2025 VETERANS CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

We the Veterans
and Military Families

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP
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ABOUT THE PARTNERS

WE THE VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

We the Veterans and Military Families is a national nonpartisan nonprofit founded by veterans and military family members to empower their community to strengthen America and local communities as civic leaders and patriotic participants. We invest in the veteran and military family community by building programs that encourage patriotic participation, foster a culture of continued service, and strengthen American institutions. Through initiatives like *Vet the Vote* – a flagship campaign mobilizing veterans and military families to serve as election workers – we activate a trusted community to support safe and secure elections. We also convene leaders and organizations to collaborate on issues affecting America and our community. By channeling the ethos of service into civic leadership, we provide veterans and military families with meaningful opportunities to continue serving their country at home. www.wetheveterans.us

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is 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, our cross-sector conferences and engagement with a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations interested in utilizing civic engagement principles and practices to enhance their work. Connecting people for the purpose of strengthening civic life is our goal. At the core of our joint efforts is the belief that every person has the ability to help their communities and country thrive. ncoc.org

ABOUT THE FUNDERS

THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS

The Heinz Endowments disburses approximately $90M in grants annually in their aim to build an exemplary, sustainable Pittsburgh region where everyone prospers and belongs. The foundation's seven primary focus areas include work in the Civic Participation and Veterans sectors. Initially funding traditional veteran programs, the Endowments has in recent years pivoted to a data-driven approach that emphasizes navigation of post-9/11 military-to-civilian workforce transition services, translation of military skills to civilian opportunities, leadership development, uplifting positive perception of veterans and data-informed policy change. The Endowments' Civic Participation portfolio advances community engagement, democratic resilience, and public leadership, including integrating veterans into broader civic life so their significant skills and experience benefit all in the region.

LEIDOS

Leidos is an innovation company rapidly addressing the world's most vexing challenges in national security and health. With 47,000 employees, Leidos is an industry and technology leader serving government and commercial customers with smarter, more efficient digital and mission innovations. The company has a strong legacy of employee engagement and investment in the communities where it operates including support for veterans and military families. Approximately 20% of Leidos employees are veterans and the company is committed to supporting veteran employees and partnering with veteran serving groups.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not be possible without the support of The Heinz Endowments, Leidos, and the National Conference on Citizenship.

FOREWORD

At no other time in recent memory has America stood to gain more from the civic participation of its veterans. In a time that often feels divided and lacking a shared direction, lessons learned from military service – duty, honor, comradery – provide guidance for mending and strengthening the fabric of our nation.

For decades, American society has honored veterans for their service in uniform and sacrifices in combat, creating a revered class of warfighters. But at times, this warrior caste has become separated from society at large. A number of factors – including over-valorization of this subpopulation and, paradoxically, a narrow focus on veterans' disabilities, detriments, and failures – have exacerbated the divide between veterans and those not connected to military service. The truth is that the role veterans should play in society extends far beyond their service in uniform. Veterans, and America's similarly revered military families, cannot merely be symbols of courage and valor; they must be leaders, teambuilders, and problem solvers who become catalysts for change in their communities.

The 2025 Veteran Civic Health Index – the fifth publication of the report – is more than an analysis of veteran engagement: it's a call to action for veterans and civilians alike. This report highlights the many ways veterans contribute to civic life, shedding light on their leadership from government, to nonprofits, and neighborhoods. It challenges the prevailing narrative that veterans ought to be recipients of gratitude as an homage to their service, urging us all to instead recognize and empower them as active, post-military-service participants in shoring up the foundations of America's strength and shaping its future.

The most recent edition of this report was published in 2021 by The Mission Continues and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. That report made a specific examination of the civic health of post-9/11 veterans – those who had served in the two decades prior, and especially those who had served in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the four-plus years since the United States' war in Afghanistan officially ended, the veteran community has entered a new era. Those who entered service after 2021 will likely not be counted amongst post-9/11 veterans, but rather will be part of a new, yet-to-be-named generation. Likewise, those who have served in the U.S. military at nearly any point in the 21st century are now discovering how veterans fit into society after these wars have come to a close.

