

# 2015 ALABAMA CIVIC HEALTH INDEX



DAVID MATHEWS  
CENTER *for* CIVIC LIFE



National Conference on Citizenship  
Connecting People. Strengthening Our Country.



## ABOUT THE PARTNERS

### DAVID MATHEWS CENTER FOR CIVIC LIFE

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that works with citizens who want to make positive, innovative decisions that lead to action in their communities on issues that concern them. The primary work of the Center is to encourage sustainable community practices that are aimed at building and preserving a healthy democracy. The Center takes a non-advocacy, non-partisan approach to fulfilling the important work that citizens must do to maintain a civic environment that promotes engagement. The David Mathews Center honors the life and work of David Mathews, a native of Grove Hill, Alabama and President and CEO of the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio.

### UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA - NEW COLLEGE

New College is the University of Alabama's commitment to providing personalized higher education for those students who need and desire special attention. New College is an interdisciplinary liberal arts program where students craft individualized courses of study consistent with their interests, aptitude, temperament, and skills. Each student, with the assistance of a New College faculty mentor, builds a depth study that includes New College seminars and coursework from across the University. In addition to traditional coursework, students can pursue research activities, community-based learning, and self-directed study. We believe our emphasis on student choice and responsibility promotes the creativity, flexibility, and adaptability necessary for effective participation in the emergent communities of the future.

### AUBURN UNIVERSITY - COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

The College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University, comprised of 13 academic departments and the Caroline Marshall Draughton Center for the Arts & Humanities, is home to nearly 4,500 undergraduate and graduate students. The College fosters a community in which students, faculty, and administration have an understanding of the human condition, a respect for individual and cultural differences, and a desire for the free exchange of ideas.

### NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is a congressionally chartered organization dedicated to strengthening civic life in America. We pursue our mission through a nationwide network of partners involved in a cutting-edge civic health initiative, an innovative national service project, and our cross-sector conferences. At the core of our joint efforts is the belief that every person has the ability to help their community and country thrive.

Congress chartered NCoC in 1953 to harness the patriotic energy and civic involvement surrounding World War II. We've been dedicated to this charge ever since. In 2009, Congress named NCoC in the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, once again memorializing our important role. This legislation codified and expanded our Civic Health Initiative (CHI) helping it become the nation's largest and most definitive measure of civic engagement.

NCoC's CHI is at the center of our work. Leveraging civic data made possible by the Corporation for National & Community Service, we have partnered with dozens of states, cities, and issue groups to draft reports and action plans to strengthen civic life. This initiative has also been an important incubator for programs such as the Civic Data Challenge and *The Civic 50*. Each program has used data and 21st century tools to create locally led, collective impact across our country. By 2020, we plan to integrate this pioneering initiative into ongoing partnerships in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**“As a democracy,** the United States depends on a knowledgeable, public-spirited, and engaged population.<sup>1”</sup>

~National Task Force on Civic Learning and Engagement, *A Crucible Moment*

Alabamians need look no further than their state’s rich history to find examples of “knowledgeable, public-spirited, and engaged” citizens. From the Alabamians who issued a clarion call for the state to pursue equality for all during the Civil Rights Movement to those who more recently cared for neighbors in need following the devastating tornadoes of April 27, 2011, the state has depended on citizens to stand for justice and provide assistance in challenging times. The success of any democratic government, including state governments, depends on citizens who work together to address difficult public issues and improve their communities.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, put forth that, “The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens.<sup>2”</sup> The 2015 Alabama Civic Health Index measures Alabama’s civic health by identifying and analyzing those functions performed by private citizens. These include both formal and informal functions such as voting, discussing politics, participating in community groups and organizations, and working with neighbors to fix or improve something in the community.



Photo provided by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life

**Table 1. Civic Participation in Alabama in 2013**

	%	Ranking
Voting (2012 Presidential Elections)	61.9%	28th
Volunteering	24.4%	35th
Attending public meetings	5.4%	49th
Charitable giving (\$25 or more)	55.1%	16th
Exchanging favors with neighbors	13.5%	16th
Working with neighbors to fix something in the community	4.7%	51st
Discuss politics with friends or family frequently	30.1%	19th
Voter registration (2012 Presidential Elections)	73.5%	20th

The 2015 Alabama Civic Health Index is a joint effort of the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, Auburn University’s College of Liberal Arts, University of Alabama’s New College, and the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC). It is the second in-depth examination of Alabama’s civic health. The David Mathews Center for Civic Life, Auburn University’s College of Liberal Arts, and University of Alabama’s New College authored the first Alabama Civic Health Index in 2011.

The 2015 Alabama Civic Health Index is linked to a national initiative of NCoC, an organization chartered by Congress. In 2006, NCoC began publishing America’s Civic Health Index. Three years later, this initiative was incorporated into the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which directed NCoC to expand the civic health assessment in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service and the US Census Bureau. Unless otherwise noted, findings presented in this report are based on analysis of the US Census Current Population Survey (CPS) data provided by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University.

Three key indicators are explored in the 2015 Alabama Civic Health Index: political action, social connectedness, and public work. Examined together, the three indicators illustrate how Alabamians engage in their communities, connect with each other, and work together to solve community problems. Each indicator includes both formal and informal measures of engagement that spotlight Alabama’s civic strengths and highlight areas for improvement.

**Political action**, as defined in this report, is composed of voting, discussing politics with family and friends, contacting public officials, expressing a public opinion online, and buying or boycotting products.

**Social connectedness**, as defined by this report, includes eating dinner with members of one's household, communicating with friends and family, talking with neighbors, doing favors for neighbors, and participating in groups.

**Public work**, according to this report, is composed of attending public meetings and working with neighbors to fix or improve something in the community.

