

# SOUTH CAROLINA CIVIC HEALTH INDEX



## VISIONS FOR ACTION

UPSTATE



Metropolitan Studies Institute



National Conference on Citizenship  
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*Left cover photo credit: Kristi Query*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report offers the first comprehensive assessment of civic health in the state of South Carolina. Civic health is determined by analyzing a series of indicators that measure **political participation, community involvement, and neighborhood engagement**. The findings show that South Carolinians vote at surprisingly high rates, frequently discuss politics with friends and family, participate heavily in community groups – particularly religious organizations, and regularly talk with neighbors.

Further analysis uncovers wide disparities of civic health among different demographic groups. Educational attainment is an especially strong predictor of whether a person is engaged in the Palmetto State. Across most civic health indicators evaluated in this report, those with less education are less active in society. This does not make South Carolina unique as this is a trend for most states; however, the marginal differences are shocking. On several indicators, the most educated people are more than 10 times more participatory than the least educated.

Civic health is also analyzed across racial groups. In the 2012 presidential election, the African-American voter turnout rate was higher than that of Caucasians. Given the well-documented and shameful history of racial discrimination in South Carolina, this is a remarkable finding. It is also inconsistent with findings that show Caucasians to be more active in other forms of political and community activity. It is within neighborhoods where the African-American population has stronger levels of civic health.

Finally, there is a profound generational engagement divide in South Carolina. Consistent with national trends, seniors are the most engaged cohort in the state. Conversely, the 18 – 29 year old group drags down overall state averages across every single civic health indicator. To put their meager rates of civic activity into a national perspective, this report compares young people in the state to their peers across the country. The data show that young South Carolinians are leaders of their generation in voting and registration rates. However, participation rates across several other civic health indicators are about average and rank in the bottom half of the country.

The *South Carolina Civic Health Index* concludes with four “**Visions for Action**” designed to improve civic health for all residents or targeted groups. Any specific idea, however, must be created and vetted by the people of the state. Therefore, each vision is accompanied with discussion questions that can aid in the development of plans to build a more participatory and engaged South Carolina.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A thriving democratic society is dependent upon an actively engaged citizenry. Participation in activities such as voting in elections, volunteering for political campaigns, joining interest groups, and participating in marches or protests serve to communicate peoples’ beliefs to political leaders. Political leaders are dependent upon the information that is drawn from such activity if they are to successfully make decisions reflective of their constituents’ desires.

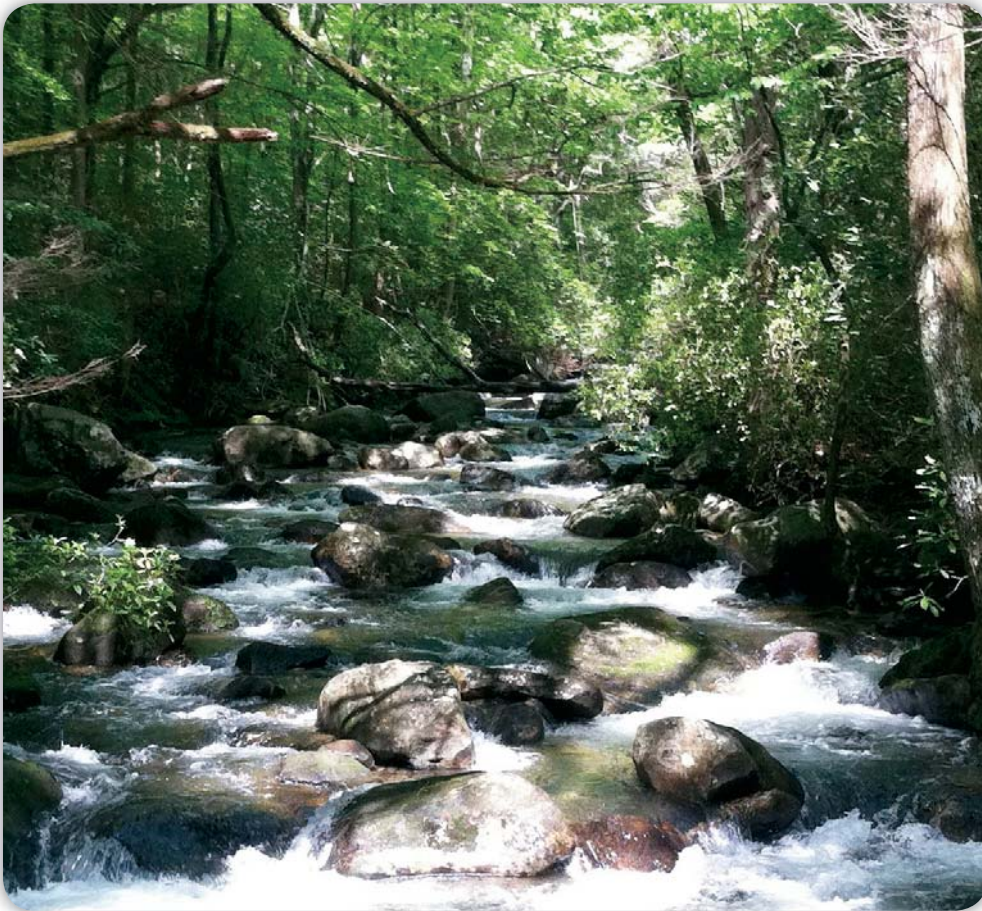
Further, political activity affords people and groups opportunities to apply pressure to elected leaders.<sup>1</sup> Leaders who are interested in serving their constituents and maintaining their positions in government rely upon votes, volunteers, and campaign contributions. Accordingly, there is an obvious incentive for political leaders to be responsive to the demands made upon them.

The lines of communication between citizens and political leaders can be fragmented. This occurs when people are not politically active. A society simply cannot function as a democracy without the people providing clear and continued guidance to their political leaders. How is it possible for political leaders to know what is important to the entire citizenry if the people are not communicating? How can they be expected to make decisions that reflect peoples' collective beliefs if they do not know what is important to them? Political leaders need information conveyed through political activity if they are to succeed in their role of representation. Without guidance from citizens, political leaders are left to their own devices.

Information conveyed through political activity reveals the beliefs of participants; however, it fails to provide a complete and accurate picture of what is important to the people. This is because political activity is a voluntary enterprise and not everyone participates. Political leaders receive information from those who provide it and feel pressure from those who apply it. Naturally, there is an incentive to be responsive to those who are politically active. On one hand, democracy is enhanced when people who actively fight for their beliefs are able to influence decisions. On the other hand, the beliefs of people who do not participate find themselves in a disadvantaged position.

The *South Carolina Civic Health Index* holds the belief that **political participation** is good for society, and stimulating activity among **all** segments of the population is of the highest importance.

South Carolinians vote at surprisingly high rates, frequently discuss politics with friends and family, and participate heavily in community groups – particularly religious organizations, and regularly talk with neighbors.



Photography credit: Jeff Kaplan



## TRENDS IN POLITICAL ACTIVITY

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The most popular method of political activity in the United States is voting. Following dramatic declines in turnout from the 1940s – 1990s, voting rates have spiked in recent presidential elections. When Barack Obama was elected to his first term in 2008, the national turnout rate among eligible voters crested 60% for the first time since the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> The amount of people who contributed money to political campaigns has also risen, having almost doubled from 1992 – 2008.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the amount of people who attempted to influence how others vote has increased dramatically.<sup>4</sup>

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Despite increased participation in electoral politics, the standard narrative among many researchers is that the United States is experiencing a “democracy crisis.” This is due to a steady depression of rates across other types of political activity. In his seminal book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam finds that “Americans were roughly half as likely to work for a political party or attend a political rally or speech in the 1990s as in the 1970s.”<sup>5</sup> He further identifies drastic declines in attendance to public meetings on town and school affairs, in addition to service as an officer or committee member of a club or local organization.

