6.3 percent in 2020, while two thirds of counties no longer have a daily local newspaper. In total, half of all counties in the United States are defined as “news deserts,” meaning districts with one or fewer newspapers (Abernathy, 2020).

As local and regional papers disappear at alarming rates, the newspaper industry is seeing meteoric rates of consolidation. In 2020, the largest 25 newspaper chains owned a third of all newspapers in the United States, up from one fifth in 2004 (ibid.).

As more local outlets have turned off the lights, private philanthropy has attempted to fill the void from waning subscriptions. Since 2009, philanthropy aimed at journalism has nearly quadrupled from \$69 million to \$255 million in 2017 (Armour-Jones, 2019). Further analysis of this funding, specifically around the philanthropic purpose, is needed to better understand its impact on the news landscape.

Meanwhile, alternative news sources, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and podcasts continue to grow in usage. Pew survey data showed that by 2017, social

BRIGHT SPOT

Voto Latino

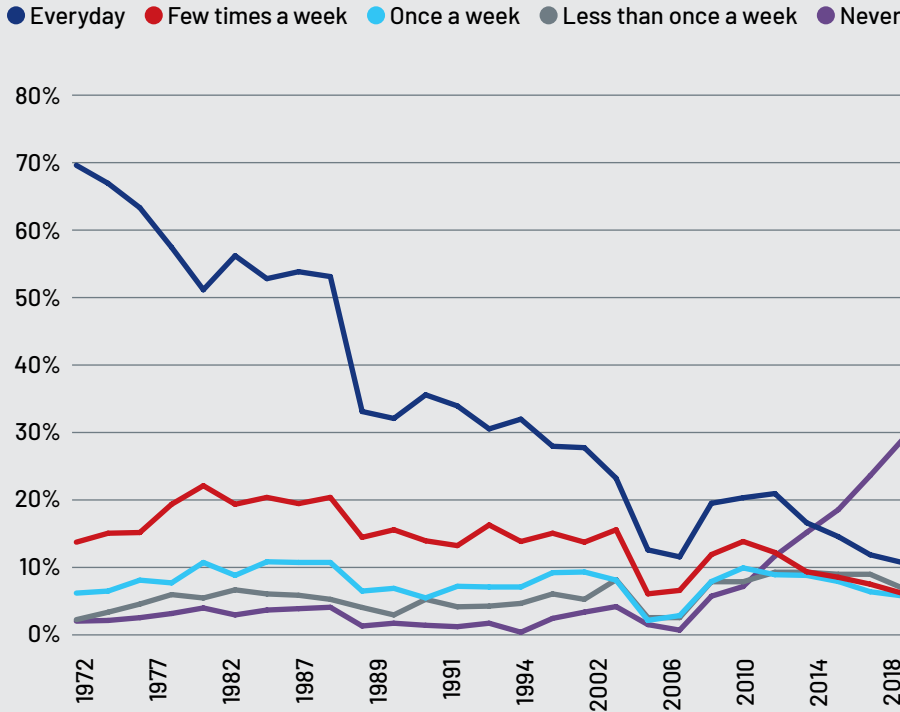
Voto Latino is dedicated to empowering the voices of Latinx voters and to drive awareness and action around the issues faced by the Latinx community.

Using digital campaigns and grassroots volunteers, Voto Latino has played an important role in registering hundreds of thousands of voters. In 2006, they pioneered the first voter registration campaign that used text messaging to target young, tech-savvy voters. Voto Latino has played a pivotal role in encouraging first-time Latinx voters to participate in the electoral process. In 2018, Latinx voters turned out in historic numbers, with 25 percent of all Latinx voters casting a ballot for the first time, helped in no small part by Voto Latino’s registration of 202,399 voters for the elections. Over the course of the 2020 Election cycle, Voto Latino registered over 600,000 voters, bringing its total to over 1 million registered voters since the organization’s inception.

The organization has sponsored numerous issue-based campaigns to fight for humane immigration procedures, including a nationally televised town hall with MSNBC to highlight the need for immigration reform. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapidly changing nature of casting a ballot in modern American politics has been the source of much confusion for many voters. To combat this, Voto Latino produced in-depth explanations on how to safely and conveniently cast a ballot, as well as a step-by-step guide to ensuring that the ballot cast adheres to all rules and guidelines.