The findings in this report show that civic life in Alabama is thriving in several key areas. Alabamians demonstrate strong social connectedness with family and friends. They exchange favors with neighbors frequently and give charitably at high rates. This affirms the state's reputation as being neighborly and hospitable. Alabamians also exceed national averages for frequently discussing politics with family and friends and for registering to vote.

Alabama's strong social connectedness and neighborliness, however, do not translate to high levels of public work. In fact, Alabama ranks at or near the bottom in rates of attending public meetings and working with neighbors to fix or improve something in the community.



Photo provided by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life

## Key Findings Include

- Nearly every indicator of civic health is positively related with educational attainment. Alabamians who hold a Bachelor's degree have higher rates of engagement in almost every measure of political action.
- Alabamians age 30 and over are nearly twice as likely as 18–29 year olds to vote in national (67.2% vs. 40.3%) and local (67.7% vs. 38.5%) elections.
- Urban Alabamians are more likely to vote and contact public officials, while rural Alabamians discuss politics with family and friends and exchange favors with neighbors more often.
- Trust forms an important component of any social bond, and 61.3% of Alabamians report trusting all or most of their neighbors. Nationally, only 55.8% of Americans report trusting their neighbors.

The data in this report captures a snapshot of Alabama's civic health. The fuller picture can be seen in cities and towns across the state where thousands of individual citizens come together to identify and address community problems in informal civic spaces, city halls, classrooms, and coffee shops.

The 2015 Alabama Civic Health Index answers questions about the state of Alabama's civic health, but more importantly it raises questions about what we can do together to strengthen civic life in our state. We hope to see Alabamians build upon a sturdy civic foundation to exercise a stronger hand in shaping civic life in our state. We invite you to examine the data, explore promising programs and initiatives, and continue the conversation in your community.

## ALABAMA At-a-Glance

**4,777,326**  
Alabama's population

**69.5%**  
White

**22.3%**  
Have a 4-year college degree

**13.9%**  
of Alabama families live below the poverty line

**47.1%**  
34 Years or younger\*

\*Source: American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

## KEY FINDINGS

### Political Action

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**“An American** gains his knowledge of the laws from his participation in legislation; he becomes educated about the formalities of government from governing. The great work of society is performed daily beneath his gaze, and so to speak, in his grasp.<sup>3”</sup>

~Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Political action primarily focuses on influencing government, large institutions, and public officials through both electoral and non-electoral means. Measures for political action include voting, discussing politics with family and friends, buying or boycotting products, expressing a public opinion online, and contacting public officials.

Alabamians perform above or on par with the national average in all measures of political action, except in contacting or visiting elected officials and buying or boycotting products.

A deeper examination of the individual measures of political action reveal differences in engagement based on educational attainment, age, geography, and race and ethnicity. Educational attainment is the single greatest factor related to high rates of political involvement. Those possessing a Bachelor’s degree or higher demonstrate greater rates of engagement in nearly every measure of political action in Alabama.

Age also matters when examining political action in Alabama. Alabamians age 18–29 are less likely to contact elected officials and boycott/buycott products than those 30 or older. They are also much less likely to vote in national and local elections than their older counterparts. In fact, Alabamians age 30 and over are nearly twice as likely as 18–29 year olds to vote in national (67.2% vs. 40.3%) and local (67.7% vs. 38.5%) elections.

Race and ethnicity also factor into how Alabamians take political action. African-Americans are more likely to vote in local and national elections than Whites. However, Whites discuss politics with family and friends, contact elected officials, and buy or boycott products and services at higher rates.

Alabamians living in urban areas are more apt to take political action than their suburban and rural counterparts. They surpass their suburban and rural counterparts in every measure of political action, except discussing politics with family and friends. Suburban Alabamians talk politics with family and friends at much lower rates (21.9%) than their rural (33.6%) and urban (32.0%) counterparts.



Samford Hall, photo provided by Auburn University Office of Communications and Marketing

## Voting

Voting constitutes one of the fundamental rights of citizenship, and rates of turning out to the polls reveal Alabamians' commitment to this primary form of political action. Alabamians performed well at the polls during the 2012 Presidential Election ranking the state at 28th in voter turnout. On Election Day 2012, 61.9% of eligible Alabama voters (i.e. U.S. citizens age 18 and over) cast ballots, slightly besting the national average (61.8%) for voter turnout. Furthermore, 59.9% of Alabamians report regularly voting in local elections, ranking Alabama 34th in the nation for percentage of citizens who sometimes or always go to the polls for local elections.

African-Americans in Alabama turned out to the polls at higher rates (63.1%) than White Alabamians (61.2%) in the 2012 Presidential Election. The 2012 Election marked a historic moment for African-American voters. Nationally, African-American citizens turned out to the polls in greater numbers (66.2%) than Whites (64.1%) for the first time since the Census began publishing voting rates in 1996.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau notes rising voter registration rates among African-Americans: "among all race groups and Hispanics, only Blacks showed a significant increase [in voter turnout] between 2008 and the most recent election in 2012."<sup>5</sup>

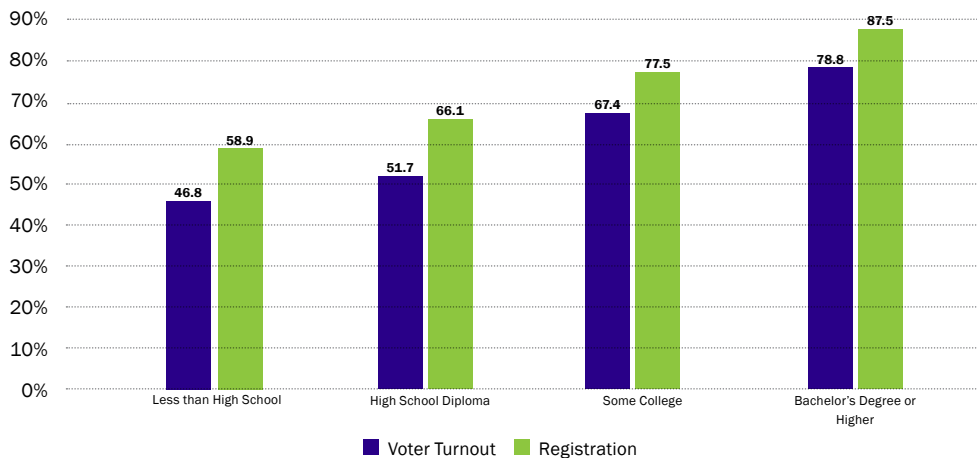
Alabama performs even better in voter registration rates. Registration rates rose in Alabama by almost two percentage points between the 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections. This outpaced the national increase in registration rates during that same period.