Due to (or perhaps causing) reduced rates in political activity, Americans have become increasingly distrusting of and disconnected from the government. A glance at the American National Election Studies data provides revealing trends about attitudes towards the government.<sup>6</sup> From 1958-2008, the amount of people who trust the government *decreased* from 73% to 30%.<sup>7</sup> The amount of people who believe that political leaders are crooked *increased* from 24% to 51%.<sup>8</sup> The amount of people who “agree” that political leaders do not care what people think *increased* from 25% to 60%.<sup>9</sup> Even connections to the major political parties declined. The amount of people identifying as “independent,” climbed from 20% to 40%.<sup>10</sup>

Given that it is composed of representatives who identify with same major political parties that people are less connected to, it comes as no surprise that the approval rating of the United States House of Representatives hit an all-time low of 9% in late 2013.<sup>11</sup>

Putnam argues that disengagement from the political arena is not the problem. Instead, it is a symptom of Americans’ withdrawal from civil society altogether. Beyond politics, his study meticulously examines patterns of engagement in social organizations, faith-based institutions, informal social connections that people build with neighbors, and even the time people spend with family and friends. He concludes:

*“During the first two-thirds of the century, Americans took a more and more active role in the social and political life of their communities—in churches and union halls, in bowling alleys and clubrooms, around committee tables and card tables and dinner tables. Year by year we gave more generously to charity, we pitched in more often on community projects, and (insofar as we can still find reliable evidence) we behaved in an increasingly trustworthy way toward one another. Then, mysteriously and more or less simultaneously, we began to do all of those things less often.”<sup>12</sup>*

The implications of broad disengagement extend beyond concerns about the state of the American democracy. The connections built through participation in civil society are paramount to the overall well-being of the country, its communities, and the people who live in them. Without people encountering each other in formal institutions or through informal social relationships, suspicion rises and public trust suffers. Conversely, Putnam argues that “social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy.”<sup>13</sup> The *South Carolina Civic Health Index*, therefore, considers **community involvement** and **neighborhood engagement** to be equally as important to civic health as **political participation**.



Photography credit: University of South Carolina Upstate

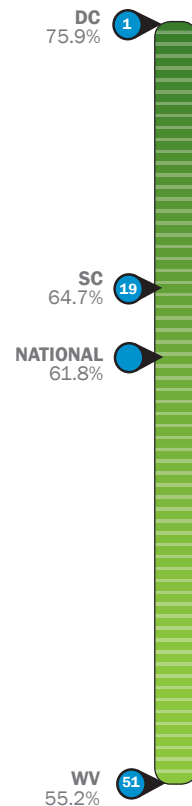
## STATE-WIDE CIVIC HEALTH

Voter turnout rates in the state have improved over the years and rank highly in comparison to other states.<sup>14</sup> In the 2012 presidential election, 64.7% of South Carolina’s citizens over the age of 18 voted, and 73.3% were registered. The state ranks 19th in voter turnout and 22nd in voter registration. The national turnout rate was 61.8% and the registration rate was 71.2%.

This is especially remarkable considering the lack of attention the state received during the 2012 presidential campaign. The Romney campaign spent under \$1000 for television campaign advertisements in the Charleston and Columbia media markets combined.<sup>15</sup> The Obama campaign did not report any spending in either market. The campaigns were more visible in the Upstate, which is likely a function of sharing a media market with western North Carolina. In the final month leading up to Election Day, Republican Vice Presidential Candidate Paul Ryan visited the state once, representing the only visit by either campaign.<sup>16</sup>

In 2010, 50.9% of eligible South Carolinians voted in the midterm election compared to the national turnout of 45.5%. This ranks as the 14th highest in the country and notably represents the highest turnout for a midterm election in the history of the state. South Carolina’s voter registration rate of 69.0% also beat the national average (65.1%). This ranks an impressive 13th among all states.

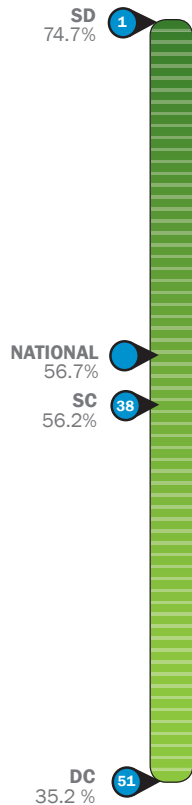
### VOTER TURNOUT



Other forms of political activity include contacting or visiting with public officials and boycotting specific products in order to make a political statement. Rates of participation in these activities are below national averages and rank towards the very bottom of the nation. The data show that 9.5% of South Carolinians contacted public officials, which disappointingly ranks 48th in the country. About 8.7% of residents participated in a boycott of particular products or services, which ranks a dismal 46th.

Although it does not appear to translate into a more politically active citizenry beyond voting, South Carolinians are interested in politics. This is demonstrated by the 30.3% of residents who frequently talk about politics with friends and family. This figure is slightly above the national average and ranks 25th in the nation.

#### TRUST IN NEIGHBORS



Participation in community life is another determinant of civic health. Community involvement occurs through memberships in organized civic, religious, or other community-based groups. Over 40% of residents in South Carolina, slightly above the national average, participate in at least one type of organization and almost 10% hold leadership roles as an officer or committee member. The state ranked 22nd for group membership and 37th in leadership rate.

By far, faith-based organizations are the most popular groups to join in South Carolina. Religious institutions are not only houses of prayer, but also social organizations where people come together for fellowship and the sense of community they provide.<sup>16</sup> More than one out of four residents participate in a church, synagogue, or mosque. This is well above the national average and ranks an extraordinary 7th in the country. About 17% of residents participate in school groups or neighborhood association, which respectably ranks 17th in the country. Beyond group participation, attendance to public meetings of town or school affairs is another way to get involved in the community. South Carolina attendance rates are below the national average and rank 44th in the country.

Finally, there are neighborhood engagement indicators of civic health that measure a range of attitudes and behaviors. One of the most common ways to engage neighbors is through informal conversations. About 45% of residents in South Carolina frequently talk with their neighbors, which is above the national average and ranks 22nd nationally. The state ranks 30th in people who exchange favors with their neighbors frequently (a few times a week or more) with a rate of about 14%. Perhaps the most important indicator of neighborhood engagement is trust. Putnam describes trust as an asset that can “lubricate the inevitable frictions of social life” and that “people who trust others are all-around good citizens, and those more engaged in community life are both more trusting and more trustworthy.”<sup>18</sup> South Carolina meets the national average for trust, as 56.2% trust all or most of their neighbors. The state ranks 38th on this vitally important indicator.



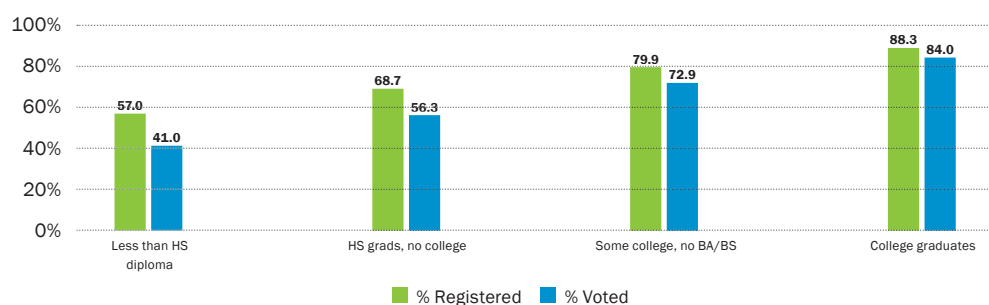


## CIVIC HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

South Carolina is particularly strong in voter turnout and registration, the level in which people discuss politics among friends and family, participation in organized groups (especially through religious institutions), and the frequency in which people talk with their neighbors. However, there are systematic discrepancies between residents who are engaged in society and those who are not.