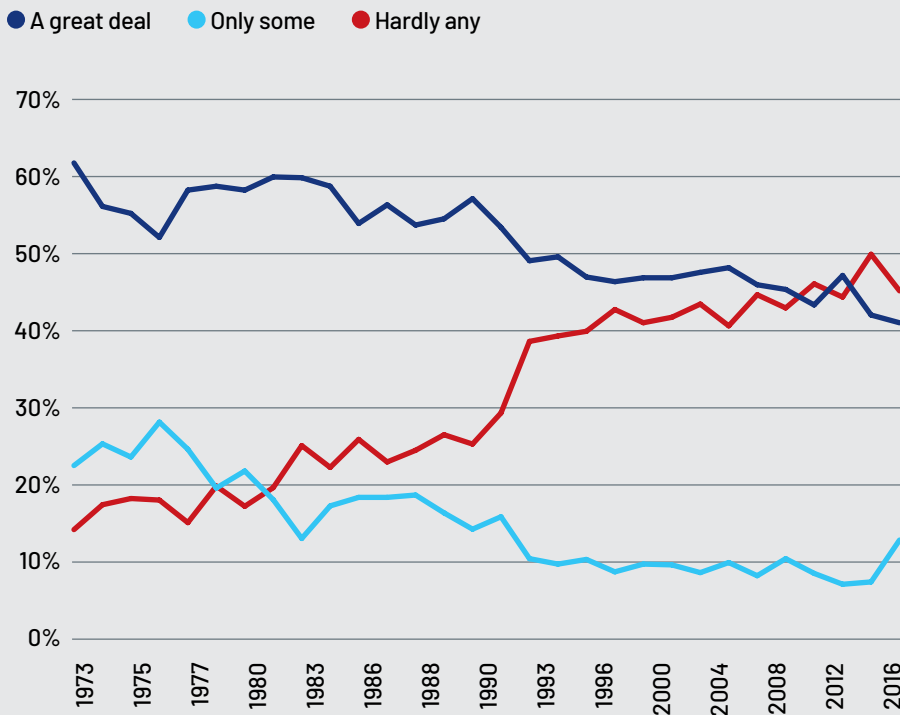
Voto Latino also has produced issue briefs on topics ranging from immigration to education to gun violence prevention. These provide a non-technical explanation of many of the most important issues that young Latinx voters face in their daily lives. The aim is to produce a well-informed generation of Latinx voters who are empowered and ready to assume leadership in American politics.

FIGURE 14 Newspaper Readership, 1972–2018



Data from the General Social Survey, 1972–2018.

FIGURE 15 Confidence in the Press, 1973–2018



Data from the General Social Survey, 1973–2018.

media had surpassed print newspapers as a news source for Americans (Shearer, 2018), with the percent of people that say they get news from social media “sometimes” or “often” increasing from 44 percent to 54 percent in 2019 (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). Meanwhile, the percent of Americans who listen to a podcast on a weekly basis has been quickly growing, quadrupling since 2013 to 28 percent in 2021 (*The Infinite Dial*, 2021).

Declining newspaper readership has been linked to ebbing civic engagement (Shaker, 2014; Thorson, Chen, & Lacy, 2020). As the number of Americans living in news deserts increases, alternative news sources become increasingly important in civic and social life. As these alternative news options gain greater prevalence and replace daily newspapers, it will be important to understand if these options help Americans be more informed about current events and more engaged.

The evidence thus far is mixed. Despite their ubiquity, Americans remain doubtful of social media companies’ roles in delivering news. Sixty-two percent of Americans believe these companies have too much control over the mix of news people see and 55 percent believe their role in delivering the news results in a worse mix of news people see in their social media feeds (Shearer & Grieco, 2019).

Moreover, evidence suggests misinformation is more likely to spread across online news platforms. This will be covered more in the following section.

Lack of confidence in the press extends beyond social media companies. Data from the GSS shows that overall American confidence in the press has steadily declined since the mid-1990s. By 2018, the most common response when the GSS asked Americans about their confidence in the press was “hardly any.” Meanwhile, Gallup confirms this distrust is consistent across print, television, and online news sources, albeit to a slightly lesser extent for newspapers (*Media Use and Evaluation*, 2020).