In Alabama, voting and registration rates generally rise with educational attainment, age, and income. Individuals possessing a college education register to vote and cast ballots at rates nearly 30 percentage points higher than those without a high school diploma. Baby Boomers (those born between 1946–1964) surpass eligible Millennials (those born 1981 or later) in voting and registration rates by nearly twenty-five percent.

# 63.1%

of African-American Alabamians voted in the 2012 Presidential Election, compared to 61.2% of White Alabamians.

**Chart 1. Alabama Voter Turnout and Registration by Educational Attainment**

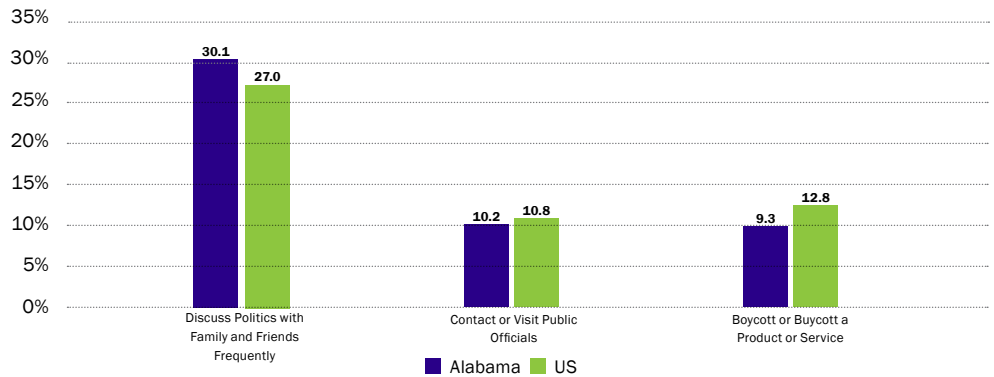


## Other Acts of Political Engagement

Political action does not begin and end at the ballot box. Non-electoral political involvement, such as contacting public officials and discussing politics, provides important avenues for Americans to participate in the political process beyond Election Day.

Over thirty percent of Alabamians frequently (a few times a week or more) discuss politics with family members and friends, ranking the state at 19th in the nation. A greater percentage of Alabamians (8.7%) also express a public opinion online than do Americans in general (7.9%). Alabamians' propensities to discuss politics face-to-face and online do not, however, always translate to frequent communication of those opinions to public officials. Alabama ranks 34th in the nation for contacting and visiting public officials; which represents a tremendous rise from its rank of 51st in 2010. It is encouraging to note that Alabamians are demonstrating a greater willingness to bring their concerns to the public officials that represent them.

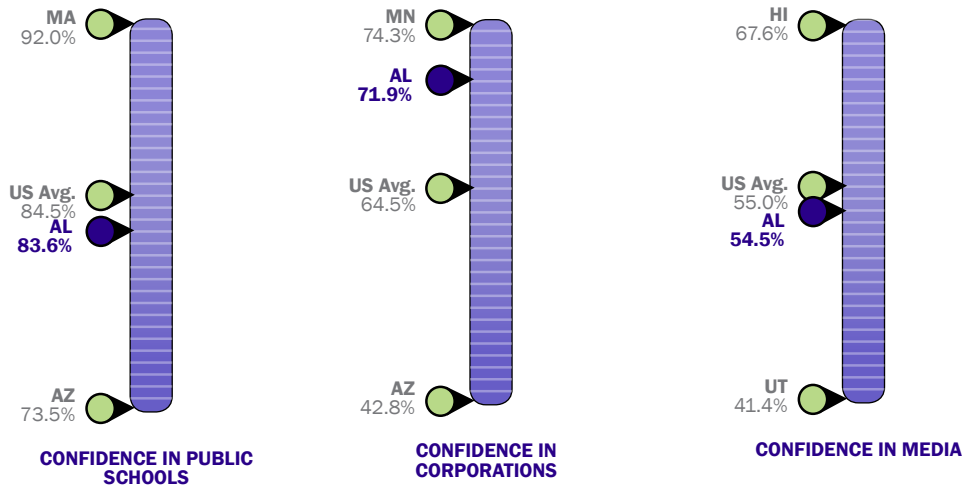
**Chart 2. Political Engagement in Alabama vs. US Averages**



Alabamians rank below the national average for buying and boycotting products and services. Only 9.3% of Alabamians buy or boycott products or services compared to 12.8% of Americans. Low levels of boycotting and “buycotting” may result from Alabamians’ high levels of confidence in corporations (7th in the nation).

# 7th

Alabama ranks 7th in the nation for some or a great deal of confidence in corporations at 71.9%.



\*Confidence is defined here as the percentage of respondents who indicated “some or a great” deal of confidence in the institution.

## NEXT STEPS FOR POLITICAL ACTION

Alabama performs reasonably well in indicators of political action, although disturbing gaps in engagement, particularly between young Alabamians and their older counterparts, call for efforts to build on existing infrastructure to improve engagement across the spectrum. We can begin by equipping the next generation with habits and skills for effective civic engagement.