Among residents who are at least 25 years old, 15.9% did not complete high school, 30.3% graduated high school with no further education, 29.2% completed some college, and 24.5% are college graduates.<sup>19</sup> There are startling disparities between these groups across most civic health indicators. In 2012, the percent of college graduates who voted in the presidential election was more than double the rate of those who did not successfully complete high school.

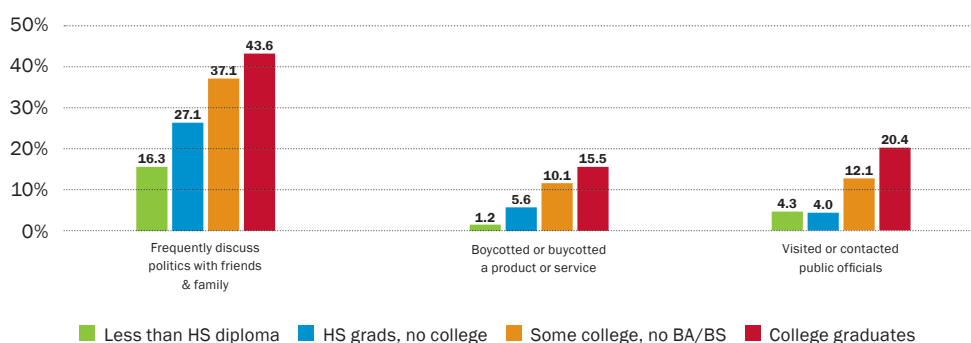
**Registration and Voter Turnout Rates in South Carolina by Educational Attainment (2012)**



College graduates are also far more active across other methods of political activity. For every 5 college graduates that contacted or visited public officials, only 1 person without a high school diploma followed suit. The ratio is even wider when examining the activity of boycotting products or services. For every 13 college graduates who participated, only 1 person with less than a high school diploma did as well.

Talking about politics with friends and family is far more prevalent among those with higher levels of education. More than 4 out of 10 South Carolinians with a college degree have such frequent discussions, while a paltry 16.3% of the least educated group does the same.

**Political Participation Rates by Educational Attainment in South Carolina (2012)**



Photography credit: Dr. Carol Loar



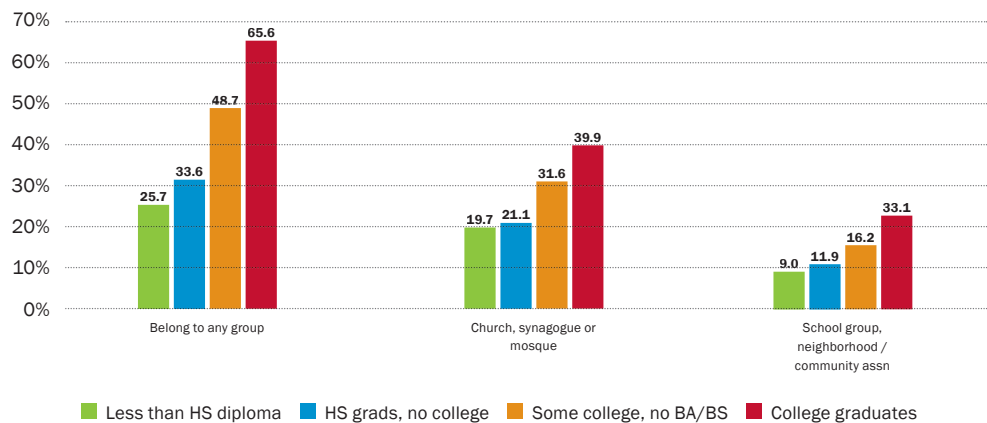
# 24.5%

Percentage of South Carolina residents with a college degree.

As with political participation, there are profound disparities in community involvement across levels of educational attainment. An impressive 66% of college graduates participate in at least one group. Rates of participation are not as strong among people with lower levels of education. About half of the people who completed some college and a quarter of residents who did not complete high school participate in some type of group.

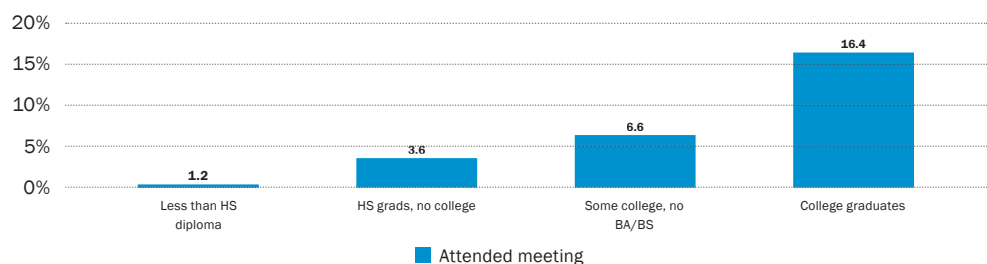
Interestingly the education gap is not as prominent when evaluating participation in a church, synagogue, or mosque. However, college-educated South Carolinians still double the rate of those who did not complete high school. Participation in school groups and neighborhood associations is also stratified by educational attainment. About one-third of college graduates participate in such a group. Less than 10% of residents who did not complete high school do the same.

#### Community Group Participation Rates by Educational Attainment in South Carolina (2012)



As with every other community involvement indicator, attendance to public meetings is far more common among those with higher levels of education. College graduates are more than four times as likely to have attended a meeting as those who did not continue their education after completing high school. Slightly more than 1% of residents who did not complete high school attend public meetings.

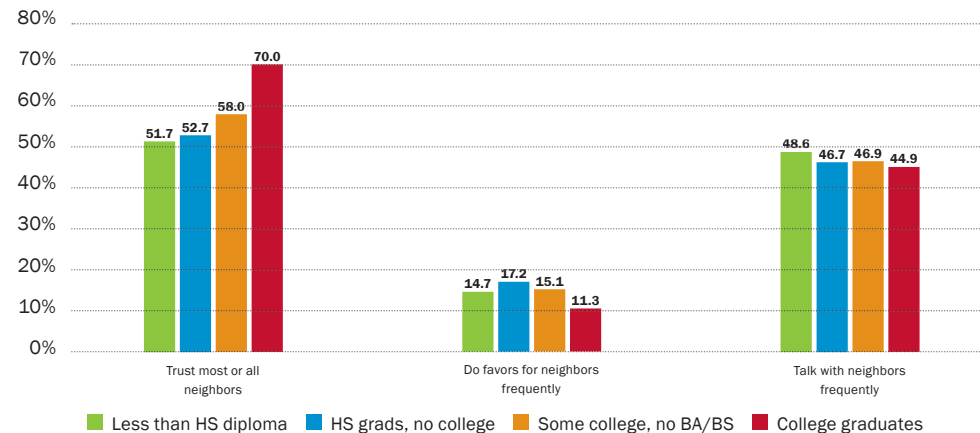
#### Community Meeting Attendance by Educational Attainment (25 or older) (2011)



An analysis of neighborhood engagement indicators break the pattern that is found within this section. Although the gaps are not large, college-educated residents exchange less favors and talk with neighbors less frequently than any other group. Those with lower levels of education score nominally higher on these indicators.

This signals that the least educated South Carolinians acquire some semblance of civic health from their neighbors. Most promising, is that almost half of those who did not complete high school

### Neighborhood Engagement by Educational Attainment in South Carolina (2011)



frequently talk with neighbors. However, with such a small percentage who report exchanging favors frequently, it is difficult to become too optimistic about this finding.