One trend to monitor is the bifurcation of how Americans get their news. For example, those who get their news from social media tend to be younger

and female, while print and broadcast television news-getters tend to be significantly older (Pollard & Kavanagh, 2019). This is also a partisan phenomenon. According to the Pew Research Center in 2020, while 60 percent of respondents who were Republican got their news from FOX News, 77 percent of Democrat respondents reported they distrusted the outlet. The reverse was true as well: 53 percent of Democrats reported watching CNN for the news, while 67 percent of Republicans distrusted the outlet. Additionally, it appears that this news polarization has worsened in the past several years. Compared to the same questionnaire in 2014, Pew found that Republicans distrusted 15 out of the 20 news outlets more than they did in 2014 (Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

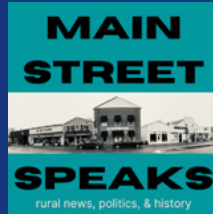
As Americans continue to choose their news sources on partisan lines, it exacerbates polarization and diminishes shared understanding of current events. During the leadup to the 2020 election, 67 percent of Americans say the news source they turn to most often have presented factual information to favor one side of an issue (Shearer, 2020).

Four years ago, the *Civic Deserts* report stated, "Decaying trust in news and journalism at large, combined with the emergence of online news and fake news stories shared on the web, weakens American norms and creates the possibility that citizens may begin to disagree on basic facts—or worse, believe things are entirely false that are actually true."

Decaying trust in journalism has widespread consequences. An informed public is crucial for a vibrant democracy but Americans' patterns of news consumption coupled with the rise of disinformation are threatening it. For example, the COVID-19 vaccine rollout has been hampered by news polarization and disinformation. Recent studies suggest that in comparison to those who primarily consume traditional sources of news (i.e., non-social media), those who primarily use social media platforms for news and current events are significantly less likely to get the vaccine (Piltch-Loeb et al., 2021).

BRIGHT SPOT

Main Street Speaks



In the fall of 2019, three University of Virginia students drove home together during fall break. Denzel Mitchell, Avery Shivers, and Tahi Wiggins discussed many topics, but found themselves returning to their mutual upbringing in the Northern Neck of Virginia.

Shivers recounts Mitchell telling a story he had never heard before about William Page, an African American man who was lynched on August 15, 1917 in Northumberland County. "The fact that we hadn't ever heard the story...was really upsetting; it felt like there were a lot more stories out there that hadn't been covered," said Shivers. Mitchell shared his plans to explore such stories through a podcast for the Mount Vernon Leadership Fellows program. The group parted ways with a realization of the need for more sources of information about the Northern Neck's past and present.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the fellowship program was cancelled. Simultaneously, the nationwide protests against police brutality in response to George Floyd's murder had risen to the forefront of each student's mind. As Mitchell recalls: "we wanted to do something aside from voting and protesting." The three founded [Main Street Speaks](#): a podcast that explores current events about the history and sociopolitical circumstances of the Northern Neck and other rural areas like it across the country.

The podcast was intended to give voice to local story tellers and they hoped to reach young people in their community who do not read local newspapers. "I think podcasts are a great way to localize news, because you don't have to depend on a lot of resources... on larger conglomerates," added Mitchell.

Early episodes focused on rooting the nationwide discourse on racial justice in the Northern Neck. Since then, the podcast has covered topics including food insecurity in rural communities, challenges of local journalism, and rural education.

You can follow Main Street Speaks on [Twitter](#) and [listen](#) to the podcast on most common podcasting apps.

Avery Shivers, Tahi Wiggins, and Denzel Mitchell (L-R) of Main Street Speaks



The Rise of Fake News

Eroding trust in the news media is captured in the rise in misinformation, colloquially referred to as “fake news.”