Creative efforts in communities across Alabama point toward promising practices for engaging young people in political involvement, public work, and civic skill building. For example, Students’ Institute is a civic program in Montevallo, Alabama for public, private, and home school students in grades 4–12. Participating youth explore civic spaces in Montevallo, interact with public servants, learn from citizens who are making a difference, and engage city leaders and residents in deliberation on youth issues. The energetic youth exercise civic skills to develop sustainable community projects and initiatives. The students’ ongoing endeavors include the first Montevallo Junior City Council and a new youth community center. Students’ Institute is a Jean O’Connor-Snyder Internship Program coordinated by the University of Montevallo Office of Service Learning, the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, and the University of Alabama’s New College.

An emphasis on improving civic competencies and providing real-world opportunities for youth to engage meaningfully in their communities unites promising programs across Alabama. We must work together to expand opportunities for young people to increase their civic knowledge, build civic skills, and exercise civic dispositions in the classroom and beyond.

\*\*“Buycotting” is to buy a product or service because of the political values of the company that provides it.



# SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

“**Social capital**, the evidence increasingly suggests, strengthens our better, more expansive selves. The performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital.<sup>6</sup>”

~Dr. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*

Social capital, according to renowned social scientist Dr. Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Social connectedness indicators measure the frequency with which individuals connect and communicate with one another. Strong social ties and interpersonal connections often transfer into the public sphere and create opportunities for effective civic engagement.

Social connectedness, as defined in this report, is composed of eating dinner with members of one’s household, seeing or hearing from friends and family, talking with neighbors, trusting neighbors, exchanging favors with neighbors, and participating in groups.

In 2013, Alabama exceeded national averages in all measures of social connectedness with the exception of how often Alabamians ate dinner with household members and group membership rates. Alabamians perform particularly well in rates of seeing or hearing from family and friends and doing favors for their neighbors.

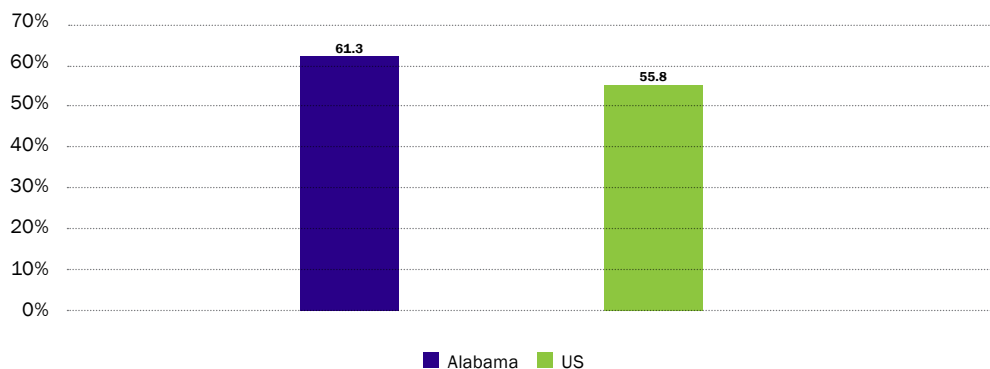
## Engaging with Family, Friends, and Neighbors

Alabama citizens’ strong social ties and tight networks of reciprocity with family, friends, and neighbors weave a strong social fabric that is promising for future civic endeavors.

Alabamians communicate and connect with family and friends on a regular basis. In 2013, 86.8% of Alabamians ate dinner frequently with members of their household. Regular communication with friends and loved ones by a large majority of Alabamians (83.4%) vaults the state to 6th in the nation for how often individuals see or hear from family and friends. Nationally, 75.7% of people see or hear from family and friends frequently.

Strong social connectedness in Alabama extends beyond an individual’s family and friends to encompass similarly tight bonds with neighbors. Trust is an important component of any social bond, and 61.3% of Alabamians report trusting all or most of their neighbors. Between 2011 and 2013, Americans’ trust in their neighbors fell slightly from 56.7% to 55.8% while Alabamians’ level of trust remained stable. Strong social ties and high levels of trust likely contribute to the state’s ranking 16th in the nation for percentage of individuals who exchange favors with their neighbors.

**Chart 3. Alabamians’ Trust in Neighbors Compared to US Average**

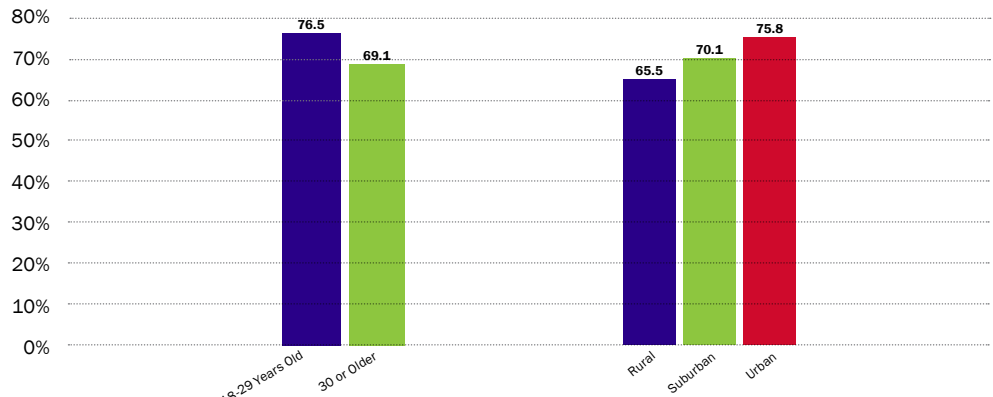


## 6th

At 83.4%, Alabama ranks 6th in the nation for seeing or hearing from friends or family frequently.

Interesting geographical, generational, and racial differences emerge in how Alabamians connect socially with family, friends, and neighbors. Rural citizens are more likely to eat dinner with members of their household and trust their neighbors, while urban Alabamians are more likely to see or hear from family and friends and talk with their neighbors. A larger percentage of Alabamians age 18 – 29 (76.5%) see or hear from family and friends than do citizens age 30 and over (69.1%). African-Americans report higher rates of talking with neighbors, while White Alabamians report doing more favors for neighbors.