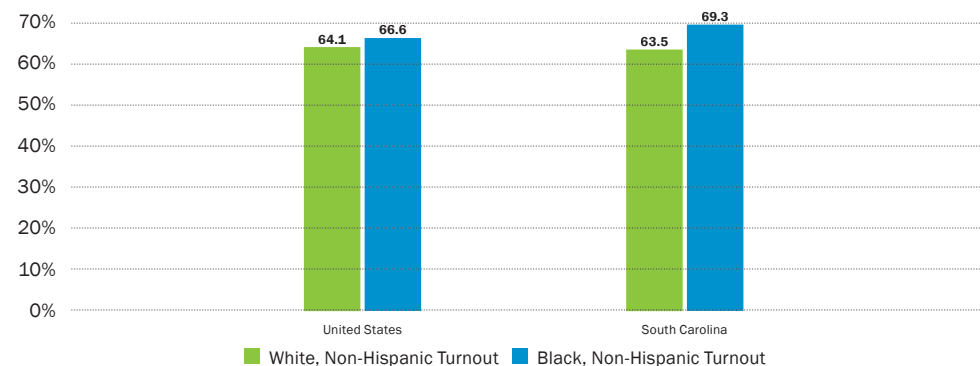
Analyzing levels of trust by educational attainment returns to the predictable pattern. An astonishing 7 out of 10 college educated residents trust most or all of their neighbors. A still respectable 50% of the least educated cohort trusts most or all of their neighbors, while an additional quarter trust “some” of their neighbors.

## CIVIC HEALTH AND RACE

The previous section demonstrates that there are significant differences based on educational attainment across most civic health indicators. Residents with higher levels of education are more active politically and within their communities. They are also more trusting of their neighbors. An analysis between racial groups does not yield such universal conclusions. Only Caucasian and African-American figures are reported in this section due to a small sample size of other racial categories.

About 7 out of 10 African-Americans over the age of 18 in South Carolina voted in the 2012 Presidential election. The African-American turnout rate in the state was higher than that of Caucasians and the overall national turnout.

### Voter Turnout by Race in the United States and South Carolina (2012)





African-American participation rates across other forms of political activity are less noteworthy. Only 4.5% contact or visit with public officials, which is three times below the rate for Caucasians in the state and is significantly less than African-Americans across the country. There is an inconsequential difference in rates of boycotting products or services between racial subgroups. Interestingly, however, Caucasians in the state participate considerably *less* than those across the country while African-Americans in the state participate slightly *more* than those across the country.

About one-third of Caucasians in South Carolina talk about politics with friends and family a few times a week or more. The rate among African-Americans is about 10 percentage points less and these figures are both in-line with national averages.

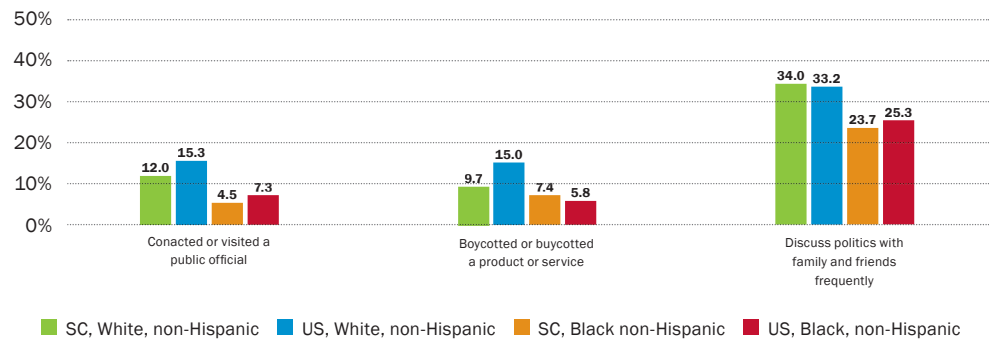
Source: Daemmrch Photography



**69.3%**

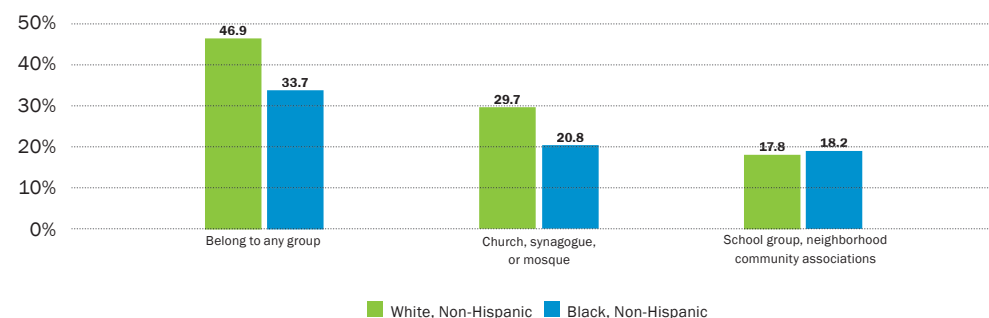
of African Americans over the age of 18 in South Carolina voted in 2012 - higher than caucasians and the overall national turnout.

#### Political Participation Rates by Race in South Carolina (2012)



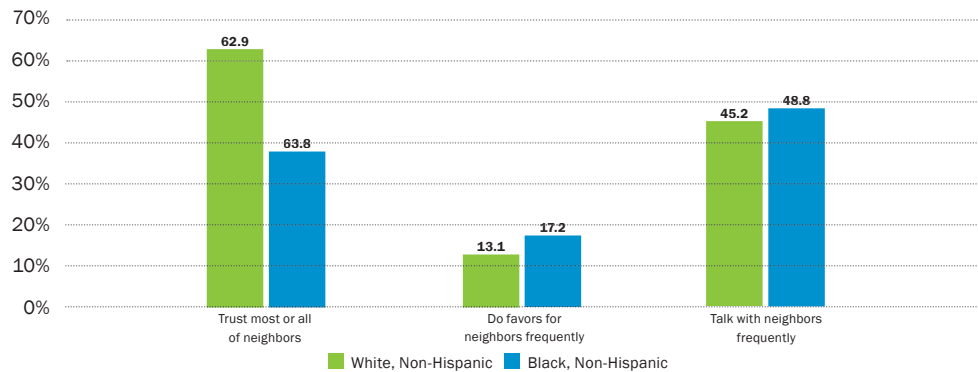
In South Carolina, Caucasians have higher rates of community involvement, while African-Americans are more engaged in neighborhoods. Slightly less than half of all Caucasians participate in at least one organized group, while about one-third of African-Americans do the same. Three out of 10 Caucasians participate in a church, synagogue, or mosque, which is about 10% higher than African-Americans. Participation rates in school groups and neighborhood associations are relatively equal. Higher rates of Caucasians attend public meetings of town or school affairs; however, the gap is marginal and neither subgroup scores particularly high on this indicator.

#### Community Group Participation by Race in South Carolina (2011)



African-Americans are more engaged in South Carolina's neighborhoods than Caucasians. This is demonstrated by having higher rates of speaking with neighbors regularly and by doing and receiving favors more often. Given these findings, it is surprising that Caucasians are far more trusting whereas 6 out of 10 trust most or all of the people in their neighborhoods, only 4 out of 10 African-Americans feel the same way.

