

# TEXAS CIVIC HEALTH INDEX





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Created in 2000 to respond to growing political cynicism and disaffection in the United States, the Institute is named for Annette Greenfield Strauss: former Dallas mayor, community leader, and philanthropist. Through nonpartisan research, education, and outreach, the Institute seeks to understand and overcome obstacles to civic engagement.

*Above photo credit: Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau  
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*This report was produced in 2012 and released in 2013.*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Texas Civic Health Index* provides a comprehensive, first-time look at civic and political engagement in Texas. It presents information about who engages in their communities and in politics across Texas and how. Data reported here are obtained from U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS) Supplements on Voting, Volunteering and Civic Engagement.

### Key Findings

- Rates of political participation in Texas are low compared with the rest of the nation. Since 1972, Texas has consistently lagged well behind national voter turnout in both midterm and presidential elections. Texas also ranks among the lowest states in terms of the numbers of its citizens who contact public officials and talk with others about politics. Participation rates are correlated with income, education, age, race/ethnicity, and citizenship status.
- Rates of civic involvement, such as donating, volunteering, and belonging to groups, are also relatively low in Texas, though not as low as rates of political participation. Income, education, age, race/ethnicity, and citizenship status all correlate with civic involvement. Gender matters as well, with women more likely to be civically involved than men.
- Social connectedness, a crucial foundation for civic and political participation, shows both strengths and weaknesses. Texans help their neighbors by exchanging favors comparatively more than residents of most other states, and this neighborliness is greater among those in lower socio-economic brackets. Yet Texans trust their neighbors less than residents of most other states do.
- Higher levels of education are correlated with higher levels of almost every measure of political participation and civic involvement analyzed in this report, signaling the importance of education to developing the resources for people to participate in civic life.
- Hispanic Texans are significantly less likely to participate in almost every form of civic engagement. The same is true of immigrants—highlighting the importance of efforts to more fully involve these groups in the civic life of the state.



Photo credit: Rice University

Higher levels of education are correlated with higher levels of almost every measure of political participation and civic involvement analyzed in this report.

Much of the information presented throughout this report leads to a troubling conclusion: Texas ranks among the lowest in the nation on many measures of political and civic participation.

Low levels of political and civic participation may stem from a variety of causes. Relatively non-competitive elections; lack of information and education; inconvenience and disenfranchisement; and the challenge of incorporating a rapidly changing population all may be contributing to lackluster civic health in Texas.

This report is a starting point. Building better civic health in Texas will require more information and discussion than is provided here. Everyone who cares about the future of Texas can and should debate the state's challenges to civic engagement, how they can be solved, and who is responsible for solving them. One place to start is by commenting on this report at [www.txcivichealth.org](http://www.txcivichealth.org). What do you see here that surprises you? Alarms you? What problems exist that are not adequately discussed here? What can be done to better engage Texans in democracy today?

## INTRODUCTION: ALL EYES ON TEXAS

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Newcomers to Texas—and there are a lot of them these days—may find themselves being greeted with a song: the University of Texas alma mater, “The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You.” According to legend, the song is meant to inspire UT students toward great accomplishments.

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These days, it might also be said that the eyes of the nation are upon Texas. Since the 2012 presidential election, the political future of Texas has been a subject of much speculation, given the state’s potential to influence national politics.

Texas is a unique state culturally, politically, and demographically. Among its many attributes, Texas has continued to grow and attract new residents even while most of the country has struggled with an economic downturn.

But while many of the state’s economic indicators are strong, levels of civic and political engagement in Texas are not what they could or should be. The state’s booming economy and population growth are not matched with equally strong levels of citizen participation in politics and civic life. Indeed, Texas may be living with an undiagnosed crisis of *civic health*.

### What Is “Civic Health” and Why Does It Matter for Texas?

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Texas’s dynamic growth is bringing challenges, from infrastructure and water to education and immigration. Meeting these challenges will require the public’s involvement. Expert research and common sense both strongly suggest that a society lacking in citizen participation is more prone to inefficiency, corruption, and unresponsive government.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when close to 64% of eligible citizens choose to sit on the sidelines—as was the case in Texas during the 2010 midterm election—that inaction allows a minority of citizens to make decisions that affect the majority.

This report examines three sets of activities that contribute to the civic health of the state: *political participation*, *civic involvement*, and *social connectedness*. When citizens participate in politics, they have an opportunity to influence governmental policies and decisions that will affect their lives. By joining groups, attending community meetings, volunteering and donating, people have an opportunity to directly improve their communities. And research shows that individuals who maintain strong relationships with their families, friends, and neighbors also participate more in civic life.<sup>2</sup> When levels of political participation, civic involvement, and social connectedness are relatively high, a state enjoys the benefits of *civic health*.

The health metaphor is a useful way of thinking about civic engagement. When the human body climbs a steep stairway or lifts a heavy load, several systems—heart, lungs, muscles—act in conjunction, and only a relatively healthy set of systems will be up to the task. Similarly, when a society needs to tackle the steep climbs and heavy loads of democratic self-government, healthy political, civic, and social “systems” make that activity possible. Like human bodies, societies can survive with less than optimal health, but sooner or later, the costs of poor civic health will be felt—in decreased government accountability and increased citizen disaffection.

Texas has continued to grow and attract new residents, but levels of civic and political engagement in Texas are not what they could be.



Photo credit: Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau

## Texas In Transition

Texas is large and diverse. It is the second-largest state in the union, with a population of more than 26 million.<sup>3</sup> That makes Texas home to over 8% of the total U.S. population. Texas is geographically expansive as well, with a total land and water area as large as all of New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and North Carolina combined.<sup>4</sup>

Texas is also one of the most rapidly growing states in the country: Its population grew by 3.6% between 2010 and 2012 alone.<sup>5</sup> Recent projections predict the population will increase to 35.8 million people by the year 2040.<sup>6</sup> The state capital, Austin, has topped *Forbes's* list of the fastest-growing cities in the country for the past two years.<sup>7</sup>

Texas's booming population is partly due to high rates of immigration into the state.<sup>8</sup> The state's foreign-born population grew by over 90% between 1990 and 2000, and grew again by nearly 45% between 2000 and 2011. In 2011, over 16% of the state's total population was not born in the U.S., and Texas was home to 10% of all foreign immigrants to the United States.<sup>9</sup> The bulk of Texas's immigrants are Hispanic.

Overall, Texas has been a "minority-majority" state since 2004, meaning that racial and ethnic minority populations, both native- and foreign-born, now collectively outnumber non-Hispanic Whites. According to 2010 Census data, just 45.3% of residents identified themselves as White/Non-Hispanic, 37.6% identified as Hispanic (of any race), 11.5% identified as African Americans and 3.8% identified as Asian Americans. More than 9 million Texas residents identify as Hispanic; of those, over 31% are foreign born. Texas is home to nearly one out of every five Hispanics living in the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

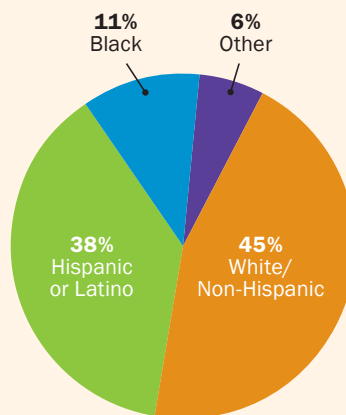
Texas's population is also relatively young, with 27.3% of residents aged 18 or under, compared with 24% for the nation overall. This fact is related to the state's ethnic composition: The median age among Texas Hispanics is 26.



# 27.3%

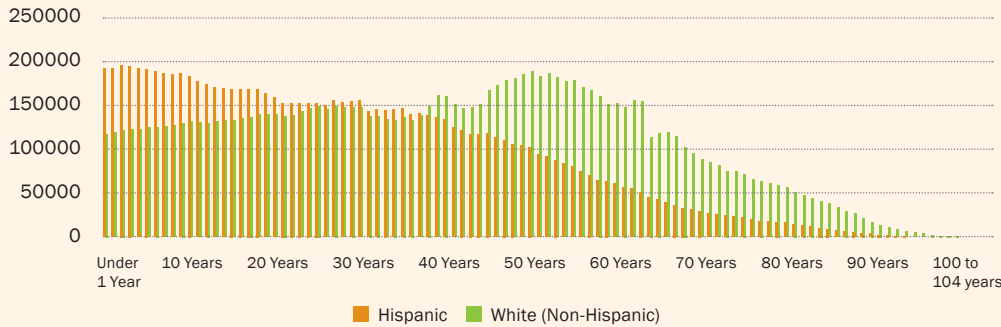
of Texas residents are aged 18 and younger compared with 24% for the nation overall.

### Texas Racial & Ethnic Composition



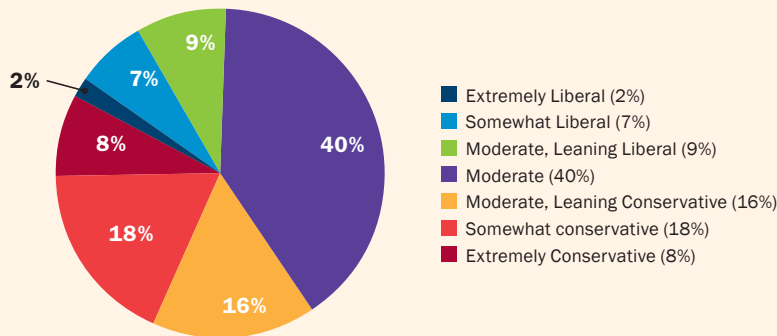
Source: Office of the State Demographer, Texas: Overview of Demographic Characteristics and Trends, April 2012.  
[http://txsdc.utsa.edu/Resources/Presentations/OSD/2012/2012\\_04\\_05\\_State\\_Agency\\_Coordinating\\_Committee.pdf](http://txsdc.utsa.edu/Resources/Presentations/OSD/2012/2012_04_05_State_Agency_Coordinating_Committee.pdf)

### Texas White (non-Hispanic) and Hispanic Populations by Age, 2010



Source: US. Census Bureau 2010

### Political Ideology in Texas, 2012



Source: Texas Politics, *Texas Political Culture*, [http://www.laits.utexas.edu/txp\\_media/html/poll/features/201210\\_partyid/slide1.html](http://www.laits.utexas.edu/txp_media/html/poll/features/201210_partyid/slide1.html)

With the nation’s second-largest economy, Texas’s 2011 real GDP growth (3.3%) was more than double national growth (1.5%).<sup>11</sup> Texas has a business-friendly tax climate<sup>12</sup> that has enticed a variety of industries to the state. It also has enjoyed relatively low unemployment rates, with 6.4% unemployment as of October 2012<sup>13</sup>—which makes Texas 16th in the nation—though levels of unemployment vary significantly across different areas of the state. The state’s median income is estimated to be \$50,920 per household, somewhat lower than the U.S. average of \$52,762.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, nearly one in five Texans live below the poverty line.<sup>15</sup> Poverty is more prevalent among racial and ethnic minorities in Texas: 25.5% of Texas’s total population living in poverty self-identify as Hispanic and 23.6% as African American, while non-Hispanic Whites make up 8.7% of the total.<sup>16</sup> According to the Pew Research Hispanic Center, the poverty rate among Texas Hispanics ages 17 and younger is 35%. Relatedly, one in five adult Texans lacks a high school diploma.<sup>17</sup>

Texas faces both challenges and opportunities when it comes to civic health. Rapid growth and multiplying diversity are paving the way for major changes in the Lone Star State. How actively will Texas citizens participate in determining the state’s future, and how many of them will join in?