As the nation celebrates the 250th anniversaries of the establishment of the United States Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, Americans are reflecting on a quarter millennium of uniformed service. This milestone is not only about honoring the past; it's an opportunity to re-examine how we perceive all those who have worn the uniform, their role in modern society, and the contributions they make to the American experiment.

We the Veterans and Military Families is proud to present the *2025 Veteran Civic Health Index, Redefining Patriotism: The Civic Lives of Those Who Serve.*

DEFINING PATRIOTISM

THE CIVIC LIFE OF THOSE WHO SERVE

INTRODUCTION

Unless otherwise cited, all findings presented in this report are based on the National Conference on Citizenship's analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, 2023 Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement, and the 2022 and 2024 Voting and Registration Supplement.

Goals of the 2025 Veterans Civic Health Index

- **Reaffirm the valuable civic roles that veterans play in American communities**
- **Explore evidence that veterans embody the definitions of servant leaders and patriots, and expound on what that means for the country**
- **Encourage American institutions to understand and leverage veteran engagement as a tool to advance projects, programs, and policies in the national and local interest, as well as rebuilding trust in the institutions themselves**
- **Discuss the contributions of the military-connected community to the civic health of the nation**
- **Examine veterans' roles in the voting process and the preservation of free and fair elections**
- **Share the examples of veteran-facing organizations that have succeeded in empowering veterans as leaders and civic assets**
- **Provide recommendations that will increase the civic engagement, health, and social welfare of all Americans – veterans and non-veterans alike**
- **Define patriotism by action and civic service for America**

Previous Examinations of Veteran Civic Health

This report represents the third major examination—across five published reports—of veteran civic health conducted by the National Conference on Citizenship in partnership with various veteran-facing nonprofit organizations, corporate funders, and charitable foundations. The first VCHI was completed in 2015, and the same data was used to provide follow-on reports in 2016 and 2017. As a trio, these reports set the baseline for veteran civic health, empirically established veterans as true civic assets, and began to explore various sub-populations within the veteran community to better understand the nuances of veteran civic health. The second full examination was published in 2021 to provide an update to the civic health measures defined in the first reports. Timed a year after the 2020 census and coincidental to the U.S. withdrawal of major fighting forces in Afghanistan, this report took the opportunity to focus on post-9/11 veterans. In 2025, this report will examine refreshed data on veterans, while, for the first time, exploring the impact that military and veteran family members have in the overall assessment of civic health.

DEFINING CIVIC HEALTH

What is Civic Health?

Civic health is a measure of how communities are organized to define and address public problems. It is a community's capacity to work together, defined by the degree and frequency by which people trust each other, convene, respond to neighbors, and interact with government. Communities with strong indicators of civic health have higher employment rates, stronger schools, better physical health, and more responsive governments. Moreover, civic health is the pulse of a nation's vitality – a measure of how deeply citizens engage with one another, their communities, and the institutions that shape their lives.

Civic health goes well beyond Constitutional rights and obligations of citizenship to encompass the interpersonal and community-wide relationships we all build. It is the conversations we have and the actions we take to improve our society. Civic health can be observed in everyday acts like volunteering, helping a neighbor, joining a community group, discussing public issues, or voting in elections. Strong civic health means a community is rich in social trust, mutual support, and active participation, all of which underpin a healthy government by and for the people.[1]

For veterans, civic health carries a weight deeply ingrained in their experience of service and sacrifice. Veterans are not merely participants in the American experiment – they are often its most dedicated stewards. After all, these men and women have sworn oaths to defend American ideals enshrined in the Constitution, and most will continue to uphold those ideals as active citizens once they return to civilian life.

Civic Health & Veterans

The civic health of veterans is an indicator of the civic health of our nation. By measuring the civic engagement of those who have made the choice to serve our country in uniform, this report examines how veterans engage with our communities. Civically engaged veterans not only serve as role models for all Americans but also demonstrate the vital roles veterans can play after their time in uniform, reminding us that service does not end with military duty.

