



2010 CIVIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON
CITIZENSHIP

CIVIC
ENTERPRISES

CIRCLE

A CIVIC NATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF AMERICA'S FIRST CIVIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), founded in 1946 and chartered by Congress in 1953, is charged with the mission of strengthening our nation's civic health. In accordance with this mission, NCoC has produced America's Civic Health Index for the last four years to measure the level of civic engagement and health of our nation's democracy. As a result of the passage of the bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, this work is expanding through an annual Civic Health Assessment. The Civic Health Assessment will measure America's civic habits across a wide range of indicators in an effort to strengthen citizen participation in our communities, states, and nation. Below is NCoC's executive summary of the leading findings from the 2010 Civic Health Assessment, based on research conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2008 and 2009. This document supplements an issue brief we are jointly releasing with the Corporation for National and Community Service. The joint brief is titled "Civic Life in America: Key Findings on the Civic Health of the Nation."

KEY FINDINGS

The most powerful force in American democracy is the connection among citizens. The Civic Health Assessment aims to deepen our understanding of these bonds and how Americans are working together to build healthier and stronger communities and a more vibrant democracy.

In the true spirit of America, people from all walks of life contribute to our society's rich tapestry. In 2008, African Americans led the way in voting, Caucasians in group membership and volunteering. Latinos were strong in neighborly activities, multiracial citizens were the most politically active, women volunteered more than men, and those who served our country in uniform rose above the rest in many categories of civic engagement.

In these tough economic times, Americans are rolling up their sleeves, gathering with neighbors, and helping to solve the problems facing their communities. In 2008 and 2009, nearly 60% of citizens reached out to help their neighbors at least once a month, and 1 in 6 do so almost every day.

The road to engagement starts at the dinner table. 89% of Americans sit down to dinner with members of their households several times each week. We know that family dinners boost the health and well-being of children, particularly adolescents, by cultivating parent-child relationships. These close ties provide important venues to discuss civic matters such as politics, religion, and current events. Whether at the table or otherwise, nearly 3 in 4 people discuss political affairs with their families and friends at least once a month.

Americans with more education dominate civic engagement. High school graduates are more than twice as likely to vote or belong to a group and three times as likely to volunteer or work with neighbors to solve problems than those who never completed high school. College graduates are significantly more engaged than high school graduates and those with some college education. Those with a bachelor's degree are nearly five times more likely to volunteer than high school dropouts.

The civic activity that is least dependent on educational attainment is exchanging favors with neighbors: 50% of those who never completed high school, 58% of high school graduates, and 65% of college graduates help out neighbors. This activity — a component of "social capital" — is also the most similar across racial backgrounds.

BY THE NUMBERS

African American voting rate: **61%**

Caucasian group membership: **36%**

Caucasian volunteering: **28%**

Latinos exchanging favors with neighbors: **47%**

Multiracial involved in more than one political activity: **32%**

Because educational attainment is the greatest predictor of future engagement, all efforts should be undertaken to foster a culture of college completion, not just access. To reinforce civic habits and educate more Americans on the importance of civic participation, a stronger focus should be placed on the teaching of American history and civic learning.

The ironic loneliness of cities can be seen through the lack of connection among neighbors in urban areas compared with their suburban and rural counterparts. The largest division we see in neighborly activity is between those in urban settings, where 51% of residents exchange favors with neighbors, versus rural environments where over 62% do so.