This report offers a civic health “check-up” for the state of Texas. The findings call for more urgent attention to civic health—to better understand it through further research, and to enhance it through individual action and, where appropriate, systemic change.

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## How To Read this Report

The Current Population Survey (CPS)<sup>18</sup> poses a large number of questions to respondents in approximately 60,000 households nationwide. From that wealth of data, this report focuses on 1) **overall rates** of political, civic, and social activities and attitudes that are most conducive to civic health; 2) **trend lines and national comparisons** that put this snapshot of Texas into context, and 3) **factors that are clearly correlated with political participation, civic involvement, and social connectedness**, such as income, education, age, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, and geography.

The survey findings reported here, unless otherwise noted, are obtained from the 2011 CPS. Other sources of data that round out the picture of civic health in Texas are credited in the endnotes.

The numbers reported here should be considered thoughtfully. Small numeric differences across groups of citizens may not be meaningful either substantively or statistically. For example, on some indicators of civic health such as voting, there are very small differences between men and women that may not be meaningful. And while it can be useful to compare rates of participation in Texas to other states, raw rankings may not be terribly meaningful if the variance across states is not great. Therefore, we include enough information for the reader to think critically about state rankings.

Also, the terminology employed to describe various demographic groups must be considered carefully. For example, Texas has a large immigrant population, many but not all of whom identify as Latino or Hispanic. The term “immigrant” in this report refers to all persons not born in the United States regardless of their racial or ethnic identity.



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## Glossary

**Civic health indicators:** The civic health of a nation, state, or community can be measured by how much and in what ways citizens participate and interact with one another. The three indicators of civic health relied on in this report are:

**Political participation:** Self-reported rates of voter registration, voter turnout, contacting public officials, and discussing politics.

**Civic involvement:** Activities outside the sphere of government and politics, including donating to charities, volunteering, and belonging to community organizations.

**Social connectedness:** Frequently interacting with and trusting one’s neighbors and family.

**Race/ethnicity:** This report refers to Texans as they describe themselves in CPS surveys—including White, African American, Asian American, and Latino or Hispanic. Although “Latino” and “Hispanic” are sometimes used interchangeably in the CPS, for the sake of clarity this report primarily uses the term “Hispanic.”

**Immigration:** The term “immigrant” refers to anyone not born in the United States (in contrast to “native-born” persons). The Texas population includes a large and increasing number of immigrants from many countries. Though the bulk of those immigrants are from Spanish-speaking countries and may self-identify as Hispanic or Latino, the term “immigrant” is used in this report to refer to all immigrants, regardless of country of origin.

**Citizenship status:** This report refers to “native-born” U.S. residents versus those who are “naturalized” and thus legally eligible to vote, and “non-citizens” who have not become naturalized.



## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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A strong connection with the populace is central to keeping government accountable. ... We can't have a truly democratic government without the eager participation of the people.

- Governor Rick Perry, February 26, 2013

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Robust political participation is one fundamental element of civic health. When citizens do not vote regularly, officials may not be held accountable. And if citizens do not convey their concerns to their representatives, those officials cannot fully represent their constituents.

Self-reported rates of voter registration, voter turnout, contacting public officials, and discussing politics all indicate that levels of political participation in Texas are anemic compared to many other states—and compared to more ideal levels of participation.

Though this is not true of all civic health indicators, political participation is much more likely among residents with higher incomes and higher education, and who are older than 30. Race/ethnicity and citizenship status are also correlated with political participation. As political scientists have long noted, racial minorities often have limited access to the resources that facilitate participation in politics.<sup>19</sup>

### *Voter Registration*

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Rates of voter registration—the necessary prior step to voting—are somewhat lower in Texas than in the United States overall. In 2010, 61.6% of voting-eligible Texans reported being registered to vote,<sup>20</sup> compared with 65.1% of voting-eligible Americans overall, making Texas 42nd in the nation. In 2008, 67.3% of voting eligible Texans reported being registered to vote.

Key demographic factors are correlated with being registered, including income and education. Almost three-fourths (71.8%) of Texans with annual family incomes over \$75,000 reported being registered, compared with only 54.1% of people with family incomes of less than \$35,000. Similarly, 74.2% of people with college degrees reported being registered versus 47.9% of those with less than a high school diploma.<sup>21</sup>

Age is also strongly correlated with being registered to vote. Only 43.1% of Texans between the ages of 18 and 29 were registered in 2010, compared with 67.4% of those 30 and older.

No stark differences exist in the proportion of women and men registered to vote. As a matter of fact, women appear to hold a slight edge, with 63.4% of Texas women versus 59.7% of men reporting they were registered to vote in 2010.

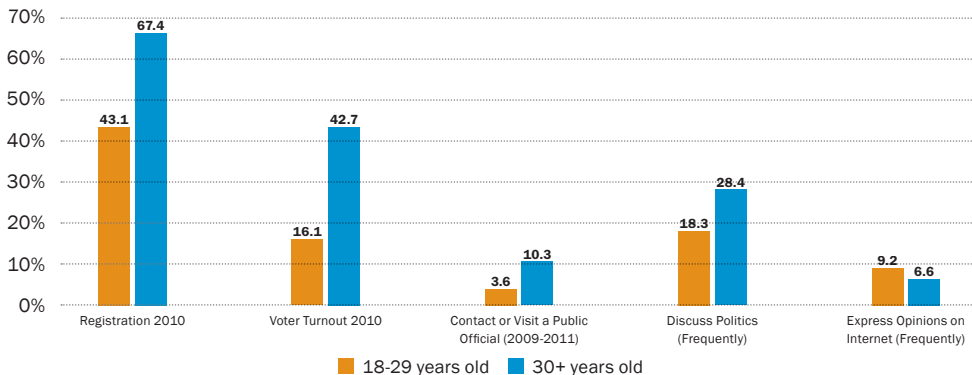


**61.6%**  
of voting-eligible Texans  
reported being registered  
to vote.

Voting rates in Texas have lagged behind the national average in every presidential and midterm election year since 1972.



### Age and Political Participation in Texas

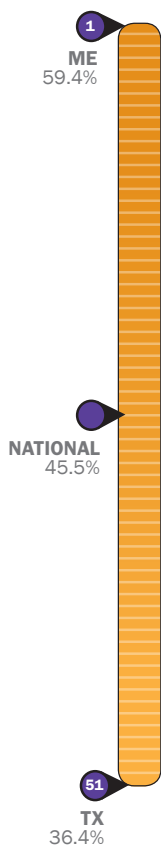


Race and ethnicity<sup>22</sup> do play a role in political participation in Texas (as they do throughout the country). In 2010, 66.9% of Texas’s White/non-Hispanic citizens were registered to vote, compared with 62.2% of African American citizens, 53.3% of Hispanic citizens, and 45.8% of Asian Americans. In other words, a significant registration drop-off is evident between Whites and other racial and ethnic groups.

Citizenship status obviously determines one’s eligibility to register to vote, since only native-born or naturalized citizens are legally eligible. But a gap is evident between the native-born and naturalized: 62.6% of native-born citizens in Texas reported being registered to vote—very close to the state average—whereas only 51.4% of naturalized citizens reported being registered in 2010.

Finally, geography appears to play a role. Voter registration in rural areas of Texas, where 65.5% of people report being registered, is somewhat higher than the state average. It is lower in urban areas, where 58.6% report being registered.

### 2010 VOTER TURNOUT



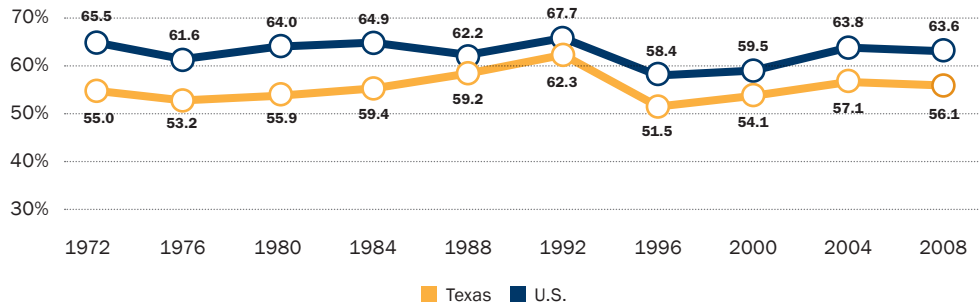
### Voter Turnout

Voter turnout is low—alarmingly low—among Texans. Though 61.6% of Texans reported being registered to vote in 2010, only 36.4% reported voting.<sup>23</sup>

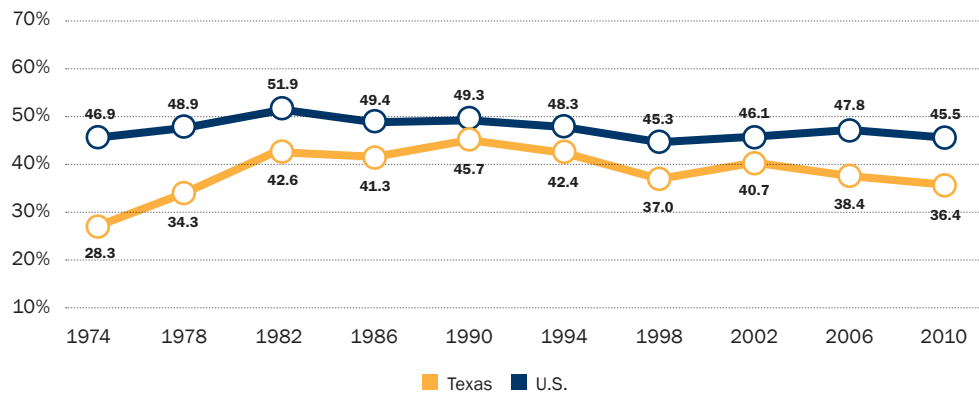
During that midterm election year, Texas was last among the 50 states and Washington D.C. in self-reported rates of voting.<sup>24</sup> A recent report based on alternative measures of voter turnout indicates that Texas ranked 48th in the nation in voter turnout for the 2012 presidential election.<sup>25</sup>

Low voter participation was not unique to 2010. Texas’s voter turnout in 2006, another midterm election year, was 38.4%, compared with a national voter turnout of 47.8%, which ranked the state at 49th. In fact, the trend lines show that voting rates in Texas have lagged behind the national average in every presidential and midterm election year since 1972. In 2008, a presidential election year with comparatively high levels of turnout nationwide, 56.1% of eligible Texans voted, compared with 63.6% for the U.S. overall. Even in presidential elections that featured an opportunity to vote for fellow Texan George W. Bush, the state’s turnout was lower than the national average by over 5 percentage points in 2000 and by almost 7 percentage points in 2004.