By and large, veterans demonstrate exceptional levels of civic engagement and – by nearly all measures – outpace their non-veteran counterparts. The first VCHI in 2015 revealed that veterans vote, volunteer, talk to their neighbors, help others, and belong to civic groups at higher rates than non-veterans.[2] Recent data confirm that most of these outsized civic contributions still abound today, as further demonstrated in this report.

The numbers only begin to tell the story. When we talk about civic health, we are talking about more than just metrics or individual actions – we are talking about the myriad ways people come together to strengthen their communities. For veterans, acts of patriotic participation are often a natural continuation of their commitment to something greater than themselves. They carry into civilian life the same values of leadership, teambuilding, and problem solving that defined their time in uniform, now applied in town halls, school boards, polling places, neighborhood projects, and nonprofit initiatives. In other words, veterans exemplify what it means to be involved in the civic life of our communities by developing and deploying the skills, values, and motivations that drive meaningful impact.[3]

Furthermore, civic health matters for veterans because of the benefits it can provide to the individual and community. Reintegration into civilian life can be challenging. Studies from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have shown that up to 70% of veterans experience some difficulty adjusting after military service.[4] Volunteerism and civic involvement can ease the transition, connecting veterans to their neighbors, improving mental health, and even reducing feelings of isolation or suicidal ideation.[5] "Service after service" – whether volunteering, community leadership, or advocacy – often provides veterans with purpose, belonging, and a renewed sense of mission. There is also a robust ecosystem of veteran and military family service and engagement organizations, and many veterans focus their efforts here, further supporting the community.

In short, strong veteran civic health is a win-win. Communities benefit from veterans' skills, leadership, and commitment while veterans benefit from social connection, civic pride, and sense of purpose.

Civic Health & the Military-Connected Community

Any discussion of veteran civic health would be incomplete without acknowledging the family members who have served alongside them. Veterans do not exist in a civic vacuum, rather, their spouses, children, parents, and caregivers are integral parts of the veteran community and our broader civic landscape.

The best capture of this subpopulation is created through use of the term "military-connected." The military-connected population includes military families – the spouses and children of currently serving military members – as well as the spouses, children, and other close family members of veterans whose military service has come to an end. By one estimate, over 106 million adult Americans[6] have a direct family connection to military service, including nearly 18 million living veterans and tens of millions of spouses and children.[7] These family members share in the sacrifices of service, and they too contribute to civic life in significant ways.

Military spouses frequently become community leaders, volunteers, and advocates – whether organizing support networks while their loved ones are deployed, serving on local boards, or joining community volunteer efforts. In addition, the positive effect of veteran civic engagement can be multigenerational, as many children of military families grow up with a strong example of service and develop a keen sense of civic duty themselves.

By including the military-connected community in our understanding of veteran civic health, we recognize that they too are leaders and civic assets, often working quietly behind the scenes to strengthen our military and leading from the front in our communities.