As previously indicated, Americans are increasingly likely to get their news from social media. Those who do primarily rely on this source are more likely to be poorly informed. During the summer of 2020, Pew Research asked respondents a series of fact-based questions about politics and government. Among the social media group, 57 percent tested poorly in this questionnaire, as opposed to 31 percent of print news consumers, 35 percent of Cable TV watchers, and 36 percent of Network TV watchers. Only 17 percent of social media consumers scored highly on this test (Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

In addition to being less informed about current events, social media users were more likely to have encountered, and in some cases believed, conspiracy theories. Twenty-five percent of social media news consumers reported they had heard “a lot” about the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was intentionally planned by powerful people. Seventeen percent of them had heard a lot about possible connections between 5G networks and COVID-19. They were also most likely to believe these theories (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Misinformation seems to have a chilling effect on American news viewership. The Knight Foundation (2018) found that one in six Americans have stopped paying attention to



39%

of Americans have decided to only consult one or two sources as a defense against misinformation.

In addition to being less informed about current events, social media users were more likely to have encountered, and in some cases believed, conspiracy theories.

the news altogether due to misinformation, especially among younger respondents. Conversely, 39 percent of Americans have decided to only consult one or two sources as a defense against misinformation. This effect is more likely among online news consumers. Those who primarily consume online news (16 percent) were less likely to have knowledge of local issues than newspaper readers (25 percent) or TV watchers (22 percent). Further, only 21 percent of those who primarily read online news feel “very attached” to their local community, and among those who do not pay attention to local news, 52 percent feel they have little to no say about government policy.

Somewhat more encouragingly, some studies indicate the amount of fake news shared on social media is much smaller than the amount of mainstream news shared (Gringberg, et al., 2019; Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019).

An increasing spread of misinformation weakens the nation’s civic health. This “truth decay”—the decline of shared belief in objective facts and analysis in American public life—as Rand Corporation terms it has serious consequences that are currently impacting the nation. To this point, a 2019 Pew Research Center survey found that just 26 percent of respondents say members of the opposite party can agree on basic facts even if they often disagree over plans and policies (Partisan Antipathy, 2019).

The role of social media in spreading misinformation must be balanced with its benefits. Social media plays a role in getting out the vote, especially among young people (Aldrich et al., 2015). It also offers opportunities for civic engagement and participation, making information on protests or other community events more readily available. This is especially true for

youth. For example, a 2020 report by UNICEF shows that digital spaces provide youth more agency to develop “civic identities and express political stances” than traditional civic spaces (Cho, Byrne, & Pelter, 2020).

Civic & U.S. History Education

Civic education is integral to maintaining a functioning democratic republic. Students who receive quality civic education are more likely to view political engagement as a way to solve community problems and four times more likely to volunteer or work on community issues. They are also more likely to vote or discuss politics than their peers. Benefits also stretch beyond civic engagement, instilling in young people crucial 21st century skills, while schools with high-quality civic learning are more likely to have positive school climates (Gould, 2011).

As group identification and organizational membership continue to decline, primary and secondary schools remain one of the few social institutions shared by communities across the nation. This places an enhanced responsibility on schools to adequately educate students on their nation’s history, government, laws, and constitution.

Yet, the U.S. education system has traditionally prioritized Math, English, and Science over developing well-rounded, community-oriented citizens. After ticking upwards in 2014, 8th Grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores declined in both Civics and U.S. History in 2018. This was true of both the average score on each exam, as well as the percent of students scoring at or above proficient. What is more striking is the long-term stagnation in scores dating back to the 1990s.

Across the board, Advanced Placement (AP) course-taking declined due to testing challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. For U.S. Government and Politics and U.S. History courses, this meant declines of 7 and 5 percent, respectively, consistent with a 7 percent decline in AP test-taking overall. Still, the number of students taking AP U.S.

Government and Politics courses and U.S. History courses was on the decline before the COVID-19 dip in AP test-taking. Similarly, there has been a long run decline in the overall share of AP students taking U.S. History courses in the United States (College Board, 2021).

Service-learning involves students in civic life during their formative years. Research indicates service-learning opportunities in school have positive impacts on students' academics and civic engagement outside of the classroom (Baumann, 2012).

Students can only take courses available at their high school, so it is important to understand how widely available opportunities for service-learning and AP courses in civics and history are. In recent nationally-representative surveys by Hart Research Associates and Civic, less than one in four parents (23 percent) and teachers (16 percent) say their students had service-learning opportunities at their schools (Atwell et al., 2021). While the share of schools offering U.S. Government and Politics AP courses is stable, AP U.S. History courses are becoming less common. Data indicates that BIPOC students are less likely to be able to attend high schools that offer AP courses as well, which suggests another gap in civic education and the benefits of involved citizenry across racial lines (Theokis & Saaris, 2013).