### Voter Turnout 1972-2008



### Midterm Turnout 1974-2010

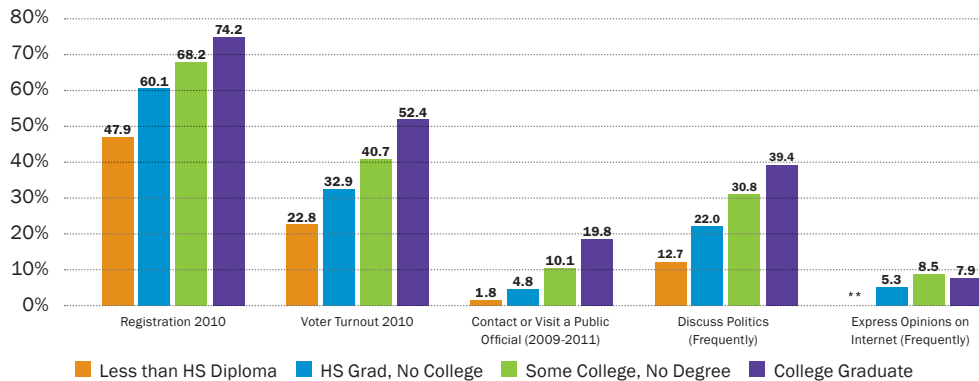


Income and education are correlated with voting in Texas, as in much of the country. Of those with annual family incomes of greater than \$75,000, 46.3% reported voting in 2010, compared with 26.7% of those in households earning less than \$35,000. Similarly, 52.4% of college graduates reported voting—well above the state average—compared with 22.8% of those with less than a high school diploma. Age is also strongly correlated with voting in Texas. Only 16.1% of those aged 18 – 29 reported voting in 2010, versus 42.7% of those 30 and older.

# 16.1%

Only 16.1% of those aged 18–29 reported voting in 2010, versus 42.7% of those 30 and older.

### Education Levels and Political Participation in Texas

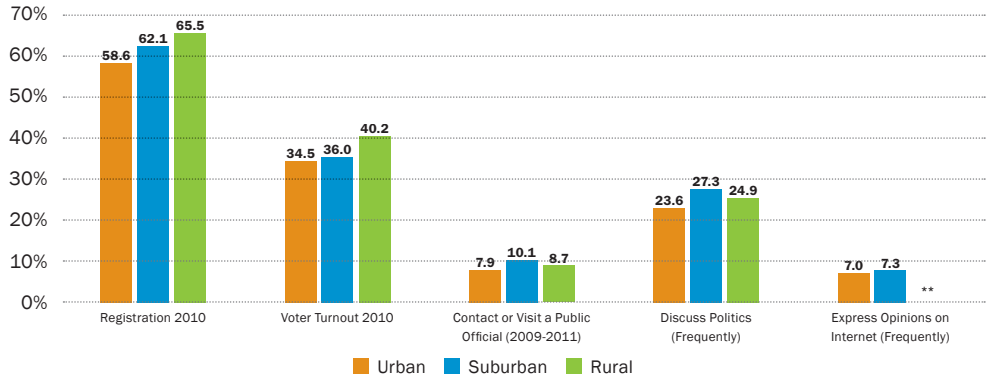


\*\*No data available

A significant voting gap is evident between Whites and other Texans, particularly Hispanics: 43.8% of White Texans reported voting in 2010, compared with 38.7% of African Americans and only 23.1% of Hispanics.<sup>26</sup> A gap between native-born and naturalized citizens is also clear, with 37.1% of native citizens voting in 2010 versus 28.3% of naturalized citizens.

Geography does not play as strong a role in voting as it does in registration, but a small difference is evident between those living in rural areas of the state, who vote at somewhat higher rates (40.2%) than the state average, and urban residents, who vote at somewhat lower rates (34.5%).

### Community Type and Political Participation in Texas



\*\*No data available

8.9%

Texans say they have contacted or visited a public official, making Texas 49th in the nation for this measure of political participation.



### Contacting Public Officials

Few Texans—8.9%—say they have contacted or visited a public official, making Texas 49th in the nation for this measure of political participation. By comparison, the national average in 2011 was 12.3%, with Vermont ranking first, at 22.8%.

Such low rates of this form of political participation can make it difficult to measure meaningful differences among various demographic groups.<sup>27</sup> Even so, the influence of income seems clear: 15.5% of Texans with family incomes over \$75,000 have contacted an official, compared with 4.0% of those with family incomes under \$35,000. Education again looms large as a factor: 19.8% of those with college degrees report having contacted an official—over twice the state average—versus 1.8% of those with only a high school education. Age matters as well: 10.3% of those 30 and older have contacted an official, versus only 3.6% of those aged 18–29. In terms of race and ethnicity, 13.7% of White/non-Hispanic Texans say they have contacted an official versus 5.2% of African American and 3.8% of Hispanic Texans.

### Discussing Politics and Expressing Opinions Online

Beyond voting for and talking to officials, political discussion with other citizens is an important dimension of participation. If people do not talk with one another about political issues, they miss the opportunity to learn others' views and sharpen their own. In fact, political discussion within families is an important way that the habits of citizenship are formed. Adolescents who talk frequently about political affairs and current events with their parents score higher on measures of political knowledge, and when they enter young adulthood, tend to vote, volunteer, and engage in civic activities more frequently than do youth who seldom discuss politics with their parents.<sup>28</sup>

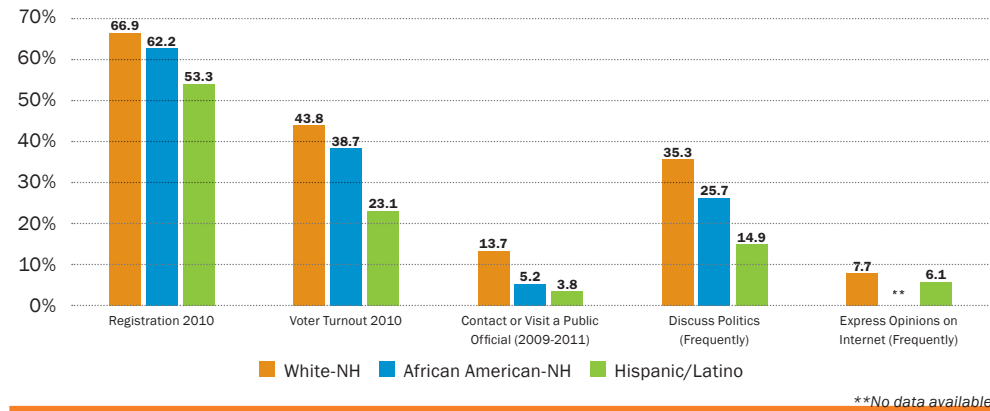
About one-fourth (26.0%) of Texans say they discuss politics with friends or family a few times a week or more. Though this rate is not much lower than the national average of 29.3%, it ranks Texas 44th in the nation.



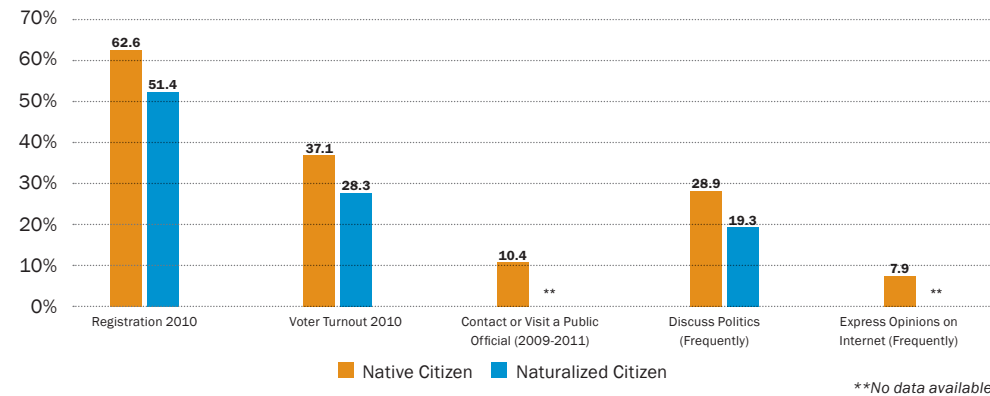
Socio-economic status plays a role in people's propensity to discuss politics: 35.2% of those with household incomes over \$75,000 report discussing politics frequently, versus 17.8% of those with household incomes of less than \$35,000. Almost four in ten college graduates (39.4%) discuss politics frequently, versus 12.7% of those with less than a high school diploma. Additionally, 18.3% of Texans aged 18–29 discuss politics frequently, compared with 28.4% of those 30 and older.

Among White/Non-Hispanic citizens, 35.3% say they discuss politics frequently; 25.7% of African American and 14.9% of Hispanic citizens say the same. Immigration status is also correlated with political discussion. Almost three in ten native residents (28.9%) say they discuss politics frequently, compared with 19.3% of naturalized citizens and 12.7% of those who are not citizens.

### Race/Ethnicity and Political Participation in Texas



### Citizenship and Political Participation in Texas



**18.3%**  
of Texans aged 18–29 discuss politics frequently, compared with 28.4% of those 30 and older.

As for online conversations, only 7.2% of Texans say they have expressed opinions about political or community issues frequently (at least a few times a week) on the Internet. This puts Texas slightly below the national average of 8.0%. This is one form of engagement in which young people have an edge: 9.2% of Texans under 30 express opinions online, versus 6.6% of those over 30.

## CIVIC INVOLVEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Basic human connections are how you start engaging...  
it's all about getting to know your neighbors, your community.

—Dvora Ben-Moshe, President, Civication, Inc.

Political participation is not the only marker of strong civic engagement. *Civic involvement* encompasses a variety of activities outside the sphere of government and politics, including donating to charities, volunteering, and belonging to community organizations. Civic involvement is bolstered by *social connectedness*: interacting with and trusting one's neighbors and family.

These activities help build communities and support democracy by creating social capital, a concept perhaps best described by Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam suggests that doing things together and sharing associations within a community—including things as simple as exchanging favors with a neighbor or eating dinner with family and friends—build networks and trust that can be leveraged for mutual benefit.

Though social capital is desirable in itself, it has been shown to contribute to other beneficial outcomes. One study of neighborhoods in Arizona found that greater association and trust among neighbors led people to take civic action.<sup>29</sup> Other research suggests that social capital benefits both individual health and community well being, and that communities with greater social cohesion find it easier to address problems and enjoy greater economic resilience.<sup>30</sup>

### *Civic Involvement in Texas*

As with political participation, civic involvement is generally greater among Texans over 30 and among those with higher incomes and higher levels of education—except for certain kinds of involvement like talking with and exchanging favors with neighbors.

Gender is another factor correlated with civic involvement. Women exceed men in donating (51.1%, compared with 43.3% of men) and volunteering (28.2%, compared with 21.0% of men). Women are more likely to belong to organizations (38.1% versus 32.3% of men), particularly school, neighborhood, and community groups (20.0% of women versus 12.3% of men).

### *Donating*<sup>31</sup>

Nearly half of all Texans report they recently donated to charities: 47.3% of people overall say they have donated more than \$25 to charitable or religious organizations.<sup>32</sup> This is lower, though not dramatically lower, than the national average of 51.8%, making Texas 43rd in the nation in rates of donating. For comparison, Utah ranks highest in the nation, at 64.9%.