### Neighborhood Engagement by Race in South Carolina (2011)



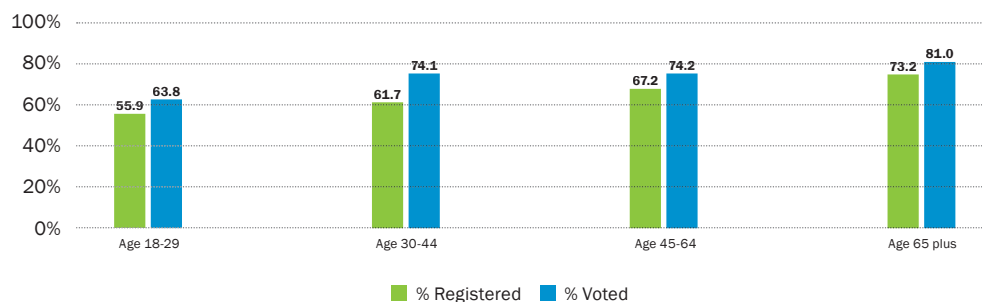
## CIVIC HEALTH AND AGE

Analyzing civic health indicators by racial groups in South Carolina does not yield consistent results. African-Americans vote at higher rates and are more engaged in neighborhoods, despite feeling less trust towards others. Caucasians participate more heavily in other forms of political activity, and have higher levels of community involvement. This report also explores differences in civic health by age group. The general trend across the indicators is that older South Carolinians are more politically active, more involved in communities, and more engaged in neighborhoods than younger residents.

A secondary analysis compares 18-29 year olds in South Carolina to 18-29 year olds across the country. Unfortunately, if current trends persist, the future of civic health in the state does not appear to be in a position to improve. Younger South Carolinians are not only less engaged than older South Carolinians, but with a few exceptions, their rates of activity are no higher than average in comparison to their own age group.

In 2012, about 3 out of 4—a tremendously high rate—of seniors voted in the Presidential election. Over 80% were registered. Voter turnout and registration rates decline with each age group. Although 18-29 year olds are responsible for dragging down overall rates, more than half participated in the election.

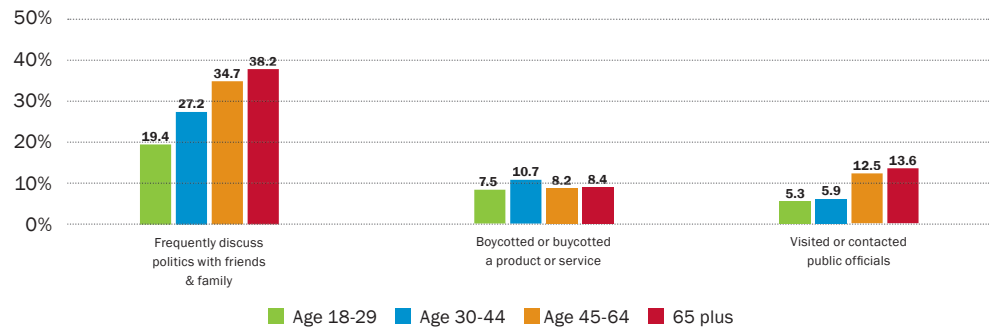
### Registration and Voter Turnout Rates by Age in South Carolina (2012)



A more significant difference exists when analyzing who contacts or visits with public officials. Participation among the two older age groups is more than double the rates of the younger two groups. Such a strong discrepancy does not appear when examining who participates in boycotts of products or services, although the 30-44 year old cohort is the only group that exceeds the state average.

Far more seniors in South Carolina frequently talk about politics with friends and family than younger residents. Almost 4 out of 10 — twice as much as the youngest group—have such conversations few times each week or more. Over half of 18-29 years olds in the state report never talking about politics.

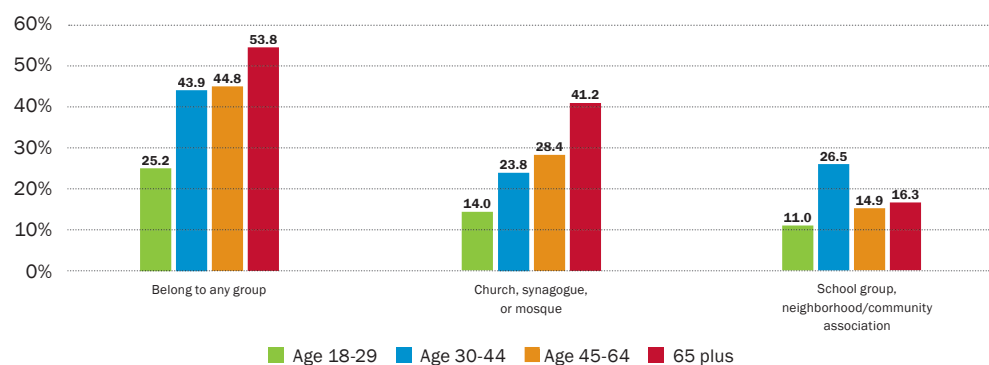
#### Political Participation Rates by Age in South Carolina (2012)



As with political participation, seniors are significantly more involved in South Carolina's communities than other age groups. Over half of all residents over the age of 65 participate in at least one group. This is 10% more than the 30-44 and 45-64 year old age groups and double the rate of the youngest group. Upon isolating religious-based groups, the discrepancies are even more pronounced. A meager 14% of 18-29 year olds participate in a church, synagogue, or mosque, which is an astonishing three times less than seniors. Not surprisingly, the 30-44 year old cohort is most active with school groups and neighborhoods associations. Although not evaluated in previous sections of this report, it bears mentioning that the participation in service or civic organizations yields the widest gap. Overall, only 7% of South Carolina's residents are members of such groups. However, 13.3% of the oldest cohort participates, while about 3% of the youngest two age groups do as well.

Attendance at public meetings is similarly stratified by age group. Although not a common activity in the state, the oldest two age groups participate at the highest rates. About 7% of the youngest group attends meetings.

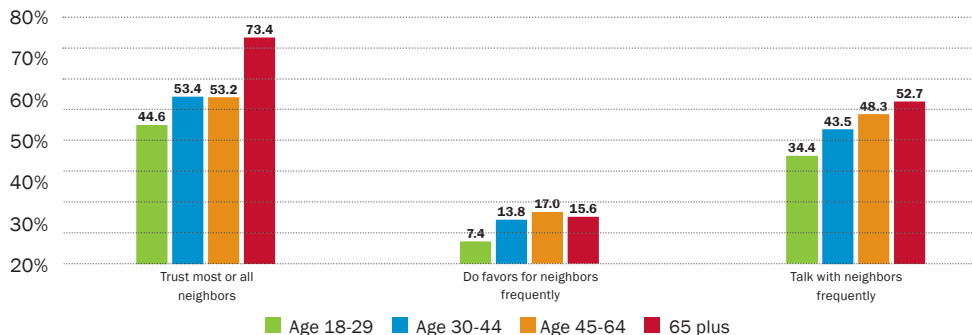
#### Community Group Participation by Age in South Carolina (2011)





Neighborhood engagement indicators follow the familiar pattern of this section. Slightly above seniors, the 45-64 year old group has the highest rate of frequently exchanging favors in their neighborhoods at 17%. That figure is more than double the rate for the 18-29 year olds. About half of the seniors in the state frequently talk with neighbors, while about one-third of the youngest group does the same. Slightly more than 7 out of 10 seniors trust all or most of their neighbors. This is significantly higher than the overall rate of trusting neighbors in the state. The overall rate is especially weighted down by the youngest group, where less than half have similar levels of trust.

#### Neighborhood Engagement by Age in South Carolina (2011)



Young South Carolinians trail behind other age groups across every single civic health indicator. This is not necessarily surprising. In the *Millennial Civic Health Index* that evaluated civic behavior of young people across the country, the National Conference on Citizenship cites a finding that points out “conventional group membership, attendance at meetings, working with neighbors, trusting other people, reading the news, union membership, and religious participation are all down for young people since the 1970s.”<sup>20</sup> The Pew Research Center yielded similar conclusions about young Americans. A 2014 study found that half of all 18–33 year olds consider themselves political independents, thus disconnected from the organized political parties that dominate the American government. They are also relatively less affiliated with religious organizations and are far less trusting than older cohorts. Interestingly, however, the group referred to as “Millennials” is more optimistic about the future of the country as measured by whether people think our “best years are ahead.”<sup>21</sup>

Portrayed as being a function of a larger national trend does not validate the dearth of civic engagement among young residents of South Carolina. However, it does put the issue into its proper context. A follow-up analysis compares the civic health of rates of 18-29 year olds in South Carolina to 18-29 year olds across the country to provide a better perspective of young residents’ engagement in the state. And, the news is not all bad.