Another worrying trend is recent state efforts to ban the teaching of certain topics and ideas, impeding students' ability to receive a full and accurate history of the United States. If the nation is to confront its long history of systemic racism—including examples in the nation's founding documents—it is important that students have access to instruction that includes these topics.

A well-informed, civic-minded population is essential to guard against misinformation and address community problems. News consumption and civic education are core pillars to ensure American citizens are up for the task of safeguarding democracy and addressing shared challenges.

BRIGHT SPOT

Wyoming's Approach to Civics Education

In 2019, Wyoming education policymakers pushed for the appropriation of funds to build an executive and legislative branch student learning center complete with an auditorium, classrooms, and forthcoming civics education programming. A similar judicial learning center, built with private funding, is hosted at the Wyoming Supreme Court.

The ambitions for these learning centers set an admirable precedent. Jillian Balow, Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction, explained: "Our goal is to have every student in Wyoming visit our State Capitol, and not only visit the building but interact, both through our learning centers and opportunities, as well as with our actual Supreme Court members, our legislators, and our elected [officials] and staff in the executive branch."

The centers persisted during COVID-19, leading Balow to call civics education a "bright spot" during the pandemic. Her department was still able to organize opportunities for students to interact with civic life. Through a regular virtual speaker series featuring Wyoming's federal delegation and Governor, students interacted with key stakeholders and developed a better sense of active citizenship.

Balow is optimistic about the future of the centers, saying that "there are people who value this and will continue to support it." Additional funding could help implementation and accessibility issues: reaching Cheyenne is an eight-hour bus ride for some, turning a visit to the Capitol into a two-day trip. For youth to become active participants in civic life, government must not seem like a distant, abstract entity: it is important, Balow said, that students can "know what [civics] feels, looks, and sounds like."



POLICY Options

1

BOLSTER CIVIC EDUCATION

As America grapples with the rise of disinformation, partisan antipathy, and high-stakes elections, it is essential that the next generation of citizens be equipped with the knowledge and perspectives necessary to engage with their communities and their nation fully and thoughtfully. While recent trends in civic education show some reasons to be optimistic, such as the 11 percent increase in Americans knowing the three branches of government or the sizable increase in Americans aware of the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment, there is more to be done. Federal, state, and local governments must all work together to bolster the state of civic education in America.

✓ Federal policymakers should support the creation of new initiatives that fund civic education across the United States. Funding should be distributed with a focus towards expanding access to civic education curricula in underserved parts of the country and establishing rigorous curricula and standards for student learning. An example of such an initiative is H.R. 8295, the Civics Secure Democracy Act, which would appropriate \$1 billion to the U.S. Department of Education for redistribution to states and other education institutions for the expansion of civic education programs. Further, H.R. 8295 would require the National Assessment of

Education Progress (NAEP) in civics and history to be administered every two years to multiple grade levels, as opposed to only students in 8th grade.

✓ Every state should adopt rigorous state standards of learning for American History and Civics Education, drawing on the [College, Career and Civic Life Framework \(C3\)](#) for effective standards (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017). States should develop and implement meaningful assessments in American history and civics to demonstrate growth in the knowledge of students in such subjects. Coursework should include addressing “problems in democracy” that engage students in lively discussions and explore the relevance of historical events and principles to modern problems.

✓ Every state should incorporate Social Studies standards and assessments into school accountability standards and procedures, such as school report cards, to evaluate the effectiveness of civic learning and address problems or gaps in equity as they arise.

✓ As the Educating for American Democracy initiative points out, implementation of robust civic education programs requires a well-trained, highly resourced teaching corps (EAD, 2021). As such, state

and local education authorities must ensure that educators have access to professional development opportunities in civic learning, as well as access to certification in civic education to promote high quality civic instruction.