It stands to reason that donating to charity is more likely among those with higher incomes. While one-third (33.3%) of Texans in the lowest income bracket (those with less than \$35,000 in annual family income) say they have donated to charity, 58.3% of those with family incomes between \$75,000 and \$99,999 report having donated, as have 69.4% in the top income bracket (those with household incomes of \$100,000 or more). Education is also strongly correlated with donating to charity: 73.9% of college graduates report having donated, compared with 32.2% of those with less than a high school diploma. Age matters as well: 54.3% of Texans who are 30 and older report having donated, compared with 30.3% of those aged 18-29.

**47.3%**

of Texans say they have donated more than \$25 to charitable or religious organizations.



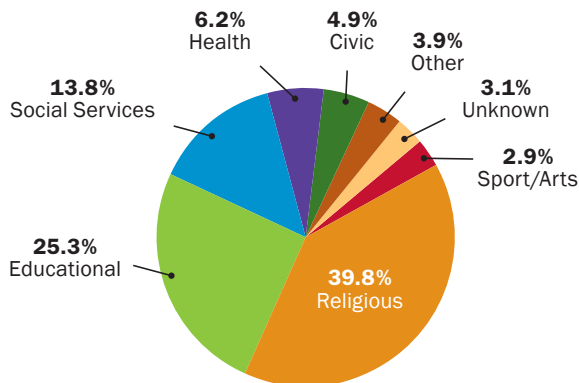
Donating is more prevalent among Whites/Non-Hispanics (58.7%) than among Asian Americans (47.2%), African Americans (43.9%), or Hispanics (33.7%)—patterns that are likely correlated with lower income and education rates among non-White communities in Texas. Interestingly, charitable donating is one way naturalized citizens are somewhat more engaged than their native-born counterparts: 53.1% of naturalized citizens have donated, compared with 48.6% of native citizens and 36.4% of those who are not citizens.

Finally, geography appears to play a role in rates of donating, and in this case the main difference is between rural and suburban residents: 41.3% of Texans living in rural areas say they have donated, versus 49.2% of those living in suburbs.

## Volunteering<sup>33</sup>

Texas ranked 42nd in volunteering in 2011, with a volunteering rate of 24.7%. The national volunteering rate in 2011 was 26.8%. An estimated 4,700,000 Texas residents volunteered in 2011. Texans are particularly likely to volunteer for religious organizations, followed by educational and social service organizations.

### Where Texans Volunteer



Source: <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/TX>

Like charitable giving, volunteering is more likely among those with greater personal resources—a fact that is true not just in Texas but generally.<sup>34</sup> Among Texans in the lowest income bracket (less than \$35,000 in annual income), 16.7% report having volunteered during the past year, compared with 39.2% of those in households earning \$100,000 or more. Of college graduates, 43.9% report volunteering versus 10.4% of those with less than a high school diploma.

Age differences are not as stark for volunteering as for many of the other civic health indicators. Two in ten (20.1%) Texans aged 18-29 volunteer, compared with 26.3% of those age 30 and older. Among the youngest group captured in this survey—those aged 16-24—18.5% report volunteering.



Photo credit: Special Olympics Texas

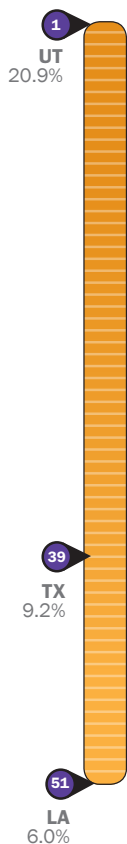
**24.7%**  
of Texans reported  
volunteering in 2011.

# 19.7%

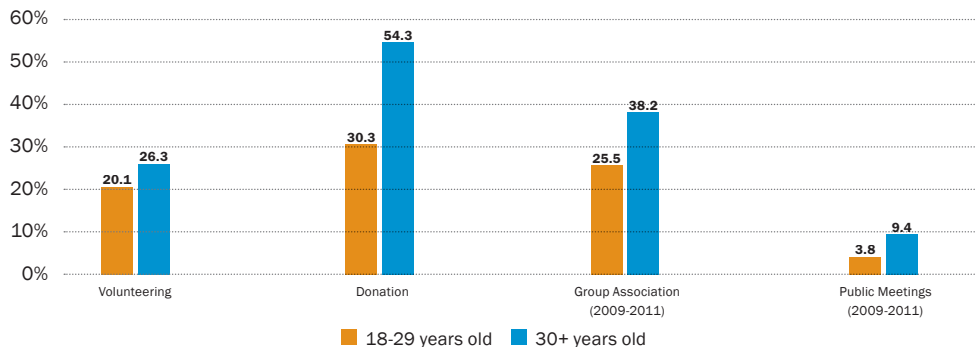
of all Texans report belonging to a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization, not including attending services.



### GROUP LEADERSHIP



### Age and Civic Involvement in Texas



As is true of some other civic health indicators, rural Texans volunteer at somewhat higher rates (27.0%) than suburban (25.3%) or urban (23.8%) residents.

Volunteering is more prevalent among Whites/Non-Hispanic (31.9%) than among Asian Americans (25.8%), African Americans (25.1%), or Hispanics (15.3%). Among native-born Texas residents, 26.5% volunteer, compared with 24.8% of naturalized citizens. A drop-off in volunteering (14.2%) is evident among those who are not citizens. However, as we will see below, some people are engaging in service to their communities in other ways.

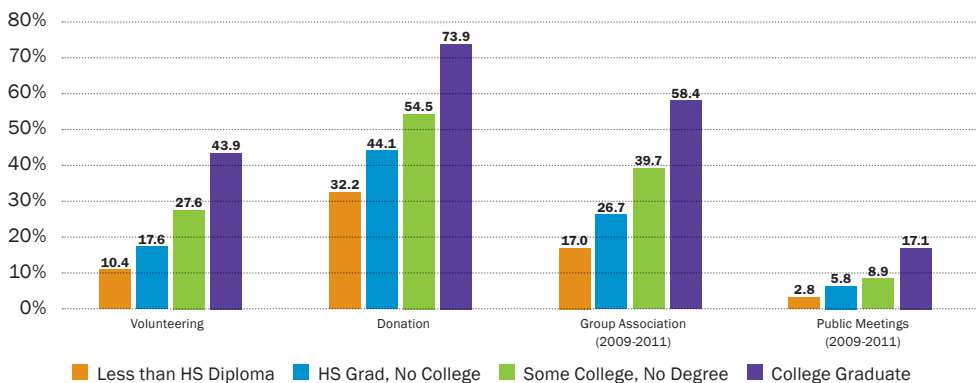
### Group Involvement

In 2011, 38.3% of Texans said they belonged to some kind of group in the community, ranking Texas 37th in the nation; for comparison, the top-ranked state is Alaska, at 54.6%. Nearly one in ten Texans (9.2%) take a leadership role in an organization by serving as an officer or serving on a committee. On this measure, Texas ranks 39th. Nationally, 39.2% belong to at least one type of group and 10.6% take leadership roles in the community.

The most common types of groups Texans belong to are religious organizations:<sup>35</sup> 19.7% of all Texans report belonging to a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization, not including attending religious services. Second most common, at 16.3%, are school, neighborhood, and community associations, followed by sports or recreational organizations, at 10%.

Among Texans with the highest household incomes (\$100,000 or more), 54.6% belong to organizations, compared with 25.2% of those with the lowest incomes (less than \$35,000). Education plays an even stronger role, with 58.4% of college graduates, compared with 17.0% of those without high school diplomas, reporting they belong to any kind of group. Age also matters: 25.5% of Texans aged 18-29 belong to organizations, compared with 38.2% of those aged 30 or older.

### Civic Involvement by Education Level in Texas





Group association is more prevalent among White/Non-Hispanic Texans (43.2%) than among Asian American (37.7%), African American (36.1%), or Hispanic Texans (24.1%). Native citizens report belonging to groups at higher rates (38.0%) than do naturalized citizens (30.0%) and those who are not citizens (21.3%). More than one-third of suburban residents (37.1%) report belonging to groups, compared with 33.8% of urban dwellers and 30.3% of rural residents.

### Attending Public Meetings and Working with Neighbors

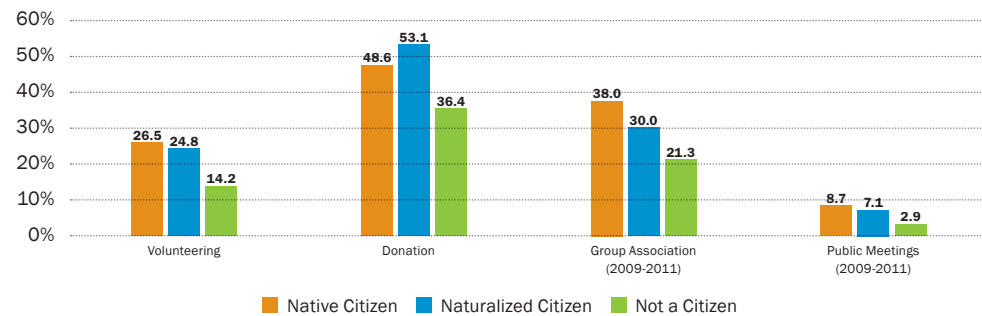
Beyond donating to, volunteering for, or belonging to organizations, people can become more closely engaged with their communities by attending public meetings or working directly with their neighbors to address problems. In 2011, 7.9% of Texans said they had attended public meetings during the last year to discuss community affairs. Additionally, 7.0% said they had worked with other people from their neighborhood during the last year to fix a problem. The national average is 8.7%.

Again, education, income and age all influence people’s willingness and ability to participate in these forms of civic involvement. Of those in the highest income bracket (\$100,000 or more), 13.8% reported attending public meetings, compared with 5.2% of those with the lowest incomes (\$35,000 or less); 17.1% of college graduates attended meetings, compared with 2.8% of those who had not completed high school; and 3.8% of younger Texans attended community meetings, compared with 9.4% of those aged 30 or older.

Attending community meetings is more than twice as common among White/Non-Hispanics (10.6%) than among Hispanics (4.2%). Among native-born citizens, 8.7% reported attending a community meeting in the last year, as did 7.1% of naturalized citizens, compared with 2.9% of non-citizens.