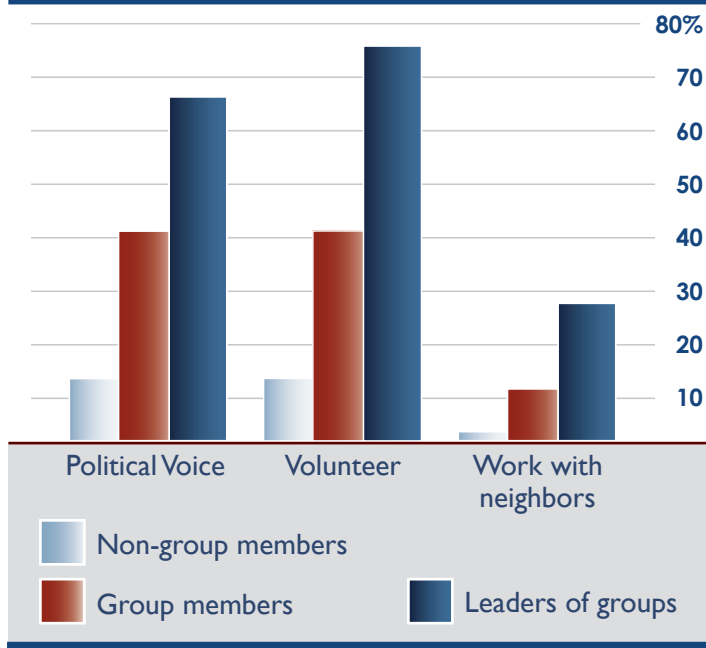
Those who assume leadership roles in community groups are highly involved in all other forms of civic engagement, but make up just 8.5% of our total population. Two-thirds (66%) of these leaders express political voice in one or more ways, about 75% volunteer, and 28% work with neighbors to fix or improve something. These rates are 150-200% higher than other members of groups and 500-700% higher than citizens who are not members of any community groups.

Living in a rural community may provide both the opportunity and the need to take a leadership role in the community — 10% of Americans who live in rural areas are leaders, compared with 7% in urban areas.

Americans have boosted their volunteer rates but still remain below the levels after 9/11. In 2009's hard economic times, more than one-fifth of unemployed Americans regularly volunteered. More than one-fourth of Americans regularly volunteered through an organization, serving mostly through religious organizations, and the most educated led the way. Between 2008 and 2009, volunteering saw the largest increase since 2003, but the overall volunteering rate still remains lower than it was in 2001-2005.

Boomers, not Millennials, set the civic pace. Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are currently the most engaged generation, in part because they have reached the time of life when engagement typically peaks. Boomers lead all other generations in every civic activity except voting, where those over 65 are the most engaged. Millennials (those currently ages 16 to 30) show promise, though. They are volunteering at higher rates than Boomers did when they were the same age Millennials are now, and growing up online may prove to have a strong positive effect on their future engagement levels.

INVOLVEMENT BY GROUP MEMBERSHIP



Most Americans still get their news from multiple sources, particularly television. Nearly 9 out of 10 Americans frequently get their news from television or television websites like CNN.com, more than two-thirds from newspapers or newspaper websites like NYTimes.com, and more than half from radio or radio websites like NPR.org. Fewer than two in 10 Americans frequently get their news from other Internet sources such as blogs that are not run by a major media outlet.

Being disconnected from information altogether (or not accessing information often) clearly interferes with civic engagement — those who do not consume news are far less likely to be engaged in all indicators of civic engagement.

The Internet appears to build civic health. As technology becomes a larger part of our daily lives, questions have been raised about its impact on our civic health. Does technology force social isolation behind computer screens or mobile devices, or does it provide more convenient outlets to take civic action, stay connected and informed, and express political views? More metrics of “eCitizenship” should be developed in order to assess its impact fully, but early indicators find those who go online on a regular basis are more likely to be involved in offline communities as well. This could be particularly significant for Millennials and those younger because these generations have grown up with access to mobile and online technologies.

In addition to research on technology's impact, ensuring access to broadband-quality Internet connections should be a high priority.

CATEGORIES OF CIVIC HEALTH

SOCIAL CONNECTION

The most common ways Americans engage with each other are eating dinner, discussing politics, and exchanging favors with family, friends, and neighbors.

Social connectedness is the first building block of civic health and is generated through spending time with community members and staying informed on current events. At least a few times a week:

- 89%** of people eat dinner with members of their households
- 86%** receive news from television sources
- 68%** receive news from newspaper sources
- 55%** receive news from radio sources
- 54%** talk to family and friends online
- 46%** talk with neighbors

POLITICAL ACTION

When Americans think about civic and political engagement, the action that most commonly comes to mind is voting. In the 2008 Presidential Election, 57.1% of American residents age 18 and over reported having voted, yet less than half this number engaged in one or more other political activities, including supporting candidates, contacting elected officials, attending meetings where political issues are discussed, or boycotting products.

In 2008 and 2009, about 15% of Americans supported or donated to a candidate, 10% contacted an elected official, and 3% attended a march, rally or protest.

BELONGING TO A GROUP

Often, the most accessible on-ramps for political and voluntary action are organizations and community groups, yet only 35% of Americans participate in one or more groups. These groups are generally affiliated with religious institutions, schools, or sports or recreational activities. Of those who participate in groups, more than 10% take on leadership roles.