**Chart 4. See or Hear from Friends or Family Frequently by Age and Geography**



\*Pooled data 2010, 2011, 2013

**76.5%**

of 18-29 year olds in Alabama reported frequently seeing or hearing from family and friends, a larger percentage than those 30 and older.

Unlike many other indicators of civic health, educational attainment and employment are not necessarily correlated with strong social connectedness. In fact, Alabamians not currently in the labor force talk with and exchange favors with neighbors more often than employed Alabamians. Furthermore, rates of talking with and doing favors for neighbors slightly decrease with educational attainment.



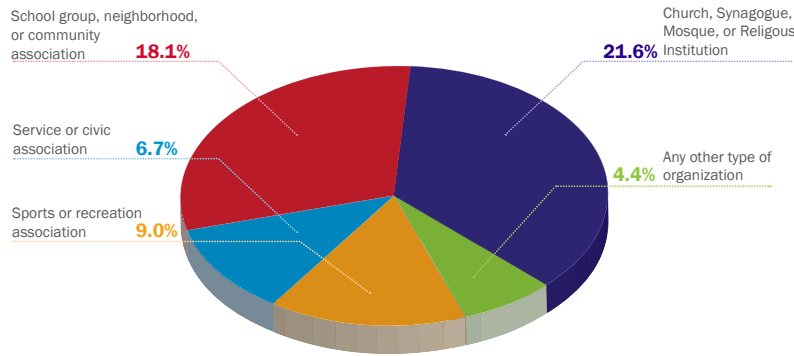
Photo provided by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life

### Group Membership

Community groups, organizations, and associations provide places for Alabamians to connect socially and an infrastructure for individuals to engage civically. According to Kei Kwashima-Ginsberg of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University, “Civic theorists have long argued that joining an organized group is an important entry point into a larger civil society, and that associational membership is part of a national identity, an opportunity to build bonding social capital, and an entrée to places where individuals interact with diverse people and expand networks via loose social connections.<sup>87</sup>”

In 2013, Alabama ranked 31st in the nation for group participation with 35.9% of Alabamians reporting membership in a group or organization. Religious organizations report the highest membership rates (21.6%) followed closely by school groups and community or neighborhood associations (18.1%). Millennials report lower group participation rates than their older counterparts. Group membership rises with educational attainment and income. It is slightly more common among women than men, and is more prevalent in Generation X (those born 1965 – 1980) than among other age groups.

**Chart 5. Type of Group Membership in Alabama**



\*Participation with a religious group does not count attendance at religious services.

Furthermore, in 2013, 10.6% of Alabamians served as an officer or member of a committee in a group, organization, or association as opposed to 9.7% of Americans nationally. Likelihood of serving in a leadership role in a group or organization rises steadily with age, income, and educational attainment.

### NEXT STEPS FOR SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Alabamians' strong interpersonal relationships and social cohesion form a sturdy foundation for strengthening communities. Working together to improve our communities and solve local problems is easier when residents know each other. Alabamians can build on strong patterns of social connectedness to form habits transferrable to weaker areas of engagement, like public work. For example, ingrained habits of exchanging favors with neighbors can prove a natural first step to increasing the number of Alabamians who work with their neighbors to solve community problems.

Informal public spaces provide a gathering place for Alabamians to connect socially and engage civically. Welcoming public spaces serve as incubators for community connectedness, civic life, and public work. Restaurants like Pie Lab in Greensboro and Just Folk Coffee House in Elba know the power of delicious food and good coffee in bringing community members together. Similar establishments across the state provide spaces in their communities for people to gather informally to share a cup of coffee or a slice of pie, and talk about community issues.

Groups, organizations, and associations provide existing infrastructure for members to connect socially and engage civically. Alabamians can work together within the groups they are already members of to address issues of concern and improve their communities. The Interfaith Mission Service in Huntsville and the Evergreen Center for Dialogue and Discernment in Dothan provide avenues for members of local faith communities to engage across religions and denominations to address social and civic issues.

Millennials report lower group participation rates than many of their older counterparts. Organizations like YouthServe Birmingham and Bridge Builders Alabama provide opportunities for youth to build social capital with peers from different parts of their community. Both groups engage young people in service and encourage habits for working together to address community problems with diverse groups of peers.

**10.6%**

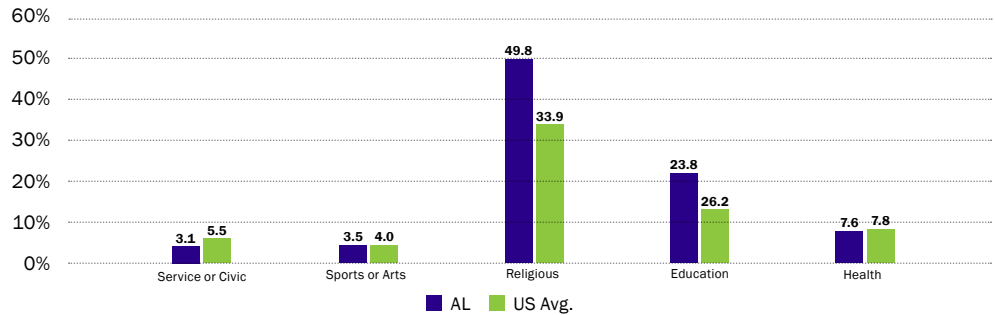
of Alabamians served as an officer or member of a committee in a group, organization, or association, compared to 9.7% nationally.

## Volunteering & Charitable Giving

While volunteering and charitable giving are not explicitly factored into composite measures of social connectedness, they provide a critical insight into tangible indicators of how Alabamians care for their neighbors.