2


STRENGTHEN NATIONAL SERVICE

The power of national service to bring together Americans of all races, ethnicities, income levels, and religions for the cause of serving those in need is used too rarely. The demand for national service in all areas of the country, especially as America emerges from a devastating global pandemic, has outstripped the supply of volunteers. Upwards of \$3.6 billion in appropriations and 100,000 volunteers are needed to reign in the pandemic, underscoring the critical need for America to improve its national service infrastructure (Watson et al., 2020). It has been repeatedly demonstrated that participation in service opportunities has a host of positive benefits. As such, concrete action is needed to expand national service as a viable opportunity for all Americans to serve their communities.


✓ National service is an effective investment in people and communities across the nation. Experts estimate that for every \$1 spent on national service, it returns \$17 in societal benefits (Modicamore & Naugler,


2020). As such, by executive order, the Executive Branch should convene an interagency task force whose purpose is to investigate how to implement national service into current agency initiatives and create efficient procedures for coordinating these efforts between national, state, and local level agencies.

 In March, the Biden Administration allocated \$1 billion in federal appropriations for civilian national service programs. To continue this momentum, Congress should reaffirm its commitment to national service by fully funding the bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. The Act, part of a bipartisan effort to invigorate national service programs and increase volunteering, appropriated \$340 million to various national programs to be distributed to state volunteer efforts to increase opportunities for national service. The Act originally envisioned a corps of 250,000 members and the creation of various corps within departments and agencies of government (e.g., Education Corps, Veterans Corps,), dependent on appropriations, and Congress should follow through on this promise.

 Currently, national service members (working through VISTA, AmeriCorps, and the many nonprofit national service efforts they fund) are eligible for education awards up to \$6,345 per year of service, which varies based on the value of the Pell Grant. These awards can be used to alleviate education costs and reduce certain types of student loans. While these awards are valuable incentives for national service participation, the rate and magnitude of student borrowing has outpaced the value of the Pell Grant, making the educational award less valuable over time. Congress should remedy these issues by affixing the value of their educational award to student borrowing rates and the rising costs

of higher education, both of which threaten to make the possibility of national service an impossibility for the average American due to financial risks. One possible method of accomplishing this would be indexing AmeriCorps education awards to the Higher Education Price Index, created by the Common Fund Institute, which more precisely measures the rising costs of college education than the standard Consumer Price Index (*Let HEPI Help*, n.d.). These education awards should be made tax-free as some bills in the Congress propose.


 Congress should fund and expand “Service Year Fellowships” that were authorized in the Serve America Act. Such fellowships could be made available in every Congressional district and provide State Service Commissions the ability to provide corps members to qualified national service organizations within their states.


 Federal and state governments should expand opportunities for service-learning programs in K-12 education. This might be accomplished by strengthening partnerships between schools and local community organizations. States can also embed service learning into their learning standards or graduation requirements.

3 IMPROVE ELECTION ACCESS AND TRUST

Functioning democratic government requires trustworthy elections. Trustworthy elections, in turn, require honest and impartial electoral institutions. When less than half of a political party believes the national vote tabulations are legitimate, it is time for drastic action to ensure that Americans believe their elections are free and fair. Swift action is imperative to ensure that election authorities are independent, our government is representative, and all eligible citizens are given convenient

and secure access to the ballot. Still, it is important to keep in mind that U.S. elections are overwhelmingly strong, with exceedingly rare instances of fraud. Indeed, it was only a sliver of the U.S. population that viewed the 2020 election as illegitimate. As such, other efforts must be taken to safeguard and expand access to the ballot box for all Americans.

 State policymakers should adopt risk-limiting audit procedures prior to election certification. Prior to each election, state election authorities must designate a minimum level of acceptable risk in election results. Then, depending on the election result, state auditors choose their sample size of scrutinized ballots based on the margin of victory and the minimum acceptable risk. The audit is then conducted, and when the audit confirms the original election result, the audit concludes and the winner is certified. Further, as mail-in balloting becomes more common, they should adopt procedural audits to ensure that election administrators implement best practices towards the tallying and reporting of votes. These results should be publicized to engender confidence in election results.

 The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) was founded in 2002 by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to serve as a central source of information and support for election officials to administer elections at all levels of government. The EAC, in its capacity as an independent, bipartisan agency, should convene a working group to research, develop, and issue a series of policy recommendations that clearly illustrate the best practices for election officials to expand and secure access to the ballot. This report should include, but not be limited to: vote-by-mail, provisional voting, polling place locations, drop box locations, ballot harvesting, early voting, and voter identification.