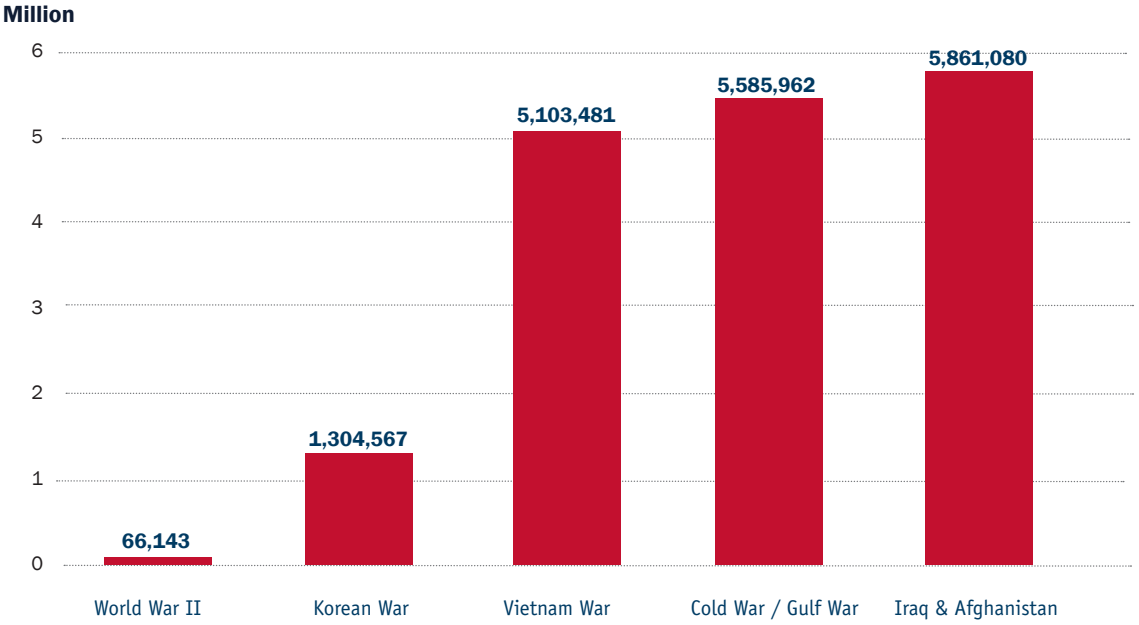
TODAY'S VETERAN

For decades in the second half of the 20th century, a pervasive image of a veteran in America was a grandfather who had fought in World War II. The massive scale of military service in the 1940s made an indelible mark on the veteran population for 75 years. For example, in the early 1970s, three quarters of the members of Congress were military veterans – and most veterans were white men.[8] The conflicts in Korea and Vietnam also added (though not on the same scale) to the veteran rolls and decidedly altered its character.

From the mid-1970s through the turn of the century, there were decently well-defined cohorts of the veteran population: the large World War II generation, who were moving into retirement; the smaller Korea generation, sometimes called the "Forgotten Generation;" the more vocal Vietnam generation; and the slowly developing Cold War era veterans, who – besides the short-lived conflict in the first Gulf War – did not have a major combat era to define them. Both the varied prominence and differentiated size of these generations – as well as powerful cultural factors at play across these eras – caused an abundance of societal attention on "The Greatest Generation." Through their service in Europe and the Pacific during World War II and their ensuing massive transition back to the home front, this generation not only ushered in the "Baby Boom," but also set the modern standard for who veterans were in America.

In addition, the use of conscription to provide military manpower in conflicts prior to 1973 coupled with changing policies regarding race in the military, meant that those who served in uniform increasingly represented a relatively broad sampling of the American male population.[9] The draft also categorically ensured that military service and sacrifice was shared (to some degree) with not just the conscripts, but with their friends, family, and neighbors as well, contrasted with the all-volunteer force which tends to be relatively more self-contained. In the second half of the 20th century, almost every American knew someone who served in the military, even if that service was a generation or two removed and decades prior.

VETERAN POPULATION BY GENERATION (WORLD WAR II - PRESENT)