#### Citizenship Status and Civic Involvement in Texas



**3.8%** of younger Texans attended community meetings, compared with 9.4% of those aged 30 or older.

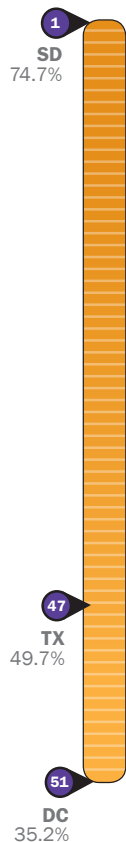
Unlike some other civic health indicators, geography does not appear to play much of a role in whether people attend community meetings. Though suburban residents report slightly higher levels of meeting attendance, suburban, urban, or rural rates of meeting attendance do not differ much from the state average of 7.8%

# 49.7%

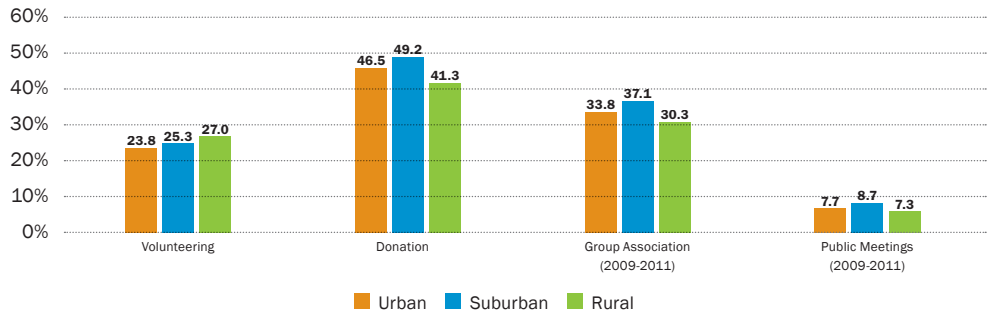
of Texans say they trust all or most of the people in their neighborhood.



### NEIGHBORHOOD TRUST



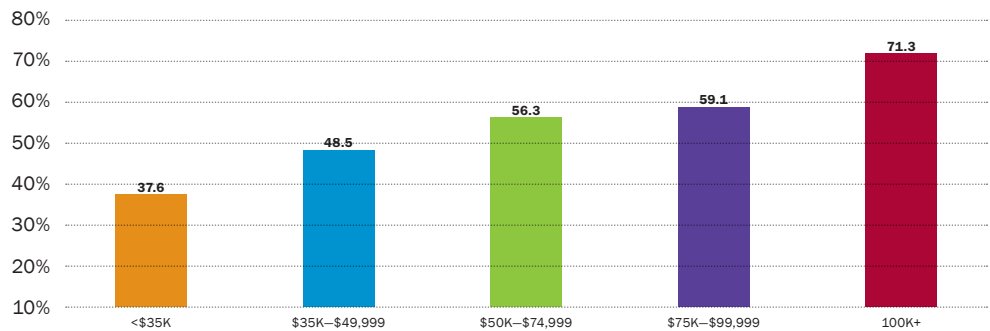
### Community Type and Civic Involvement in Texas



### Social Connectedness

On some measures of social connectedness, Texas appears relatively healthy, civically speaking. Overall, 43.0% of Texans say they talk frequently with their neighbors, ranking Texas 32nd in the nation. And Texas is 16th in the nation for the rate of people who exchange favors with their neighbors a few times a week or more (15.4%). This statistic may indicate that some people provide service to their communities in ways that aren't usually considered volunteering, but that nevertheless strengthen social cohesion and well being in communities.

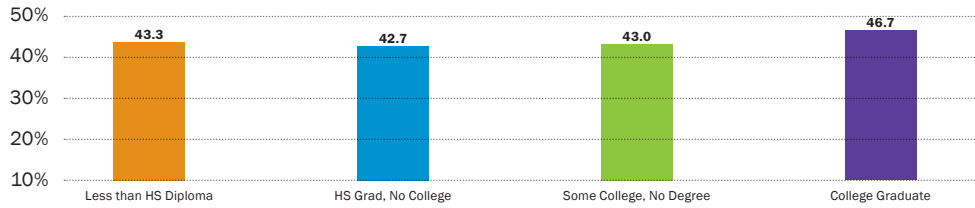
### Trust People in Neighborhood (All or Most), by Income



However, Texas ranks 47th in the nation in terms of neighborhood trust, with 49.7% saying they trust all or most of the people in their neighborhood. Nationwide, 56.7% of Americans say they trust all or most of their neighbors. This apparent disconnect between levels of trust and rates of helping neighbors is striking.

Social connectedness is not influenced in the same ways by income and education as other civic health indicators examined here. For example, there is virtually no difference between the percentages of people in the highest income bracket who say they talk with their neighbors frequently (41.4%) and those in the lowest bracket (43.4%). Similarly, only a small difference is evident between the 46.7% of college graduates and 43.3% of those with less than a high school education who say they talk with their neighbors frequently.

### Talk with Neighbors (Frequently), by Education Level



In fact, for some forms of social connectedness, the relationship between socio-economic status and neighborhood connections may run in the opposite direction. Frequently exchanging favors with neighbors appears to be somewhat more prevalent among lower income Texans (16.2%) than among those with the highest incomes (12.2%). Similarly, 14.5% of college graduates say they exchange favors frequently with neighbors, compared with 17.1% of those with less than a high school diploma. One possible explanation is that residents with lower incomes and education may rely more on these social networks and helping behaviors—a potentially important asset for building other forms of community engagement.

However, neighborhood trust—an essential component of community building—appears to be positively correlated with socio-economic status. Texans in the highest income bracket are much more likely to say they trust all or most of the people in their neighborhoods, at 71.3%, compared with 37.6% of those in the lowest income bracket—patterns that have also been observed nationally.<sup>36</sup>

### Family and Friends

Of those Texans in the highest income bracket, 92.6% say they have dinner with their household frequently, compared with 86.9% of those with the lowest incomes. And 91.3% of Whites, 86.9% of Hispanics, 85.1% of Asian Americans, and 85.0% of African Americans have dinner frequently with their households. Having dinner with family does not vary significantly with citizenship status, with native-born, naturalized, and non-citizen groups all within a percentage point of the state average of 88.5%.

In terms of connectedness with friends and family, Texas ranks 41st in the percent of people who communicate with friends and family frequently, 78.1% communicated at least a few times a week. On the national level, 79.0% of Americans say they communicate at least a few times a week with family or friends. Texas ranks 40th in the rate of people who say they ate dinner with their family a few times a week or more, at a rate of 88.5%.

Staying in touch with friends and family also varies with socio-economic status: 84.4% of high-income Texans say they hear frequently from family and friends, compared with 74.7% of low-income Texans. 82.7% of White/Non-Hispanics, 74.5% of Hispanics, 74.3% of African-Americans, and 71.2% of Asian-Americans hear from friends and family frequently. There is a gap between those Texans who are native-born (79.2%) and non-citizens (72.6%) that may be explained in part by the fact that many immigrants leave friends and family members behind in their home countries.



**88.5%**  
of Texans say they eat dinner with their family a few times a week or more.

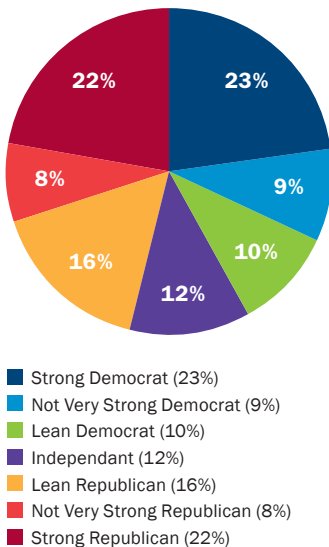
# IF EVERYTHING IS BIGGER IN TEXAS, WHY IS OUR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SO LOW?

Too many organizations that promote civic engagement are addressing the issue the wrong way. People first get engaged about issues, then you can get them to vote.

–Paula Rojas, *Why Bother? Engaging Our Changing City*  
Participant, December 10, 2012

Many of the findings throughout this report lead to a troubling conclusion: Texas ranks among the lowest in the nation on many measures of political and civic health. The civic health crisis revealed in this report should invite spirited conversation among Texans about how these low levels of participation matter and what can be done to raise public involvement in democracy and in our communities. This section highlights a few of the likely causes.

Party Identifications in Texas



Source: Texas Politics, Texas Political Culture, [http://www.laits.utexas.edu/txp\\_media/html/poll/features/201210\\_partyid/slide1.html](http://www.laits.utexas.edu/txp_media/html/poll/features/201210_partyid/slide1.html)

## The Demographic Challenge

The findings reported here offer stark evidence of participation gaps between Whites and other Texans—gaps that are likely due in part to socio-economic factors. Income and education are strong predictors of participation, and being African American or Hispanic is unfortunately correlated with higher likelihood of poverty and lower educational opportunities and achievement. Thus, racial and ethnic minorities often have less access to the resources that facilitate participation in public life.<sup>37</sup>

Research also suggests several factors that determine if naturalized citizens will vote, including their socio-economic status, length of time in country, and the strength of democratic institutions in the immigrant's home country.<sup>38</sup> Given the dramatic growth in the state's immigrant population, a considerable challenge in Texas is how to integrate these new and potential citizens into the life of the state. At the same time, the challenges immigrants face often necessitate strong social networks; strong social connectedness is often required in order for immigrants to move to the U.S. and establish themselves—networks that may be opportunities for building other forms of civic engagement.

Another challenge is the large number of young people in Texas, which is in part a function of the state's larger Hispanic population, among whom the median age is 26. Since 1972, when 18 year olds won the right to vote, self-reported turnout rates for young people have consistently been 24 to 29 percentage points below voting rates among those aged 30 years and older in U.S. midterm elections, and between 14 to 24 percentage points below in presidential elections.<sup>39</sup> A relatively young and less-educated population with lower incomes is likely connected to the state's low rates of voter turnout.<sup>40</sup>

It seems clear that Texas's anemic civic health is in part due to the challenge of engaging young, low-income, and minority and immigrant communities in civic life. But the participation problem in Texas is not due only to the state's changing demographics. As the data shown in this report indicate, voting rates have been low in Texas since at least the 1970s—long before recent demographic changes.

It is also important not to treat these findings as somehow “natural” or to assume that lower participating groups will always be so. As the recent *Millennials Civic Health Index* noted, “when political parties, civic associations, news organizations, and other institutions assume that young people do not engage, these institutions may avoid trying to recruit youth, which can lead to a cycle of disengagement.”<sup>41</sup> The same can be said for other groups that currently participate at low levels.