An estimated 921,360 Alabamians, or 24.4% of the state's population, contributed 116.4 million hours of service worth \$2.6 billion in 2013. Religious organizations, closely followed by education groups and social services, drew the largest percentage of volunteers in Alabama. Main volunteer activities included collecting and distributing food, teaching and tutoring, and fundraising.

**Chart 6. Volunteering by Type of Organization in Alabama**



### Millennial Alabamians Reflect On Volunteering



*"Volunteer work is the ultimate classroom. When we step out into our communities as volunteers and interact with local assets and challenges, we learn to engage more deeply with the issues around us."*

- K.C. Vick, Tuscaloosa, Age 25



*"Volunteering is one of the greatest assets in a community. It should be supported and praised more than it is. Volunteering has given me a passion for helping others, my community, and myself."*

- Lauren Davis, Prattville, Age 20

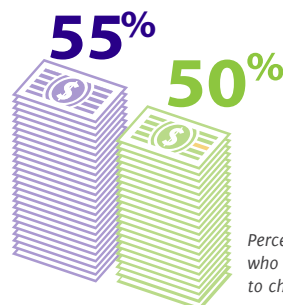


*"Volunteering is more than an occasional sacrifice of time; it is a way of life! Volunteering is a lifestyle which requires opening your eyes to the needs of others and extending a helping hand. When we invest our time in others we have the opportunity to improve our community, and the world, for coming generations."*

- Lydia Godwin, Maylene, Age 21

Over 55% percent of Alabamians gave \$25 or more in charitable donations in 2013 compared to the national rate of 50.1%. This ranks Alabama 16th in the nation for giving charitably. Furthermore, the percentage of Alabamians giving charitably consistently outranked national averages by five to seven percentage points between 2006 and 2013.

● Alabama ● US



Alabama ranked 16th in the nation for donating to \$25 or more to charitable causes at 55.1%.

# PUBLIC WORK

“Public work is sustained, largely self-directed, collaborative effort, paid or unpaid, carried out by a diverse mix of people who create things of common value determined by deliberation: work by publics, for public purposes, in public. The capacity for public work, or civic agency, is mainly learned through public work.”<sup>9</sup>”

~Harry Boyte, *Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work*

Citizen participation in public work constitutes one of the most important indicators of civic health. Public work involves working with others to solve a problem or improve something through the process of deliberation and action. Measurements for public work include both attending public meetings and working with neighbors to solve problems or improve something in the community. Very few Americans attend public meetings (8.3%), and even fewer work with their neighbors to address community problems (7.6%).

Public work in Alabama paints an even more dismal picture. Only 5.4% of Alabamians attended a public meeting in 2013, ranking the state 49th in the nation. Alabama ranks last (51st) for percentage of the population (4.7%) working with neighbors to fix or improve something in the community. Alabamians’ participation in public work starkly declined from 10.1% to 4.7% between 2010 and 2013.

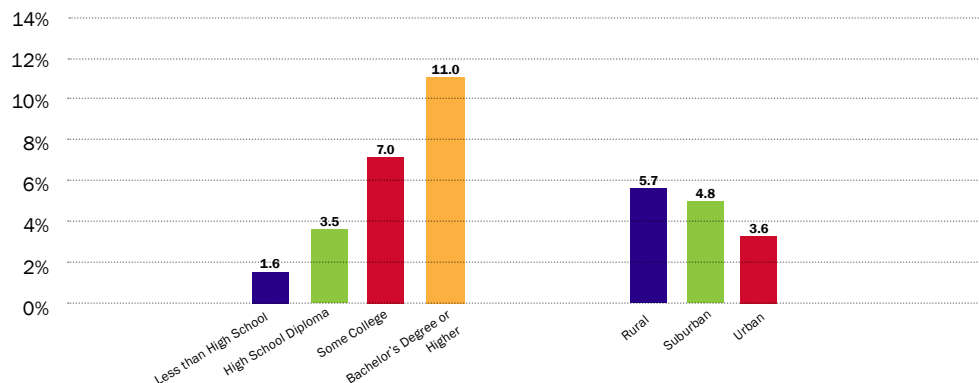


Photo provided by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life

## Attending Community Meetings

In 2013, 5.4% of Alabamians attended at least one community meeting where public issues were discussed compared to a national rate of 8.3% of Americans. Attendance at public meetings rises steadily in Alabama with educational attainment. Alabamians with a Bachelor’s degree were the most active attendees of public meetings, and those with some college were twice as likely as those with a high school diploma to attend community meetings. Urbanites, males, the employed, and Baby Boomers were particularly likely to participate in public meetings. Millennials and those with less than a high school diploma were the least likely to attend a community meeting in 2013.

**Chart 7. Attending Community Meetings by Educational Attainment and Geography**



\*NILF is "Not in Labor Force", means those not counted as unemployed because they had not searched for work in the 4 weeks preceding the survey.

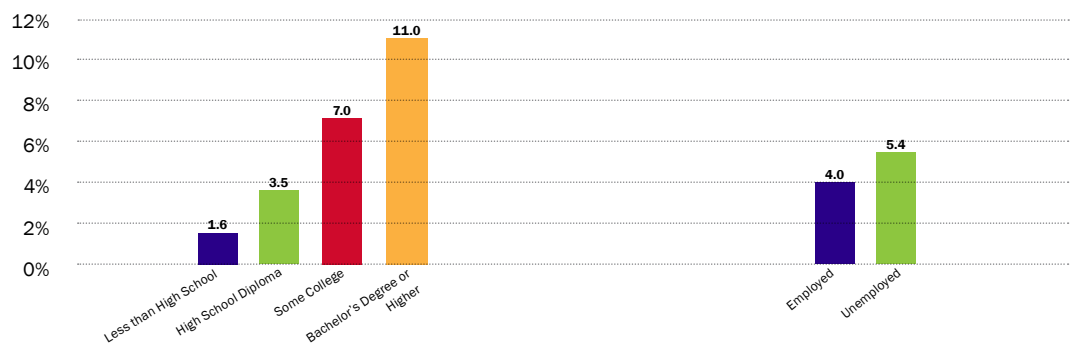
## Working with Neighbors

Alabama ranks 51st in the nation for percentage of residents who work with neighbors to fix or improve something in the community, which is surprising to note since Alabamians exchange favors with neighbors frequently. Rates of working with neighbors in Alabama declined sharply from 10.1% in 2010 to 4.7% in 2013. It is possible that Alabamians do not view their informal working with neighbors to address community issues as "solving problems or fixing something in the community." Rather, they see their actions as an extension of their neighborliness, thus causing Alabamians to underreport on this indicator.