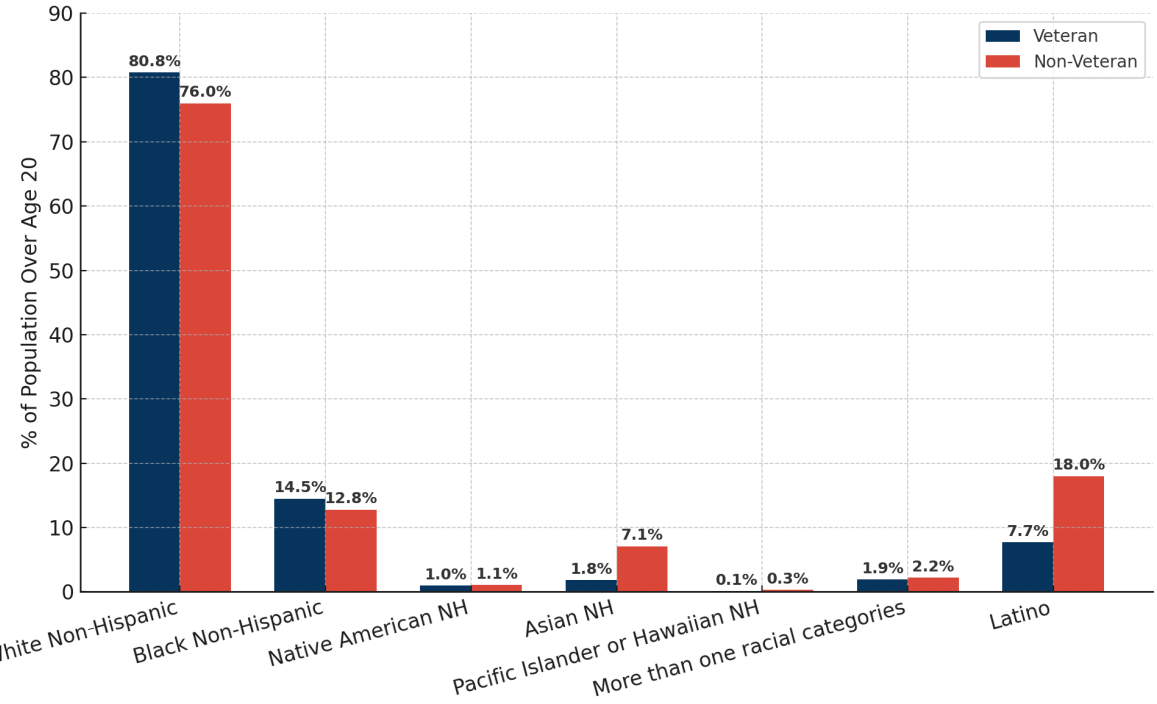
By 2025, a quarter century after the emergence of the post-9/11 generation, the country now has a different and more quickly evolving understanding of veterans. Today's veteran population is diverse, dynamic, and far more complex than many realize. Veterans represent an expanding range of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. Modern veterans include increasing numbers of younger adults, women, and people of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds. This demographic evolution reshapes the veteran experience and challenges us to broaden our understanding of what it means to be a veteran in America, at this point in history.

There are now just under 18 million living American military veterans,[10] as well as just over two million men and women currently in active, National Guard, or reserve military service.[11] The vast majority of the World War II and Korea veterans have passed, Vietnam-era veterans are well into retirement, and Cold War Era veterans are not far behind them. Thus, it has become quite clear that the heart of the current veteran community is the post-9/11 generation – those who volunteered in some of the nation's longest and most complex military engagements. These veterans, largely in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, now make up the largest cohort of veterans. They carry the lessons of two decades of conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other global conflict zones, some having endured multiple deployments across multiple theaters. Crucially, they have navigated challenging transitions from military to civilian life – shifting from the rigid structure of service back to the open-ended responsibilities of civilian society.

Despite the obstacles some may face, post-9/11 veterans have proven to be some of the most resilient and dedicated citizens in our country. These veterans bring home with them a deep sense of purpose and a commitment to service that extends beyond their military service. Many of them find ways to channel their sense of duty into civic engagement: running for local office, spearheading grassroots community projects, starting businesses and nonprofits, and mentoring youth. In doing so, this newest generation of veterans is continuing to define what it means to be a patriot and servant leader in America.

One of the most notable changes in the veteran population is the growing presence of women veterans. Women have always served in America's defense – as far back as the American Revolution – but they now make up a larger proportion of veterans than ever before. As of 2024, women accounted for nearly 12% of all U.S. veterans,[12] a number that continues to grow. Today, women also represent approximately one in five U.S. military service members,[13] and they fill a wide array of roles, including combat billets and top leadership posts. Naturally, women veterans are also stepping into leadership roles within veteran communities and in society at large. Their rising visibility and impact are helping to break down remaining barriers and stereotypes, ensuring that the face of the American veteran is no longer seen as exclusively male.