VOLUNTEERING AND SERVICE

26.5% of Americans served their communities through formal volunteering opportunities with nonprofit organizations. Of this group, more than 1 in 3 serve through a religious organization, and more than 1 in 4 volunteer with an education or youth-focused group. The most common activities associated with these volunteer opportunities include fundraising, preparing food, tutoring, mentoring, and providing transportation.

WORKING WITH NEIGHBORS

Millions of Americans participate in “neighborhood engagement,” which are activities that address a community problem and are organized by neighborhood residents themselves without the help of an organization or institution. Between 2007 and 2009, about 18.6 million adults worked with their neighbors to fix or solve a community problem.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Civic habits build on one another and education fosters civic engagement. There is a strong connection between forms of engagement, and they tend to create a reinforcing cycle. Citizens who are involved in volunteering or belong to one or more groups are more likely to be involved in political action and stay in contact with friends. Further, Americans who keep in frequent touch with friends, family, and neighbors are much more likely to remain civically involved. The best boost for our nation's civic health is to ensure all children graduate from high school and complete college, enhancing the likelihood that they will become active volunteers, joiners, givers, and participants in the lives of their communities, state and nation.

NCoC will continue its efforts to support civic learning, national and community service, political activity, and other civic efforts. This data aims to serve as a basis of conversation among individuals, nonprofits, businesses, foundations, and policymakers. This dialogue should identify specific community needs and lead to tangible policy and practical solutions. NCoC is willing to help facilitate these dialogues and to assist local organizations as well as federal and state legislators in this capacity.

The bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act represents an important leap in unlocking the power of our society's most valuable resource — its citizenry. A critical next step is the development and collection of new measures of civic engagement that broaden our understanding of the term and more accurately capture the full range of participation. These include metrics associated with social innovation, online engagement, corporate citizenship, social capital, public service, trust among individuals, and confidence in institutions. These are crucial indicators to understanding what an informed, engaged, giving, and trusting citizenry will look like in the 21st century. The National Conference on Citizenship remains committed to championing civic engagement in all its forms and helping to define modern citizenship.



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Florida Joint Center for Citizenship

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Citizen Advocacy Center, McCormick Foundation

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Founded in 1946 and federally chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1953, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is a leader in advancing our nation's civic life. We track, measure and promote civic participation and engagement in partnership with other organizations on a bipartisan, collaborative basis. We focus on ways to enhance history and civics education, encourage national and community service, and promote greater participation in the political process.

Many distinguished Americans have been involved with the growth and development of NCoC over the years including Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower and Chief Justices Earl Warren and Warren Burger. The roster of board members, advisors and guest speakers at NCoC events represent a diverse spectrum of leaders from across government, industry, academia, community and nonprofit organizations and the media, including Senators Robert Byrd and Lamar Alexander; Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Stephen Breyer, Anthony Kennedy, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Antonin Scalia, philanthropists Ray Chambers and Eugene Lang, authors David McCullough and Walter Isaacson, scholars Robert Putnam and Stephen Goldsmith, TIME Magazine's Richard Stengel, MTV's Ian Rowe, ABC's Cokie Roberts, actor Stephen Lang, AOL's Jean Case, Facebook's Sean Parker, former Clinton Administration advisor William Galston and former Bush Administration advisor John Bridgeland.

NCoC's accomplishments are many, ranging from fueling the civic energy of the Greatest Generation freshly home from WWII to helping lead the celebration of our nation's Bicentennial in 1976. NCoC helped establish the observance of Constitution Day, each September 17, and our charter mandates we hold our annual conference close to this date with a focus on building a more active and engaged citizenry.

Since 2006, NCoC has produced America's Civic Health Index, the nation's leading measure of citizen actions and attitudes. In April 2009, NCoC was included in the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. To help our communities harness the power of their citizens, the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Census Bureau were directed to work with NCoC to expand the reach and impact of these metrics through an annual Civic Health Assessment.

To advance our mission, better understand the broad dimensions of modern citizenship, and to encourage greater civic participation, NCoC has developed and sustained a network of over 250 like-minded institutions that seek a more collaborative approach to strengthening our system of self-government.

For more information, please visit www.ncoc.net



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