In 2013, 4.7% reported working with neighbors to fix or improve something in the community, compared to 7.6% nationally. Similar to rates of attendance at public meetings, working with neighbors to solve community problems occurs most often among those with a Bachelor's degree or more. Men, urbanites, and Baby Boomers also demonstrate comparatively higher rates of working with neighbors to solve problems or fix something in the community. Encouragingly, 5.4% of residents not in the labor force report working with neighbors on community issues compared to 4.0% of employed Alabamians. This is promising news for job seekers as working with others in the community provides opportunities for the unemployed to build job skills that contribute to employability and connect them with potential employers.<sup>10</sup>

\*NILF is "Not in Labor Force", meaning those not counted as unemployed because they had not searched for work in the 4 weeks preceding the survey.

**Chart 8. Working with Neighbors to Fix or Improve Something in the Community by Educational Attainment and Employment Status**



## NEXT STEPS FOR PUBLIC WORK

Public work requires citizens to dedicate valuable time and energy in our fast-paced society to address community problems. Allocating time and creating infrastructure for public work requires citizens and communities to make tradeoffs and ask: "What are we willing and unwilling to do to work with each other to solve problems and improve our community?" Many Alabama citizens, organizations, and communities answer that question by creating innovative pathways for community members to connect with each other in productive civil discourse on challenging public issues.

During 2014, the *Alabama Media Group* (AMG) engaged Alabamians, journalists, and public officials in thoughtful reflection and public discussion on prison overcrowding in the state using a deliberative framework developed by Alabama citizens, AMG, and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life. Alabama residents responded to the framework with thought-provoking opinion editorials and online submission forms. Alabamians came together to deliberate and share perspectives in a follow-up statewide forum series on prison overcrowding. Initiatives like this provide residents opportunities to deliberate civilly and communicate public judgment to policymakers and public officials.

Millennials (those born 1981 or later) report particularly low rates of engagement in public work. Alabama must begin equipping the next generation with habits and skills for effective public work at a young age. *Living Democracy*, coordinated by the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University, brings together students and citizens to collaborate on issues of public concern to Alabama communities. Similarly, the University of Alabama's New College partners with the Walker Area Community Foundation to host a community-based internship for university students. Both projects prepare undergraduates for civic life through living-learning experiences in rural communities in the summer. Participating students attend and convene public meetings, partner with citizens and organizations to address community problems, and learn what it takes to make democracy work.

# 51st

Alabama ranks 51st for working with neighbors to fix or improve something in the community.

# CONCLUSION

**“Citizenship** is not a spectator sport.<sup>11”</sup>

~Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*

Alabama’s civic strengths provide a sturdy foundation for engaging more Alabamians in building a robust civic life in the state. Alabamians actively engage in their communities through voting, giving charitably, exchanging favors with neighbors, and discussing politics with family and friends. Much remains to be done to involve more Alabamians in working with their neighbors to solve problems and improve their communities. Equipping a greater number of Alabamians with habits and skills for effective civic engagement must remain a priority in our state.

The following areas of civic life in Alabama demand particular attention and emphasis:

- Alabama should prioritize equipping the next generation with habits and skills for effective civic engagement. We must prepare students not only for college and career, but also for citizenship by partnering with schools and communities to build civic competencies at a young age. Alabama’s youngest residents need opportunities in classrooms and communities to increase civic knowledge, build civic intellectual and participatory skills, and exercise civic dispositions. “They [young people] can only learn how to be civically engaged by being civically engaged.<sup>12”</sup>
- Education is a powerful predictor of community involvement and civic engagement. Nearly every indicator of civic health is positively correlated with educational attainment. By supporting students as they complete high school and continue on to higher education institutions and careers, we are laying the foundation for more individuals to become active participants in civic life. We must work together to ensure all Alabamians have access to the educational opportunities that will enrich not only their own lives, but their communities as well.
- Alabamians’ strong sense of neighborliness provides a solid foundation for engaging more citizens in working with neighbors to solve problems and improve Alabama communities. This sense of helping those we know must be translated into addressing local concerns that may not impact our immediate network of family and friends. We must equip more Alabamians to contribute their time, talents, and voices to strengthening their communities.

By bolstering civic education, supporting students, and strengthening public work, Alabama can continue making strides to better the state’s civic health. We hope the 2015 Alabama Civic Health Index encourages Alabamians to engage in a rich conversation on civic life in the state, and to find new opportunities to work together to improve the state’s civic health. We encourage you to join the conversation in your community and online at [www.mathewscenter.org](http://www.mathewscenter.org).