VETERAN & NON-VETERAN POPULATION BY DEMOGRAPHICS



The veteran population is also becoming younger, on average, as well as more racially and ethnically diverse. In the post-9/11 generation of veterans, these changes are more pronounced, reflecting the broader demographic shifts of the nation. This brings a variety of cultural perspectives and ideas into the veteran community. The 2021 Veteran Civic Health Index introduced a data-supported hypothesis that an increasingly diverse veteran population volunteers at higher rates, which correlates to higher civic health overall.[14] With certainty, a veteran community that looks more like America can better build bridges and support different communities.

While a cohort of younger 21st century veterans has recently taken center stage, the pre-9/11 veteran generations are still making immense contributions. Veterans of Vietnam, the Cold War, and the Gulf War remain an integral part of the overall veteran population. They carry a wealth of knowledge, historical perspective, and civic experience that in many ways set the standard for the post-9/11 generations. Not to mention, there is a general trend amongst all Americans to exhibit increased civic participation – particularly voting and volunteering – later in life, if only for the abundance of time. Older veterans draw on decades of lived experience. They have witnessed enormous social and political change over the course of their lives, and their insights into civic life are invaluable. At the same time, the challenges older veterans face, such as health issues and social isolation, often differ from those of younger veterans. In the end, a diversity of age and experience is another marker of the overall civic health of veterans[15], as older veterans serve as the wise guardians of civic memory and tradition, passing down lessons of service to the next generation.

Over the years, considerable attention has been given to veteran employment, with numerous initiatives – including those championed by multiple White House administrations – urging businesses to hire veterans. While it is true that some veterans face employment challenges, the data consistently show that veterans, as a group, fare better in the labor market than their civilian peers. In fact, the veteran unemployment rate is typically lower than the national average. For example, in 2023, the unemployment rate for all veterans was 2.8%, compared to 3.6% for non-veterans.[16] Veterans are also more likely to work in management and professional occupations and tend to earn higher median incomes than non-veterans.[17] Implicitly then, veterans are good for a company's bottom line, just as they are beneficial to our communities' civic health.

VETERAN & NON-VETERAN EMPLOYMENT COMPARISON

	Veterans	Non-Veterans
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	2.8%	3.6%
MEDIAN INCOME	$52,122	$40,368

Source: Bureau of Labor Statitstics

Taken together, today's veterans are not just people with a shared past; they are active participants in shaping the future. The leadership, resilience, and ongoing commitment to their community of modern veterans is an essential ingredient in the civic health of the nation. Their contributions are not always visible or adequately recognized, but they are profoundly valuable. In local communities across America, veterans – trained as leaders – are often the ones who step forward to organize disaster relief efforts, coach youth sports, drive community improvement efforts, and bridge divides in public dialogue. They are leaders in the public square and steadfast guardians of American ideals.

250TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MILITARY

As a prelude to America's independence, the United States Army was officially founded on June 14, 1775, and the Navy and Marine Corps were established later that same year on October 13th and November 10th, respectively. As we consider the dynamic portrait of today's veterans, we are also reminded of the long arc of history that connects them to generations past. This year's celebration of the 250th anniversary of the U.S. military's founding invites us to look back on a legacy of service, sacrifice, and leadership that has been handed down through the ages.

The United States military's story – from the Continental Army, through the trials of a civil war and the immensity of two world wars, to the all-volunteer force of the present – is deeply entwined with the story of the nation itself. Through every era, veterans have returned home after service to build the peace and lead in their communities, often applying the hard-won lessons of war to strengthen America's civic fabric and democratic norms.

As we honor that legacy on this semiquincentennial, we also look forward. Today's veterans are writing the next chapter of that story. They are defining what patriotism and citizenship mean in the 21st century, not only by remembering the ideals of the past, but also by actively working to realize valued ideals in the present. In doing so, the veteran community of today is moving our country forward, leading by example, and making an indelible mark on the future of American society.