✓ As the management and administration of elections becomes more complex, each state should set aside funding for a professional support team that provides training and support for elected and unelected election officials at the local level, including volunteer poll workers, for example. Additionally, each state should create and require election officials to undergo periodic training for election administration responsibilities.

✓ For several decades, both political parties have taken advantage of the decennial process of redrawing congressional district boundaries with each new census. Each time this occurs, citizens from across the political spectrum, both Democrats and Republicans, are prevented from full participation in our elected government. Regardless of partisan gain, the lack of representation that stems from gerrymandered legislative districts cannot be tolerated in a free and fair democracy. All states should establish nonpartisan redistricting commissions to limit the corrosive effects of gerrymandering on our elected legislatures.

✓ Prioritizing access to the ballot must not be forgotten in efforts to improve electoral confidence. Data suggest nontraditional voting as a potential way to expand ballot access (CIRCLE, 2021). States should continue to allow voters multiple avenues to cast their ballots, while ensuring votes are cast legitimately and counted accurately.

4 BOLSTER COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced all Americans into isolation for an extended period, our community institutions suffered greatly. As community resources were forced to offer services digitally, many faced growing disparities in access

to their benefits. The country continues to face declining social trust, seeing growing apathy to local issues as national news and social media increasingly dominate the nation's attention, and fewer sources of reliable information. It is important that America take action to strengthen community bonds through shared institutions, like libraries, schools, and community centers.

✓ To address the growing digital divide, Congress and the President should work together to create and fund infrastructure programs that guarantee universal access to broadband internet across the United States.

✓ The cause of domestic civic engagement and local community institutions deserves more attention at home. As the Our Common Purpose report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences points out, while the U.S. Congress funds the National Endowment for Democracy to promote democratic engagement abroad, there is no comparable domestic institution. This can, and should, change. The U.S. federal government should create and fund a national-level institution that can redirect resources to struggling communities for the purpose of building essential civic infrastructure like libraries and other communal institutions. Further, this institution should develop programming and research that drives attention and energy to increasing civic engagement in the U.S., with a special focus on historically marginalized and underserved communities.

5 HARNESS THE POWER OF THE INTERNET AND TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The power of social media companies to shape our democratic processes and

interpersonal relationships is undeniable. Civic participation, whether by voting or by protesting, soared to new heights due to the organizing power of online engagement and messaging. Yet, at the same time, disinformation and hate speech proliferated on these same platforms. The true effects of technology and social media on civic engagement are little understood. If we hope to mend the divisions in our society, more research, energy, and thought must be directed towards developing standards and institutions that ensure online activism is a tool for productive civic engagement.

✓ The federal government should pursue programs and legislation that entice large tech platforms, such as Facebook and Google, to establish data sharing procedures with academic researchers. Any procedure must take all available means to protect consumer privacy by using de-identified data. Further, all research projects utilizing these data must adhere to rigorous ethical standards and practices. Research projects should be directed towards creating a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between technology and civic engagement.

✓ The federal government should investigate best practices for social media companies to encourage healthy democratic activism and publish these best practices in the form of ethical and civic obligations for social media corporate behavior in the civic engagement space.

✓ State governments should implement media literacy curricula into civic education programs to promote critical thinking in media consumption and limit the impact of disinformation campaigns.

Conclusion

Recent years have exposed a duality of civic life in the United States. Many trends point to declining community and civic health, with rising animosity toward members of the opposing party and dwindling trust among Americans in each other and in major institutions, contributing to political violence. Yet, citizens turned out in record numbers to demand an end to systemic racism and make their voices heard through the ballot box, led overwhelmingly by younger generations.

The paradox extends beyond these countervailing trends. Americans understand the crises but do not understand how—or are unwilling—to change course away from the isolation and enmity tearing the nation apart. They see rising polarization and know it is a problem. They decry the decline in community organizations and union organizations that offered opportunities for diverse groups to gather and share experiences.

The United States is at an inflection point. Americans have an opportunity to dial back the anger and divisiveness that sparked a seditious mob that attacked the U.S. Capitol. Now is the time for citizens of all walks of life to work together to heal the nation.



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