Photo provided by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life



## ENDNOTES

- 1 The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future*, (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2012), P. 2.
- 2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Edited by Richard D. Hefner, (New York: New American Library, 1956).
- 3 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Trans. Gerald E. Bevan, (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2003 ), P. 356.
- 4 Thom File, *The Diversifying Electorate – Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012 (and Other Recent Elections)*, (U.S. Census Bureau, May 2013), P. 3.
- 5 Thom File, *The Diversifying Electorate – Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012 (and Other Recent Elections)*, (U.S. Census Bureau, May 2013), P. 4.
- 6 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), P. 349.
- 7 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), P. 19.
- 8 Kei Kwashima-Ginsberg, "Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville – Portraits of American Teenagers' Extracurricular Involvement, and Implications for Educational Interventions," *CIRCLE Working Paper #80* (March 2014), P. 2.
- 9 Harry C. Boyte, *Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Citizen-Centered Democracy and the Empowerment Gap*, (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2013), P. 2.
- 10 Christopher Spera, Robin Ghertner, Anthony Nerino, Adrienne DiTommaso, *Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding Employment for the Out of Work?* (Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service, June 2013), Pp. 1 – 2.
- 11 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), P. 341.
- 12 Lisa Guilefoile and Brady Delander, *Guidebook: Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning*, (January 2014), P. 4

## 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.

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 Alabama.





## TECHNICAL NOTE

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, voting estimates from 2012 November Voting and Registration Supplement, and all other civic engagement indicators, such as discussion of political information and connection to neighbors, come from the 2013 CPS Civic Engagement Supplement.

Using a probability selected sample of about 150,000 occupied households, the CPS collects monthly data on employment and demographic characteristics of the nation. Depending on the CPS supplement, the single-year Alabama CPS sample size used for this report ranges from 391 (civic engagement supplement) to 921 (volunteer supplement), 1,066 (voting supplement) residents from across Alabama. This sample is then weighted to representative population demographics for the district. Estimates for the volunteering indicators (e.g., volunteering, working with neighbors, making donations) are based on US residents ages 16 and older. Estimates for civic engagement and social connection indicators (e.g., favors with neighbors, discuss politics) are based on US residents

ages 18 and older. Voting and registration statistics are based on US citizens who are 18 and older (eligible voters). When we examined the relationship between educational attainment and engagement, estimates are based on adults ages 25 and older, based on the assumption younger people may be completing their education.

Because multiple sources of data with varying sample sizes are used, the report is not able to compute one margin of error for Alabama 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 (2010-2013) for a more reliable estimate when sample sizes for certain cross tabulations may have been small. Furthermore, national rankings, while useful in benchmarking, may be small in range, with one to two percentage points separating the state/district ranked first from the state/district ranked last.

It is also important 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.

# 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 US 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 for Civic Life  
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  
The Civic Canopy  
Denver Metro Chamber Leadership  
Campus Compact of Mountain West  
History Colorado  
Institute on Common Good

### 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

### Georgia

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

### Illinois

McCormick Foundation

### Indiana

Center on Congress at Indiana University  
Indiana Bar Foundation  
Indiana Supreme Court  
Indiana University Northwest  
IU Center for Civic Literacy

### 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

### 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  
Campus Compact of New Hampshire  
University System of New Hampshire  
New Hampshire College & University Council

### New York

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

### North Carolina

Institute for Emerging Issues

### 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

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

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### Latinos Civic Health Index

Carnegie Corporation

### Veterans Civic Health Index

Got Your 6

### 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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### **Atlanta**

Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta

### **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

### **Pittsburgh**

University of Pittsburgh

Carnegie Mellon University

### **Seattle**

Seattle City Club

Boeing Company

Seattle Foundation

### **Twin Cities**

Center for Democracy and Citizenship

Citizens League

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

## CIVIC HEALTH ADVISORY GROUP

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### **John Bridgeland**

CEO, Civic Enterprises

Chairman, Board of Advisors, National Conference on Citizenship

Former Assistant to the President of the United States & Director, Domestic Policy Council & US Freedom Corps

### **Kristen Cambell**

Former Chief Program Officer,

National Conference on Citizenship

### **Jeff Coates**

Research and Evaluation Director,

National Conference on Citizenship

### **Lattie Coor**

Chairman & CEO, Center for the Future of Arizona

### **Nathan Dietz**

Senior Research Associate, The Urban Institute

### **Doug Dobson**

Executive Director, Florida Joint Center for Citizenship

### **Jennifer Domagal-Goldman**

National Manager, American Democracy Project

### **Diane Douglas**

Executive Director, Seattle CityClub

### **Paula Ellis**

Former Vice President, Strategic Initiatives, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

### **William Galston**

Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

Former Deputy Assistant to the President of the United States for Domestic Policy

### **Hon. Bob Graham**

Former Senator of Florida

Former Governor of Florida

### **Robert Grimm, Jr.**

Director of the Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership, University of Maryland

### **Shawn Healy**

Resident Scholar, McCormick Foundation

### **Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg**

Deputy Director, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University

### **Peter Levine**

Director, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University

### **Mark Hugo Lopez**

Director of Hispanic Research, Pew Research Center

### **Ted McConnell**

Executive Director, Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

### **Martha McCoy**

President, Everyday Democracy

### **Kenneth Prewitt**

Former Director of the United States Census Bureau

Carnegie Professor of Public Affairs and the Vice-President for Global Centers at Columbia University

### **Robert Putnam**

Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University

Founder, Saguaro Seminar

Author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*

### **Stella Rouse**

Assistant Director, Center for American Politics and Citizenship

### **Shirley Sagawa**

Chief Service Officer, National Conference on Citizenship

Co-founder, Sagawa/Jospin, LLP.

### **Thomas Sander**

Executive Director, the Saguaro Seminar, Harvard University

### **David B. Smith**

Chief of Programs and Strategy, National Center for Service and Innovative Leadership  
Founder, Mobilize.org

### **Drew Steijles**

Assistant Vice President for Student Engagement and Leadership and Director Office of Community Engagement, College of William & Mary

### **Michael Stout**

Associate Professor of Sociology, Missouri State University

### **Kristi Tate**

Partnership Development Director, National Conference on Citizenship

### **Michael Weiser**

Chairman, National Conference on Citizenship

### **Ilir Zherka**

Executive Director, National Conference on Citizenship



National Conference on Citizenship



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