## Noncompetitive Elections

A number of factors may account for low political interest and involvement in Texas, including the relatively small number of competitive statewide election contests. Simply put, close elections tend to generate greater levels of campaign spending, media attention, and voter turnout. When elections are not closely contested and parties and candidates are not reaching out aggressively to voters, voters generally do not show up in large numbers.<sup>42</sup>

From Reconstruction well into the 20th Century, Texas was a solidly Democratic state. In the 1950s, over 70% of Texas voters identified with the Democratic Party. Over recent decades, however, the state has seen a “Republican Party resurgence and Democratic Party decline.”<sup>43</sup> Viewed over the long term, this has created a more balanced political situation, with roughly a third of Texas voters now identifying with the Democratic Party, a third with the Republican Party, and a third identifying as independent.<sup>44</sup> More recently, however, statewide elections have again become noncompetitive due in part to redistricting, which has created less competitive congressional races across the country.<sup>45</sup> No Democrat has won statewide office in Texas since 1994.<sup>46</sup> In 2010, only 5 out of Texas’s 32 U.S. House seats were competitive, with most candidates that year winning by a minimum of 20 percentage points—earning Texas a ranking of 49th by one organization that tracks electoral competitiveness around the U.S.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Texas has not been a battleground state in a presidential election since the 1970s, when Jimmy Carter narrowly beat Gerald Ford by 3% in the state. The lack of competitive presidential and state-level races has meant relatively weak party mobilization efforts and relatively low levels of political advertising. As one Texas-based observer recently put it, “The 2012 presidential race in Texas might as well have been in Mexico, so little did the Democrats campaign for the state’s 38 electoral seats.”<sup>48</sup>

But in truth, when elections are not competitive, neither side tries very hard to reach voters. For example, local TV ad spending for both presidential candidates totaled \$164,670 in Texas (with none of those dollars spent in support of Barack Obama), compared with local ad spending in key battleground states such as Florida, Virginia, and Ohio that topped \$150 million each.<sup>49</sup> Another example: Recent evidence suggests that, compared to other states with sizable Hispanic populations, Hispanic voters in Texas were significantly less likely to say they had been contacted by a political campaign or otherwise personally encouraged to vote in the 2012 election season.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to note that competitive races do not just engage voters who lean toward the minority political party. The 2010 election campaign is a case in point: Though Texas turnout in the general election that year was low, the 2010 Republican gubernatorial primary attracted an unprecedented 1.5 million Republican voters to the polls, drawn by a high-visibility contest between incumbent Governor Rick Perry, former U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, and challenger candidate Debra Medina.<sup>51</sup>

## Busy Voters, Shrinking Media Coverage

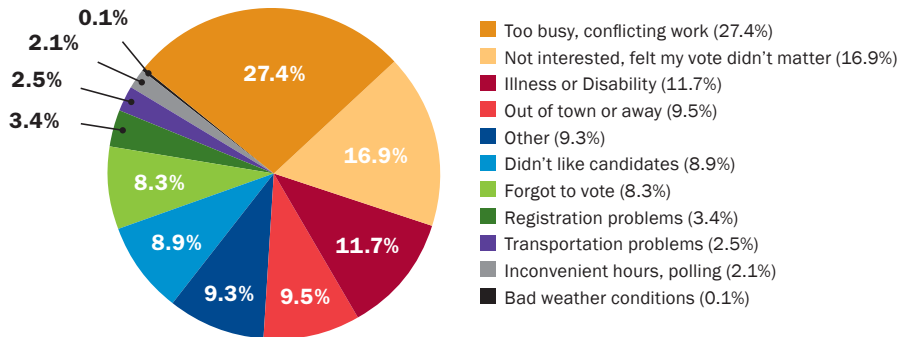
Another reason for low political involvement may be that many Texans (like many Americans) lead busy lives and feel too uninformed to vote. In the 2010 CPS survey, when asked why they did not vote, almost one-third (27.4%) of Texas non-voters said they were too busy. Another 8.3% said they forgot to vote or to send in their ballot, while 16.9% said they were not interested or their vote wouldn’t make a difference.

**27.4%**  
of Texas non-voters said they were too busy to vote.



Photo credit: Daemmrich Photography

## Reasons Texans Did Not Vote in 2010



Source: 2010 CPS

# 52%

of Texans surveyed were “extremely interested” in politics and public affairs, and another 37% said they were “somewhat interested.”



Photo credit: Daemmrich Photography

Another recent study found the most-named reason for not voting was that “People don’t know enough about the candidates or the issues” (32%). Another 15% said that “People do not have enough time to find out about the candidates and vote.” Among those who vote only infrequently, this number rose to 21%, and among Hispanic infrequent voters, it climbed to 25%.<sup>52</sup> Many of these “low-propensity” voters appear to believe that uninformed voters should self-select out of the voting process and leave voting to those who know more about the issues and candidates.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, a statewide poll in the fall of 2012 indicated that 52% of Texans surveyed were “extremely interested” in politics and public affairs, and another 37% said they were “somewhat interested.”<sup>54</sup> Despite that professed interest, it may be challenging to become a well-informed voter in Texas, especially given the large number of choices Texas voters must make. Elections are held at least once every year, including at least three in presidential election years. Texas also employs “the long ballot,” which gives citizens the opportunity to vote for any public office of significance. Along with local officials, Texans elect 18 judges to the State Supreme and Criminal Appeals Courts, plus anywhere from two to 60 judges to state and district courts. Add to this the constitutional amendments and other issues that may reach the ballot—for example, the 2003 ballot included 22 proposed constitutional amendments<sup>55</sup>—and the number of choices requiring some level of information becomes potentially formidable.

Yet political and public affairs information has been disappearing from local newspapers and television shows around the country. A recent comprehensive review by the Federal Communications Commission, *The Information Needs of Communities*,<sup>56</sup> found that even in this era of 24-hour cable news and the Internet, many communities face a shortage of news reporting on state and local politics and public affairs. In part this is due to cutbacks at news outlets, which has meant that topics like local education, health care, and government get less coverage. In Texas, the report found, the number of reporters covering the state legislature and other state offices dropped significantly between 1989 and 2009. This information gap is likely to lead to a less informed electorate.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, voter guides that offer nonpartisan information about candidates and ballot measures can be difficult to find depending on where you live. Information for voters about how to find polling locations and assistance with special needs can be accessed online at the Texas Secretary of State’s website [www.votetexas.gov](http://www.votetexas.gov), but voters are encouraged to find information about issues and candidates through the state political parties or various other groups. As in many other states, however, local chapters of the League of Women Voters and other nonpartisan groups do produce voter guides prior to elections.

Parties and campaigns are also an important source of information for voters. In fact, research suggests that as political parties have declined as key connectors among voters and candidates, rates of political participation have declined as well.<sup>58</sup> But Texas’s sprawling geography, with 20 media markets, compared with California (which has 14) and Ohio (with 12), makes campaigning statewide in Texas particularly challenging and expensive. Even presidential campaigns, as documented above, often have not reached out assertively to Texas voters.

## ***Inconvenience and Obstacles to Voting***

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Among other reasons for not voting, another 19.7% of Texas non-voters named disability or illness, problems registering, inconvenience/long lines, and transportation. These numbers point to another set of obstacles to political participation: For some people, voting is (or seems) too inconvenient. Interestingly, a recent Pew Research Center report ranks Texas 22nd in the country for the quality of its voting and elections procedures, including an average reported wait time of 12 minutes in voting lines compared with 2.5 minutes in Vermont and over an hour in South Carolina.<sup>59</sup>

One proposal for increasing the convenience of voting is same-day voter registration, which has been shown to lead to higher voter turnout in other states. Texas has not adopted same-day registration, though several such bills have been introduced.<sup>60</sup> Prior to the 2012 election, the Texas Legislature passed measures to regulate voter registration drives.<sup>61</sup> While detractors fear this measure could result in fewer registered voters, proponents say it has reduced application errors and created consistency across counties. And voter registration is not always a simple process. In 2008, for example, over 12,000 voter registration applications in Harris County “were lawfully rejected for being incomplete after would-be voters failed to follow up after receiving a letter from the voter registrar asking for more information.”<sup>62</sup>

Concerns about disenfranchisement have increased given controversies over “voter ID” laws in Texas. The most recent such effort in Texas was a 2011 law that amended the procedure for allowing people who appear at the polls to vote; instead of merely showing a voter registration certificate, the law required the voter to present an approved form of photo identification, such as a government-issued driver’s license or personal identification card, a military ID card, or a concealed weapon permit. Under the law, voters who did not meet the identification requirements could be allowed to vote by provisional ballot. That law was denied federal approval and was struck down by a federal court in August of 2012, which ruled that the law imposed “strict, unforgiving burdens on the poor.”<sup>63</sup> Texas’s recent redistricting plans for state and federal offices were also struck down for discriminating against minority voters by drawing districts that would favor White voters and candidates.<sup>64</sup>

A statewide survey in the fall of 2012 showed 66% of Texans agreeing with the idea of requiring voters to present identification when they vote.<sup>65</sup> But these laws raised historical memories of disenfranchisement—with which Texas has a relatively recent history, including poll taxes and “Whites-only” primaries that only ended in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>66</sup> That history is one reason why Texas continues to be required to submit changes to its election laws for federal approval (called “preclearance”) under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act (an issue being deliberated by the U.S. Supreme Court as this report went to press).

## ***Beyond Political Participation: Civic Involvement and Social Connectedness***

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In a state as large and complex as Texas, it stands to reason that many additional factors might contribute to poor indicators of civic health. When examining the state’s civic health, it is important to consider civic involvement and social connectedness, not just political participation.

Civic involvement is inherently a neighborhood and community phenomenon. Social connectedness is built person to person, in local communities, in neighborhood associations, schools, nonprofit organizations, and places of worship. It is perhaps less tangible and less measurable than things like voter registration and turnout. But it is the glue that holds communities together.

These civic and social arenas are where social capital is created for other forms of engagement. For example, belonging to *non*-political groups can actually be a strong predictor of whether people become engaged in politics as well.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, involvement in groups and activities that are not explicitly political can help people hone the skills and habits of engagement, and can create social support networks that encourage greater political involvement as well.



## **22<sup>nd</sup>**

A recent Pew Research Center report ranks Texas 22nd in the country for the quality of its voting and elections procedures, including an average reported wait time of 12 minutes in voting lines.

The picture provided here of civic involvement and social connectedness in Texas is mixed. The findings reported here show that, unlike many other indicators of civic health, low socio-economic status does not correlate negatively with talking with one's neighbors and exchanging favors with them. In fact, lower income communities engage more in those kinds of neighborly activities. Yet those communities do not show the same levels of volunteering and donating, perhaps because they may not have the same density of community organizations for which people can volunteer and donate. And volunteering, donating, and joining groups are more feasible for people with greater disposable income and leisure time. In other words, while donating, volunteering, and joining are invaluable to community, we must consider a wide range of ways that community is built and sustained.

That said, almost 50% of Texans report they have donated at least small amounts to charity, and over 15% report they exchange favors with neighbors frequently, the 16th highest rate in the country. The rate of joining civic organizations in Texas (38.3%) lags only slightly behind the national average (39.2%). It is also worth noting that the nonprofit sector is expanding in Texas. What once was unpaid volunteer work is now also paid work for nonprofit organizations, and Texas has seen a 70% increase in the number of 501(c)(3) public charities between 1999-2009.<sup>68</sup> Some of these organizations engage in nonpartisan get-out-the-vote efforts, work directly with communities to increase citizen engagement with government, and seek to empower communities to address community problems.

Civic involvement is inherently a neighborhood and community phenomenon.



Photo credit: Daemmrich Photography

Civic involvement, social connectedness and political participation—the three key systems for civic health—are all interconnected. One is unlikely to function entirely separately from the other two, and what sustains one system likely contributes to the health of the other two.