Although young residents have the lowest voter turnout and registration rates in the state, South Carolina’s 18-29 year olds are among the highest in the nation in comparison to their own generation. The state remarkably ranks 6th in voter turnout and 8th in registration rates. The rankings are less impressive across other forms of political activity. Young people in South Carolina rank 28th in contacting or visiting public officials and 34th in participating in a boycott of products or services. These numbers are higher than the overall state-wide rankings on these indicators. Young people in South Carolina rank 35th in talking about politics with friends and family. Only about 5% of young South Carolinians express political or community opinions on the Internet a few times each week or more, thus ranking 47th in the country.

The 18-29 year-old group in South Carolina is outperformed by their peers across the country in community involvement. Young people in the state rank 45th in participation in any type of group. This is particularly disappointing given the state-wide rate of participation in groups (regardless of age) is above the national average. South Carolina’s 18-29 year olds rank 22nd in participation in religious organizations and in neighborhood or school-based associations. The rates of activity are in line with national averages on these indicators.



**53.8%**  
of South Carolina seniors belong to at least one group.

Young South Carolinians are among the nation's leaders in attendance to public meetings of town or school affairs. Rates of participation in the state are double the national average for 18-29 year olds. Although ranking 6th is cause for optimism, it still only represents less than 1 out of 10 young people in the state.

Finally, a comparison of neighborhood engagement indicators puts the civic health of young South Carolinians into a national context. The 18-29 year olds in the state rank 25th in talking with neighbors a few times a week or more. 40th in exchanging favors with neighbors, and 32nd in trusting people in their neighborhood. Despite these rankings, the actual rates of activity are about average for talking with and trusting neighbors.

		% of SC 18-29 year olds	% of USA 18-29 year olds	National Rank
VOTING, REGISTRATION, & POLITICAL PARTICIPATION	Voter turnout (2012)	55.9%	45.0%	6th
	Voter registration (2012)	63.8%	57.8%	8th
	Discuss politics (a few times a week or more)	19.4%	21.1%	35th
	Contacted or visited a public official	5.3%	5.3%	28th
	Attendance at public meetings	7.0%	3.6%	6th
	Express political or community opinions on the internet	5.0%	8.9%	47th
	Buy or boycott a product(s) or service(s)	7.5%	8.6%	34th
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND NEIGHBORHOOD ENGAGEMENT	Belong to any group	25.2%	29.6%	45th
	Participate in school group, neighborhood/community associations	11.0%	10.5%	22nd
	Participate in a church, synagogue, or mosque	14.0%	13.8%	22nd
	Talk with any of your neighbors (a few times a week or more)	34.4%	34.4%	25th
	Do or receive favors from neighbors (a few times a week or more)	7.4%	10.6%	40th
	Trust people in your neighborhood	44.6%	43.6%	32nd

## PERSPECTIVE ABOUT VOTING

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This report offers some positive news about voting in South Carolina. Despite very little attention from national campaigns, turnout and registration rates are above national averages. Further, African-Americans—a population subjected to a long history of disenfranchisement—have an exceedingly high turnout rate. Young people in the state are among their generation’s leaders in voter registration and turnout.

However, prominent scholars have described voting by its limitations. Relative to other forms of political activity, votes “communicate little information about the concerns and priorities of the voter” while “many other kinds of participation arrive with specific issue concerns attached.”<sup>22</sup> Voting requires people to package all of their concerns into the support of a single candidate. In a pluralist society, it cannot be assumed that voters support all of the preferences of the candidates for whom they vote. Nor can it be assumed that based solely on vote choice, elected officials know what is important to citizens. Leaders need to know citizen preferences to govern for the people; however, voting falls short of providing all the necessary information.

Some have even questioned whether voting in an election is a rational behavior.<sup>23</sup> It does not seem that the individual costs associated with voting (e.g., time off of work, driving to the polling station) outweigh the individual benefits. It is not likely that any individual is going to cast the deciding vote in any election, particularly at the national level. With the Democratic presidential candidate having won South Carolina one time in the past 40 years, national election outcomes are quite predictable in the state. Perhaps the relatively high turnout among South Carolinians is even more remarkable when viewed through this lens.

Researchers have discovered that people vote largely because they see it as their duty and to do their part to preserve democracy.<sup>24</sup> These are noble causes that should not be minimized. South Carolina’s turnout and registration rates would imply that there is a strong sense of civic duty among residents that has crossed racial and generational differences. Achieving a vibrant democratic environment, however, requires there to be clear lines of communication between citizens and leaders. As a mechanism to deliver specific information about what is important to the people of South Carolina, voting is insufficient.



If voting were the sole indicator of civic health, then South Carolina would be a model for the United States.

## VISIONS FOR ACTION

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The final section of the *South Carolina Civic Health Index* offers four Visions for Action based on the data analysis. The Visions for Action are not panaceas for the state’s civic health deficiencies, nor have they been developed or evaluated by South Carolina’s leaders and citizens. The Visions for Action do, however, represent what this report views as promising approaches to capitalizing on the strengths and addressing the challenges of the state.

Implementable strategies must be created by incorporating the ideas of the people of South Carolina. Therefore, each Vision for Action is accompanied by discussion questions aimed at igniting the broad dialogue that is necessary to making our great state even greater. Promoting **political participation**, **community involvement**, and **neighborhood engagement** for all segments of the state’s diverse citizenry is the job of everybody. It requires us to ask hard questions, challenge the status quo when it needs to be challenged, and determine whether our current policies, practices, and priorities encourage or inhibit the healthy, vibrant civil society that we aspire to be.



The *South Carolina Civic Health Index* demonstrates that the state ranks among the top half of the country in voter turnout and registration rates, the frequency in which people talk about politics with friends and family, participation in community groups, and the frequency in which people talk with their neighbors. It is notably among the nation's leaders in participation in religious organizations.

The low rates of activities that communicate specific information to political leaders, like contacting or visiting with public officials and boycotting products or services, represent the most glaring state-wide deficiencies. Further, the state ranks in the bottom half of the country in exchanging favors with neighbors and trusting all or most neighbors. Interestingly, the neighborhood engagement rates did not vary as strongly across education attainment categories as did political participation rates.

A fascinating body of research that can directly respond to neighborhood engagement deficits is related to the physical design and vibrancy of the public sphere in cities and towns. South Carolina has seen incredible population and urbanization growth. Currently, two out of three residents in South Carolina live in an urban area—a rate that has doubled in 60 years.<sup>25</sup> An influx of new residents and changing development patterns can challenge the public trust that can only build from familiarity.

Author Jane Jacobs famously wrote “the trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts.”<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, post-World War II development patterns have done little to encourage regular face-to-face contact between residents. Consequently, the public sphere has suffered despite continued improvements in the quality of private life. As offered by Andres Duany, an architect and planner described as the “father of New Urbanism” and his colleagues:<sup>27</sup>

*“Dollar for dollar, no other society approaches the United States in terms of number of square feet per person, the number of baths per bedroom, the number of appliances in the kitchen, the quality of the climate control, and the convenience of the garage. The American private realm is simply a superior product. The problem is that most suburban residents, the minute they leave this refuge, are confronted by a tawdry and stressful environment. They enter their cars and embark on a journey of banality and hostility that lasts until they arrive at the interior of their next destination. Americans may have the finest private realm in the developed world, but our public realm is brutal.”<sup>28</sup>*

The quality of the public sphere is not inconsequential for some aspects of civic health. One particular study finds that the built environment of the neighborhoods directly influences residents' levels of engagement. Those living in neighborhoods that allow people to get to destinations by walking—thus creating more face-to-face contact among residents—are more likely to know their neighbors, have friends visit their homes for company, and feel others are trustworthy than those who do not.<sup>29</sup> However, when communities are built in a design which isolates people from each other, neighborhood engagement suffers.