### **How Much More Civic Engagement Can We Realistically Expect?**

Voting rates in the U.S. overall are among the lowest of the developed democracies.<sup>69</sup> What ails Texas is to some extent what ails the country, and Americans have long had an ambivalent relationship to political and civic engagement. As political scientist Jane Mansbridge observed of our forebears,

*Even though no more than fifty-eight men were eligible to come to the Dedham [Massachusetts] town meeting and to make the decisions for the town, even though the decisions to which they addressed themselves were vital to their existence, even though every inhabitant was required to live within one mile of the meeting place, even though each absence from the meeting brought a fine, and even though a town crier personally visited the house of every latecomer half an hour after the meeting had begun, only 74 percent of those eligible actually showed up at the typical town meeting between 1636-1644.<sup>70</sup>*

The American public's ambivalence about political participation seems to be even more pronounced in today's largest states. Patterns of voting in the 2012 presidential election (based on different data than used in this report) show that "the nation's most populous states—California (41st), New York (44th), and Texas (48th)—ranked in the bottom ten" among all states in terms of voter turnout, depressing overall national turnout.<sup>71</sup> Just as research on voting behavior suggests, mobilizing voters is harder in larger populations because individuals perceive their single vote matters less.<sup>72</sup>

It also may be that levels of political participation will never be as high in a state shaped by what scholars call a "traditionalistic" political culture that includes a norm of deference to political and business elites. According to one scholar of Texas politics, low levels of voter turnout are part of a complex state culture shaped by social and economic conservatism and "the state's long history as a one-party state" (first Democratic, now Republican).<sup>73</sup>

That said, when a state ranks among the lowest within a country marked by comparatively low levels of engagement, surely that is cause for concern.



In order to improve civic health in Texas, the goal does not have to be to engage 100% of the people, 100% of the time. To return to the metaphor of physical health, every individual does not need to be a triathlete in order for the public to be relatively healthy overall. A realistic goal is to help individuals improve their habits in a variety of ways large and small, knowing that each effort will improve overall civic health.

## WHAT CAN HELP?

Reshaping the civic environment of a far-flung and diverse state like Texas is an enormous challenge. But there are some approaches that can help. Some are large-scale efforts that require collaboration of many individuals and organizations to achieve. Others are more personal efforts individuals can take to make a difference.

### *Improving Civic Literacy through Schools*

Young people can build civic competencies and pro-civic attitudes, and experience what it means to be a member of a community, through programs offered in the classroom. Our K-12 schools can be a crucial site for the development of **civic literacy** (knowledge of community affairs and political issues), **civic skills** (competencies in achieving group goals), and **civic attachment** (feelings or beliefs that the individual matters within the community).

A well-constructed and well-taught civics curriculum has considerable impact on the civic development of young people. Research shows that students who receive high-quality civics education in school are more likely to vote and to discuss politics at home, more likely to volunteer and work on community issues, and are more confident in their ability to speak publicly and to communicate with their elected officials.<sup>74</sup>

One way states can try to improve the civic literacy of students is through their curriculum and assessment standards. Texas has comparatively strong social studies and civics assessment standards, in that it is one of nine states that require both course completion and assessment in civics.<sup>75</sup>

These TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) standards provide educators and students with some meaningful ways to become better citizens. Yet currently, social studies learning is assessed beginning in the 8th grade. The lack of elementary grade-level assessment can mean that social studies and civics are “squeezed out” of curriculum in the elementary grades, because what is tested in schools becomes what is prioritized in the classroom.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, while testing and assessment are an important element of any civic education program, civics education, to be most effective, must go beyond memorization of facts.<sup>77</sup> These requirements focus primarily on knowledge rather than building civic skills or civic attachment.

To build those, students also need to participate in meaningful projects that promote community involvement. Hands-on learning, in which “students apply what they are learning in school to identify, research and address community needs,”<sup>78</sup> has been shown to instill pro-civic attitudes and behaviors in young people.<sup>79</sup> Texas has no specific requirement for service-learning,<sup>80</sup> and resources for service-learning declined in 2011, with federal funding cuts.<sup>81</sup>

There are a number of other promising practices for high-quality civics instruction, including staging classroom discussions about difficult issues and conducting simulations of democratic practices.<sup>82</sup> Part of the solution for low levels of civic engagement in Texas includes providing these and other classroom-tested methods to impart knowledge while also building civic skills. Four years ago, experts at a Texas convening of the Education Commission of the States made recommendations for civic education that can guide discussion today. They suggested creating and organizing a network of decision makers, organizations, and practitioners to improve and



Photo credit: Daemmrich Photography

Texas has featured prominently in the news since the 2012 presidential election, with a great deal of speculation about which political party will tap the state’s Hispanic voters.



promote civic education in Texas. They also recommended that key decision makers be informed about effective civic education programs.<sup>83</sup>

Additionally, educators and those who support them could explore possibilities for extending civic education into the elementary grades; encouraging hands-on learning and providing students ample opportunities to practice citizenship; and supporting teachers and staff with additional preparation and professional development to teach citizenship education.

### **Increasing Access to Higher Education**

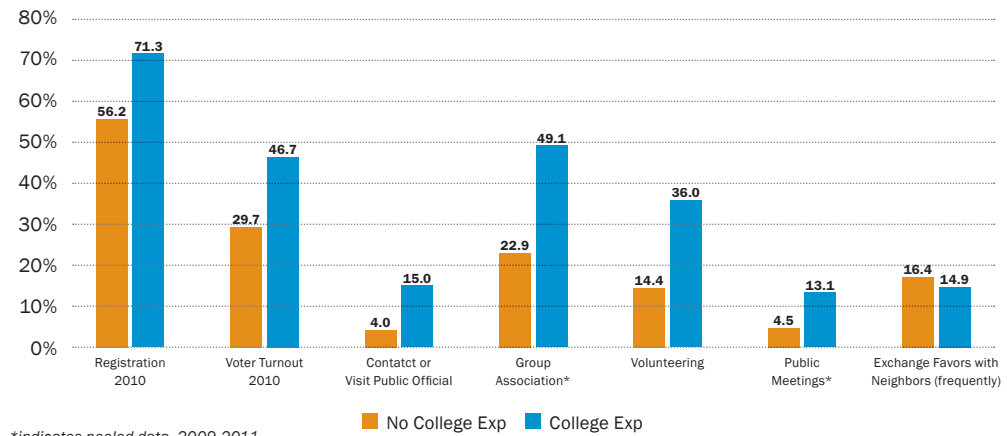
The findings reported here show again and again the relationship between education and engagement. Better-educated Texans are more likely to vote; more likely to express their views to family, friends, and elected officials; more likely to volunteer and join civic organizations; and more likely to work with others to address problems in their communities. In part this is because education is associated with higher income, greater leisure time, and greater self-esteem. But higher education—even just some exposure to the college classroom—also appears to influence levels of engagement.<sup>84</sup>

Texas has strong social studies and civics assessment standards. But to be most effective, civics education must go beyond memorization of facts.



Photo credit: Daemrich Photography

#### **College Exposure and Key Political/Civic Variables**



\*indicates pooled data, 2009-2011

These findings add urgency to the challenge of improving college access for all Texans. Currently, 20% of Texans lack a high school diploma, and another 26% have only that. As the *Florida Civic Health Index* recently observed of its own citizens, failing to complete high school or to gain at least some college-level experience “means that a citizen will live in a ‘civic wilderness’ where needs and opinions go unheard through political or civic processes.”<sup>85</sup>

### **Increasing the Supply of (and Demand for) Public Affairs Information**

While education is a powerful tool for improving civic health, it is not the only tool. Citizens of all ages need accurate and thorough information in order to fulfill their civic responsibilities. But, as noted above, a significant percentage of Texas non-voters claim they do not have time or are not sure how to become informed enough to participate politically. Meanwhile, the amount of public affairs news appears to have shrunk due to cutbacks in the news industry.

In part, informing voters is a job for the political parties. Vigorous political parties that reached citizens through newspapers, workplaces, and social circles were one reason for much higher levels of voter turnout in the 19th Century.<sup>86</sup> As the growing potential of young voters, Hispanic voters, and other groups to shape election outcomes has become clear, both major political parties are showing renewed interest in reaching out to Texas voters.<sup>87</sup> But parties and campaigns cannot be expected to provide nonpartisan information.

What greater role might nonprofit organizations play in addressing the information gap? While nonprofits face restrictions on the amount of time and resources they can devote to direct lobbying or advocacy for issues, there are no restrictions on these entities in terms of providing information, resources, and education about voting, voter registration, how government works, or how citizens can get involved.<sup>88</sup> Several nonprofits, such as local chapters of the [League of Women Voters](#), the [Sunlight Foundation](#), and [Project Vote Smart](#), provide nonpartisan voter guides and online searchable databases of information on candidates and issues. These could be more widely disseminated and be made more interactive and engaging. Organizations of all kinds can also continue to look for innovative ways to fill the gap in public affairs information, especially at the local level.

At the same time, what greater role might government agencies play in providing information to citizens? According to a recent report, the state of Texas is doing a good job of making legislative information transparent to its citizens.<sup>89</sup> But, according to another expert review, “providing raw data is not in itself transparency. ... To engage the public, raw data must be interactive and [must include] opportunities for collaboration.”<sup>90</sup> Election officials could also consider providing nonpartisan voter information about candidates and issues, not just on election procedures.

Of course, greater levels of information can only go so far if citizens are not motivated to consume it. Finding ways to increase people’s appetite for information—to increase the demand, not just the supply—remains an important challenge.

### Embracing New Platforms for Engagement

The Internet and digital communications technology are transforming the experience of being a citizen. For example, according to a recent survey, approximately 66% of social media users in the U.S. use new media platforms to “post their thoughts about civic and political issues, react to others’ postings, press friends to act on issues and vote, [and] follow candidates.”<sup>91</sup>

Accordingly, one path to more engaged citizenship runs through digital and social media. Mobile and network communication effectively eliminates barriers to local officials. Citizens no longer have to wait for the next City Council meeting to address their concerns. Mobile engagement apps also allow governments to tap the community for instant feedback during a city event, public meeting, or official proceeding. And a variety of new “citizen media” projects encourage citizens to take advantage of new media tools to produce blogs, videos, and other media that highlight problems in their communities, start discussion, and explore solutions.

Several innovative projects leverage new media to connect citizens with local government around Texas. [SeeClickFix](#), which currently operates in Austin, Dallas, and Houston, allows users to report problems such as inefficient traffic lights, fire hazards, or areas of neighborhood crime to a community website, where government officials and neighborhood organizations can gather information and seek solutions. Officials and citizens can monitor the progress of the claim, add comments, or post pictures, and observe whether some areas of town have their needs addressed more quickly than others. When citizens see resolution to their reports, they may be more inclined to further participate in their communities.

Another innovative approach was the Manor Labs project (now discontinued), which used incentives and games to encourage citizen participation. The City of Manor, Texas, created an interactive website that allowed citizens to post ideas to key problems facing the community. Users could then vote on possible solutions. Winning ideas received “innobucks” that could be traded for perks in the community.<sup>92</sup>

Another innovation, [Textizen](#), is a text message application that allows governments to create mini surveys to receive instant feedback from the community. If a local government needs feedback on a neighborhood development project, for example, officials can craft a short survey and advertise the survey with a phone number and prompt to text in a response. The survey then mimics a text chat; when a citizen responds, a follow-up question is sent. Since the app is mobile phone based, officials can reach citizens in areas that may not have Internet access.<sup>93</sup> The City of Austin recently used Textizen during the 2013 New Year’s Eve Festival.

### Educational Attainment among Texans 25 or Older

Last Grade Completed	% of Texans
Less than 9th grade	10.0%
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	10.0%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	26.0%
Some college, no degree	22.0%
Associate’s degree	6.3%
Bachelor’s degree	17.3%
Graduate or professional degree	8.5%
Percent high school graduate or higher	80.0%
Percent Bachelor’s degree or higher	25.8%

## WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO

Beyond these large-scale efforts to improve the institutions that shape civic life, there are many actions individuals can take to expand their personal participation—and that of others around them.

Readers are invited to begin the conversation at [www.txcivichealth.org](http://www.txcivichealth.org), where you can comment on what you've read here; talk with others about what is working in your communities; talk about why you think political participation is important or why you don't vote; and suggest ideas for improving civic health in Texas.

Some ideas include:

### Voting:

- Plan a debate watch or election night party.
- Get savvy about the candidates and issues.
  - League of Women Voters Voting Guide - <http://www.lwvtexas.org>
  - Project Vote Smart's "VoteEasy" Guide - <http://www.votesmart.org/voteeasy/>
- Start a conversation about the election with someone you don't usually talk to about politics.
- Remind your friends to vote.
- Help a friend find their polling place and get to the polls - <http://www.vote411.org>

### Engaging Your Representatives:

- Call, write, or visit your legislators to discuss issues that matter to you: <http://bit.ly/4vZhMc>
- Track legislative bills and watch sessions live: <http://bit.ly/4hoEhh>
- Join a nonprofit that advocates on issues you care about.
- Write a letter to the editor or use social media to share your views.
- Testify at a public House, Senate, or City Council committee hearing.

### Building Social Capital and Civic Involvement

- Reach out to neighbors and other residents across lines of geography, age, gender, race and ethnicity, and education levels. Get involved in intergenerational activities.
- Talk with your children, other family members, and friends about issues you care about and how to make a difference.
- If you see a need in your community, bring friends and neighbors together to figure out how to address it.

### What Civic Organizations and Community-Based Groups Can Do<sup>94</sup>

- Organize community conversations that bring diverse groups of people together to address common problems. Include everyone and issue personal invitations. Involve a wide range of community groups in the project.
- Integrate civic participation into your programming.
- Act as a hub for collecting stories that feature people who have made a difference in civic life. Help build citizens' confidence and knowledge to speak on critical issues.
- Support programming that welcomes and orients newcomers to Texas, especially young people, immigrants, and other new and future citizens.

# 66%

of social media users in the U.S. use new media platforms to post their thoughts about civic and political issues, react to others' postings, press friends to act on issues and vote, [and] follow candidates.



## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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In many ways, there is no roadmap for civic engagement in the 21st Century. As the state of Texas continues to grow and change, the way forward can be illuminated with further research and discussion. The following questions seem particularly pressing:

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**We need more knowledge about the many diverse communities across Texas.** The statewide data presented here are vital, but we need to drill down.

- What is happening in different regions of Texas? Are there some parts of the state that are comparatively healthier civically? If so, what are they doing that's working? On the other hand, if there are areas that lag the rest of the state in indicators of civic health, what explains those gaps?
- What strategies can help better connect low-income, low-education individuals to the civic life of their communities?
- What efforts to improve civic health adopted in other states or communities might also work here in Texas?

**We need to know more about young people:** about their social connectedness, how they think about what it means to be a responsible citizen, and whether they feel invited to participate in public life.

- We could learn more about what works in civics education. For example, many of today's students in Texas are learning English even as they learn the rest of the curriculum. Does civics education work in the same ways for those populations?
- How might changes to the public school civics curricula affect civic literacy, civic attitudes, and rates of civic engagement among young Texans?
- How do young Texans think about what it means to be a "citizen" today?

**We need to know more about civic engagement among Texas's diverse racial and ethnic groups and among immigrants to the state.** One study found that even ten years after naturalization, 60% of new U.S. citizens do not take part in our most significant democratic tradition. Their absence is all the more puzzling since 80% of immigrants say being able to vote is an important reason for their having sought citizenship in the first place.<sup>95</sup> In Texas, this is a particularly significant challenge.

- What groups and institutions are best poised to engage recent immigrants in the civic life of the state?
- What differences might exist in the engagement habits and opportunities of native-versus foreign-born Hispanics?
- What role do language and cultural barriers play in connecting Hispanics, immigrants, and other low-engagement groups to Texas communities? What institutions and organizations could act as connectors for or bridges to these populations?
- Should measures of civic health be refined to better capture the kinds of engagement most readily available to immigrant and minority populations? For example, a high level of social capital is often needed to relocate from one nation to another. Research could better assess the value of those social networks to the state's civic health, and also reconsider what "counts" as civic participation.



## CONCLUSION

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“If this is going to be a country that’s owned by its people, then the owners have got to be active in the management of the country. It’s that simple.”

–H. Ross Perot, June 1988

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The troubling state of civic health described in this report should be of concern to all Texans who care about the future of our state. How can Texas more effectively engage a larger number and broader range of its citizens to meet the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead?

What happens in Texas also matters nationally, both because of the sheer number of voters in our state and because we are at the leading edge of a massive national demographic shift.<sup>96</sup> For example, Texas has featured prominently in the news since the 2012 presidential election, with a great deal of speculation about which political party will tap the state’s large pool of potential Hispanic voters.

What is often missing from those discussions is a clear picture of the current levels of political engagement across Texas’s many diverse populations. Whether any political party can effectively mobilize these groups depends in large part on whether those who are currently disengaged develop new civic habits. Efforts aimed at turning out new voters just for the next election might not help to build the attitudes and habits necessary for *sustained* political and civic engagement. Fostering a greater sense of civic ownership and enhanced civic skills among these groups—and among all Texans—is the real challenge.





## A FINAL WORD

This report should be a conversation-starter. The data and ideas presented here raise as many questions as they answer. We encourage government entities, community groups, business people, leaders of all kinds, and individual citizens to treat this report as a first step toward building more robust civic health in Texas.

## TECHNICAL NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, findings presented in this report are based on CIRCLE's analysis of the Census Current Population Survey (CPS) data. Any and all errors are our own. Volunteering estimates are from CPS September Volunteering Supplement, 2002-2011, voting and registration data come from the CPS November Voting/Registration Supplement, 1972-2010, and all other civic engagement indicators, such as discussion of political information and connection to neighbors, come from the 2011 CPS Civic Engagement Supplement.

Using a probability selected sample of about 60,000 occupied households, the CPS collects monthly data on employment and demographic characteristics of the nation. Depending on the CPS supplement, the Texas CPS sample size used for this report ranges from 4,183 (civic engagement supplement) to 4,721 (volunteer supplement) residents from across the state. This sample is then weighted to representative population demographics for the state. Estimates for the volunteering indicators (e.g., volunteering, working with neighbors, making donations) are based on U.S. residents ages 16 and older. Estimates for civic engagement and social connection indicators (e.g., exchanging favor with neighbor, discussing politics) are based on U.S. residents ages 18 and older. Voting and registration statistics are based on U.S. citizens who are 18 and older (eligible voters). Any time we examined the relationship between educational attainment and engagement, estimates are only based on adults ages 25 and older, based on the assumption that younger people may still be completing their education.

Because we draw from multiple sources of data with varying sample sizes, we are not able to compute one margin of error for the state across all indicators. Any analysis that breaks down the sample into smaller groups (e.g., gender, education) will have smaller samples and therefore the margin of error will increase. Data for some indicators are pooled from multiple years (2009-2011) for a more reliable estimate when sample sizes for certain cross tabulations may have been small. Due to the small sample size, findings should be interpreted with caution, and may not be generalized across the population. Furthermore, national rankings, while useful in benchmarking, may be small in range, with one to two percentage points separating the state ranked first from the state ranked last.

It is also important to emphasize that our margin of error estimates are approximate, as CPS sampling is highly complex and accurate estimation of error rates involves many parameters that are not publicly available.

## A WORD ABOUT RECOMMENDATIONS

NCoC encourages our partners to consider how civic health data can inform dialogue and action in their communities, and to take an evidence-based approach to helping our communities and country thrive. While we encourage our partners to consider and offer specific recommendations and calls to action in our reports, we are not involved in shaping these recommendations. The opinions and recommendations expressed by our partners do not necessarily reflect those of NCoC.

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# CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

## State and Local Partnerships

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NCoC began America's Civic Health Index in 2006 to measure the level of civic engagement and health of our democracy. In 2009, NCoC was incorporated into the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act and directed to expand this civic health assessment in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Census Bureau.

NCoC now works with partners in more than 30 communities nationwide to use civic data to lead and inspire a public dialogue about the future of citizenship in America and to drive sustainable civic strategies.

## STATES

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### Alabama

University of Alabama  
David Mathews Center  
Auburn University

### Arizona

Center for the Future of Arizona

### California

California Forward  
Center for Civic Education  
Center for Individual and  
Institutional Renewal  
Davenport Institute

### Connecticut

Everyday Democracy  
Secretary of the State of Connecticut

### Florida

Florida Joint Center for Citizenship  
Bob Graham Center for Public Service  
Lou Frey Institute of Politics  
and Government  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

### Georgia

GeorgiaForward  
Carl Vinson Institute of Government,  
The University of Georgia  
Georgia Family Connection Partnership

### Illinois

Citizen Advocacy Center  
McCormick Foundation

### Indiana

Center on Congress at Indiana University  
Hoosier State Press  
Association Foundation  
Indiana Bar Foundation  
Indiana Supreme Court  
Indiana University Northwest

### Kentucky

Commonwealth of Kentucky,  
Secretary of State's Office  
Institute for Citizenship  
& Social Responsibility,  
Western Kentucky University  
Kentucky Advocates for Civic Education  
McConnell Center, University of Louisville

### Maryland

Mannakee Circle Group  
Center for Civic Education  
Common Cause-Maryland  
Maryland Civic Literacy Commission

### Massachusetts

Harvard Institute of Politics

### Michigan

Michigan Nonprofit Association  
Michigan Campus Compact  
Michigan Community Service Commission  
Council of Michigan Foundations  
The LEAGUE Michigan

### Minnesota

Center for Democracy and Citizenship

### Missouri

Missouri State University

### New Hampshire

Carsey Institute

### New York

Siena College Research Institute  
New York State Commission on National  
and Community Service

### North Carolina

North Carolina Civic  
Education Consortium  
Center for Civic Education  
NC Center for Voter Education  
Democracy NC  
NC Campus Compact  
Western Carolina University Department of  
Public Policy

### Ohio

Miami University Hamilton Center for  
Civic Engagement

### Oklahoma

University of Central Oklahoma  
Oklahoma Campus Compact

### Pennsylvania

Center for Democratic Deliberation  
National Constitution Center

### Texas

University of Texas at San Antonio  
The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life,  
University of Texas at Austin

### Virginia

Center for the Constitution at James  
Madison's Montpelier  
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

## CITIES

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### Chicago

McCormick Foundation

### Miami

Florida Joint Center for Citizenship  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation  
Miami Foundation

### Seattle

Seattle City Club  
Boeing Company  
Seattle Foundation

### Twin Cities

Center for Democracy and Citizenship  
Citizens League  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

## MILLENNIALS CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

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### Millennials Civic Health Index

Mobilize.org  
Harvard Institute of Politics  
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