Understanding the importance of human interaction in the public sphere, some South Carolina communities have made great strides in improving the vibrancy of public places. The downtown of Greenville is nationally recognized as an example of how the public, private, and non-profit sectors can join forces to enhance community life. The Richland County Neighborhood Improvement Program in Columbia promotes initiatives designed to improve quality of life through collaborations between neighborhood organizations, businesses, local governments, and schools. Smaller towns like Lake City overcame improbable odds to implement a façade improvement program for downtown buildings, as well as a weeklong event called ArtFields, which includes a 10-day art competition and free community programming.

Civic health can be enhanced (or harmed) by the design of the built environment of communities and vibrancy of the public sphere. Therefore, this report suggests that leaders of the public, private, and non-profit sector collaborate in all municipalities to **develop and promote urban areas that bring people together and stimulate neighborhood engagement**. There are important questions related to this Vision for Action that merit discussion:

- Do you feel connected to others who live in your neighborhood? Why or why not?
- What does your neighborhood do to bring people together? What could it do better?
- Are there common characteristics among neighborhoods that have successfully fostered engagement among residents? What can be learned from them?
- Are there common characteristics among neighborhoods that have struggled to enhance engagement? How can any real or perceived barriers to creating more vibrant neighborhoods be overcome?

Opportunities for improvement are also identified upon analyzing different groups within the state. South Carolina's less educated residents and 18–29 year olds drag down overall civic health rates across most indicators. It is critical to devise targeted strategies that will stimulate civic behaviors and attitudes among these groups.

The astoundingly low rates of political participation, community involvement, and neighborhood engagement among less educated residents in the state represents the most daunting challenge. A *long-term* response to improving overall civic health is to improve overall educational attainment. The Association of American Colleges and Universities argues that a liberal college education “headlines the kinds of learning needed for a free society.”<sup>30</sup> This is accomplished through emphasizing the development of skills such as critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, information literacy, and teamwork and problem solving. These skills are directly applicable to participation in civil society. In one of the most extensive studies of political behavior ever conducted, civic skills are described as an important stimulant to participation in a range of activities. As noted by the study's authors:

*“The citizen who goes to the polls, attends a demonstration, or writes a check does not need to be especially articulate or well-organized or to be capable of exercising leadership. In contrast, activists who contact public officials, work in campaigns, serve on local boards, or work with others on community problems (or who accompany a contribution with a communication or attempt to organize a demonstration) will be more effective if they are skilled.”<sup>31</sup>*

Higher education also emphasizes civic knowledge and engagement and the development of ethical reasoning. An exciting example of a new initiative in South Carolina aiming to improve overall educational attainment rates exists with the Spartanburg Academic Movement (SAM). Inspired by a goal to increase the college graduate rate in Spartanburg County from 20% to 40% by 2030, the SAM is working to foster a county-wide culture that values education by recognizing that educational achievement is the responsibility of a broad range of community entities. It is building long-term strategic partnerships with leaders of education, business, government, foundation, community, and religious organizations to improve educational achievement by “measuring academic accomplishments that matter – cradle to career, setting achievement targets that escalate annually, aligning networks in pursuit of these targets, and encouraging and reporting progress with persistent regularity.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps most promising, aside from its strong leadership and broad coalition, is that the SAM recognizes that academic achievement and a love of learning can and should be cultivated at the earliest stages of life. Understanding that education is a strong predictor of civic health, this report suggests that all counties should follow the lead of the Spartanburg Academic Movement and **forge strategic community-based partnerships that foster a “culture that values educational achievement.”** Some questions related to this Vision for Action that merit discussion:

- Does your county currently promote a culture of educational achievement? What does it do well? What could it do better?
- What are the most significant barriers to improving educational achievement? How can those barriers be overcome?

- Who are the key groups that should take a leadership role in working to improve educational achievement in your county?
- What is one program or policy that you think would unquestionably improve the educational achievement rates of your county?

Higher rates of educational attainment will improve civic health. It can also influence individual earnings and break patterns of intergenerational immobility.<sup>33</sup> Educational attainment has been found to be directly linked to poverty rates, perceptions of physical health, and even incarceration rates.<sup>34</sup> Focusing on raising the educational attainment rate is paramount to a better society. However, it should not be at the cost of identifying *short-term* solutions to engaging the 75% of South Carolinians over the age of 25 who do not have a college diploma.

Civic health rates are substantially lower among less educated residents. Political participation and community involvement are particularly dominated by the most educated South Carolinians. One effective way to promote activity is to simply ask people to participate. Not surprisingly, people are more likely to vote, volunteer for a candidate, and contribute money to a party or candidate when contacted by a political party.<sup>35</sup> Political parties, however, have limited time and resources to devote towards recruiting people into participation and have an incentive to target people who they believe can be effective. It is for this reason that researchers find that “the wealthy, the educated, and the partisan are more likely to be targeted for mobilization than the poor, the uneducated and the uncommitted.”<sup>36</sup>

The conundrum this creates for those interested in improving *overall* civic health is that although people are more likely to participate if they are asked, there is an incentive to recruit people who are most likely to participate anyways. The 25% of South Carolinians with a college diploma are most likely to participate *and* most likely to be asked to participate.

This report does uncover a small window of opportunity to break this pattern and marginally improve civic health rates regardless of educational attainment. About half of the population in South Carolina never completed a credit hour of college. Of those, about 20% participate in a church, synagogue, or mosque. That figure represents over 450,000 residents. People with lower education levels in the state are not very civically active in South Carolina, but the modest level of involvement in religious institutions can be leveraged.

Experimental research finds that asking people face-to-face is the most effective form of mobilization in that it yields the most participation.<sup>37</sup> Acknowledging that recruitment efforts are time consuming and expensive, targeting religious organizations allows exposure to more people in a shorter amount of time. This is a wise investment for groups seeking to improve *overall* civic activity. It also exposes people who would not ordinarily be asked to become politically active or involved in communities to recruitment efforts.

Accordingly, this report suggests that political and nonprofit organizations **reach out to willing religious institutions to invite people to participate in nonpartisan political activity and broader community involvement**. Efforts to invite people to vote or become more involved in their communities should focus on improving activity **without** influencing ideas and political preferences. Readers interested in this Vision for Action should consider the following questions:

- Do you think churches, synagogues, and mosques are appropriate venues to host voter registration drives? Why or why not?
- What specific people or groups should be involved in trying to recruit less educated residents to become more involved in their communities?
- Are there any barriers that are unique to people with lower levels of education that hinder community involvement? How can those barriers be overcome?
- What are some other short-term implementable strategies that can improve civic health rates among residents who are less educated?



Another group that merits attention is young people in the state. The 18-29 year old group is significantly less politically active, less involved in communities, and less engaged in neighborhoods than older generations. This is likely attributed to larger national trends. In comparison to their own generation, voter turnout and registration rates have made young South Carolinians leaders in the country. However, rates across most other civic health indicators are about average and rank in the bottom half of the country.

The relative civic health rates of 18-29 year olds in the state seem to mirror the relative state-wide rates. Similar to the state-wide figures, young South Carolinians vote at high rates, despite less inspiring rankings across other forms of political activity. As with state-wide rankings, 18-29 year olds rank in the top half of their age-group in participation in religious organizations and neighborhood and school groups. Relative neighborhood engagement rates of young people also seem to mirror relative state-wide rates. Although 18-29 year olds talk with neighbors less frequently and exchange favors less often than older generations in South Carolina, the relative rankings are quite similar. These findings reinforce the idea that civic behavior is learned. Young people are more likely to become politically and socially active as adults when raised in an environment where political and social participation were emphasized.<sup>38</sup>

South Carolina residents give generously of their time and talents by volunteering in their communities and by joining and leading community-based groups. At least in presidential election years, many South Carolinians participate in electoral politics. Notably, South Carolinians have a great deal of confidence in their public schools, which stand at the center of many South Carolina communities. These schools play critical roles in the teaching of democratic values and the fostering of skills and habits needed for effective citizenship.

It is still somewhat surprising; however, that civic health is not much stronger among South Carolina's 18-29 year olds. The robust state standard for social studies education has been recognized as a national leader for its content and rigor.<sup>39</sup> By 5th grade, students will have completed two years of an American history curriculum that addresses major wars, the world-wide implications of the Soviet collapse, and the impact of 9/11 at home and abroad. High school students take required courses that focus on Constitutional development, citizenship, and the pluralistic nature of policy making.<sup>40</sup> These dynamic standards, however, are not translating into stronger civic engagement among young South Carolinians.

The national leader in research on youth civic engagement contends that schools and colleges cannot be relied upon to serve as the sole source of developing citizenship. Instead it should be fostered through a collaboration of policymakers across all levels of government, educators, and families and communities. Based upon a year-long study, the report *All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement* creates extensive recommendations that target those charged with promoting the civic health of young Americans.<sup>41</sup>

It is unclear how well (or poorly) the state measures up to the national recommendations. However, it is clear that efforts should be made to capitalize on the encouraging voter turnout rates of young South Carolinians. Therefore, **state leaders should consider assembling and empowering a "South Carolina Commission on Youth Civic Engagement."** Acknowledging the importance of understanding civic development as a shared responsibility, and not relying solely on schools, the commission should have inclusive representation. Its primary charge should be to make implementable recommendations designed to specifically improve the civic health of young people in the state. The aforementioned report, as well as the *South Carolina Civic Health Index*, should be required reading for the Commission to offer a starting point in their thinking about urgently needed guidance. Some questions that merit discussion about this Vision for Action:

- What goals should a "South Carolina Commission on Youth Civic Engagement" set?
- Who should be invited to serve on the Commission? Why?
- Why do you think young South Carolinians vote at such a high rate despite lower rates of community involvement and neighborhood engagement?
- Are there barriers to civic participation that especially effect young people? If so, how can they be overcome?

## 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 South Carolina.

## 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, 2002-2012, voting and registration data come from the CPS November Voting/Registration Supplement, 1972-2012, 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 South Carolina CPS sample size used for this Report ranges from 1,332 (Voting Supplement), 1,305 (Civic Engagement Supplement) to 1,389 (Volunteer Supplement) residents from across the state. This sample is then weighted to represent 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 (2010-2012) 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. The approximate estimate of margin of error rates range from two to three percentage points with this sample size.

## 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.

# ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The author credits Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady for framing political participation as a mechanism to communicate and apply pressure to political leaders.
- <sup>2</sup> McDonald, Michael P. 2014. "Presidential Voter Turnout Rates, 1948-2008". United States Elections Project. Accessed January 29, 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> The American National Election Studies ([www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org)) TIME SERIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers and distributors], 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster: New York. p. 41
- <sup>6</sup> The American National Election Studies ([www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org)) TIME SERIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers and distributors], 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> These percentages refer to respondents who reported that they "just about always" or "most of the time" trust the government in Washington to do what is right".
- <sup>8</sup> These percentages refer to respondents who felt that "quite a few" people running the government are crooked.
- <sup>9</sup> The 25% figure is drawn from the 1960 survey, as the question was not asked in 1958.
- <sup>10</sup> This included people who identified as "independent", regardless of whether they lean towards a party when pressed with a follow-up question.
- <sup>11</sup> Gallup Poll, November 12, 2013. Poll question retrieved December 30, 2013. Available from Gallup website, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/165809/congressional-approval-sinks-record-low.aspx>.
- <sup>12</sup> p. 183
- <sup>13</sup> p. 290
- <sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the findings throughout this report are based on analyses of the Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and United States Census data.
- <sup>15</sup> "Mad Money: TV Ads in the 2012 Presidential Campaign." Rev. of Campaign Spending 2012, by Wilson Andrews, Dan Keating, and Karen Yourish. Washington Post n.d.: n. pag. Washingtonpost.com. 14 Nov. 2012. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
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- <sup>17</sup> Newport, Frank. "Just Why Do Americans Attend Church?" Just Why Do Americans Attend Church? Gallup, Inc., 6 Apr. 2007. Web. 01 Jan. 2014.
- <sup>18</sup> p. 135 and 137
- <sup>19</sup> "Educational Attainment." American FactFinder. American Community Survey, Web. 08 Apr. 2014.
- <sup>20</sup> Millennials Civic Health Index. Report. Washington DC: NCOC, 2013. Print.
- <sup>21</sup> Millennials in Adulthood." Pew Research Centers Social Demographic Trends Project RSS. Pew Research Organization, 7 Mar. 2014. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.
- <sup>22</sup> Verba, S., Schlozman, K.L., Brady, H.E. 1995. *Voice and Equality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 13.
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- <sup>25</sup> "South Carolina Urban and Rural Population (1790-2010)." South Carolina Statistical Abstract: Population. SC Budget and Control Board, n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2013.
- <sup>26</sup> Jacobs, J. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House. p. 56.
- <sup>27</sup> Redmon, Kevin C. "The Man Who Reinvented the City." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 18 May 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.
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- <sup>32</sup> To learn more about the Spartanburg Academic Movement, visit their website: <http://www.learnwithsam.org/>.
- <sup>33</sup> United States Department of Treasury. 2012. *The Economic Case for Higher Education*. Available at: [http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Documents/The%20Economics%20of%20Higher%20Education\\_REPORT%20CLEAN.pdf](http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Documents/The%20Economics%20of%20Higher%20Education_REPORT%20CLEAN.pdf). Web. 13 February 2014.
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- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 32
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# CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

## State and Local Partnerships

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

### 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

### Colorado

Metropolitan State University of Denver

### Connecticut

Everyday Democracy  
Secretary of the State of Connecticut

### District of Columbia

ServeDC

### 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  
Volunteer Centers of Michigan  
Council of Michigan Foundations  
The LEAGUE Michigan

### Minnesota

Center for Democracy and Citizenship

### Missouri

Missouri State University  
Park University  
Saint Louis University  
University of Missouri Kansas City  
University of Missouri Saint Louis  
Washington University

### Nebraska

Nebraskans for Civic Reform

### 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

### South Carolina

University of South Carolina Upstate

### 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

## ISSUE SPECIFIC

### Latinos Civic Health Index

Carnegie Corporation

### Millennials Civic Health Index

Mobilize.org  
Harvard Institute of Politics  
CIRCLE

### Economic Health

Knight Foundation  
Corporation for National & Community  
Service (CNCS)  
CIRCLE



## CITIES

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### Chicago

McCormick Foundation

### Kansas City & Saint Louis

Missouri State University

Park University

Saint Louis University

University of Missouri Kansas City

University of Missouri Saint Louis

Washington University

### 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

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### Nelda Brown

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### Kenneth Prewitt

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### Robert Putnam

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### Thomas Sander

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### Max Stier

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### Michael Weiser

Chairman, National Conference on Citizenship

### Jonathan Zaff

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### Ilir Zherka

Executive Director, National Conference on Citizenship



## NOTES

NOTES



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