After 250 years, veterans are continuing the work of building a more perfect union.

AMERICA'S TRUST IN VETERANS

Year after year, surveys confirm that veterans and active-duty service members rank among the most trusted cohorts in American society.[18,19] This public confidence is not merely symbolic, rather it holds the potential to strengthen the civic fabric of our country.

Trust in institutions like Congress, media, public education, and government agencies has seen a steady decline over the last two decades. According to Gallup's 2023 trust index, confidence in most major U.S. institutions remain below historical averages.[20] Meanwhile, the military consistently ranks near the top of the list, and veterans can benefit from that elevated status by association. But while Americans often express appreciation for veterans, that trust is rarely expressly translated into a deeper partnership that could engage veterans in solving civic challenges.

This creates a paradox: veterans are viewed as highly trustworthy, but their influence is underutilized in civic arenas. They are thanked but not always heard. They are respected but not expressly empowered. The nation must shift that dynamic.

When a civic institution partners with veterans, they are not only engaging a constituency but also tapping into a source of credibility that can positively influence others. Veterans, drawing from a well-founded perception of integrity and discipline, often serve as trusted connectors between the public and the institutions that shape American life. Research suggests that when people encounter someone they trust speaking positively about a civic institution or public initiative, they are more likely to give that institution the benefit of the doubt.[21]

This trust advantage can be contagious. When veterans model community engagement – for example, by voting, volunteering, or speaking out on local issues – they inspire others to do the same. This often triggers a virtuous cycle of trust. Veterans lend their credibility to institutions, institutions become more trustworthy in the public eye, and the broader public becomes more engaged in civic life.

This cycle benefits everyone by drawing more Americans into meaningful civic participation. The opportunity also exists through veterans to begin to repair the frayed relationship between the public and the institutions designed to serve them.

PATRIOTISM THROUGH A VETERANS LENS

There is no denying that, for the past decade or more, politics and media in the United States have been hyper-partisan and divisive. The occasional bipartisan bill or work done "across the aisle" has become much more an exception than a rule. Not only does this division exist among lawmakers, but also among voters, which means that it exists among friends and neighbors. And while our society may not be quite as polarized as the pundits make it seem, the nation continues to divide in consequential ways along ideological lines.[22]

In this era, the concept of love of country quickly becomes a tinder box for ideological ire. Who loves America more: democrats, republicans, or independents? Whose policies and politics earn them the moral high ground when it comes to being a patriotic citizen? And what are the true definitions and measures of patriotic participation and love of country?

Perhaps the answer can be found in veterans, who have literally fought while carrying the colors of the nation to protect its ideals. Notably, more than half of veterans identify as politically independent, negating attempts by either major party to claim that veterans align more with them.[23] The truth is that veterans – even those with strong political affiliations – tend to align first with the country and a government by and for the people, before they align with a political party or ideological agenda.[24]

Veterans express their love of the country in various ways, not the least of which is their high scores on civic health indicators. One example that touches on both voting and volunteering is the high rate of veterans who sign up to be election poll workers. Those who partake in this special type of civic service often do so to protect the very institutions of American ideals they fought for.

Perhaps most notably, veterans seek and serve in elected public office at higher rates than non-veterans. Veterans will likely not in the foreseeable future make up three-quarters of Congress, as they did a half-century ago, but veterans' presence in the U.S. Congress today is roughly three times their presence in the adult population.[25] And veterans can be found serving or working at virtually every level of government to demonstrate their love of country and community.

What veterans don't often do is measure their patriotism by the size of their flag or the volume they play *God Bless the U.S.A.* while driving down the highway. Veterans and military family members don't always need to vociferously demonstrate how much they love America, because they have lived it, and their patriotic participation speaks for itself.

WHERE DO VETERANS LEARN PATRIOTISM?

It's important to understand both why and how veterans exhibit patriotism, if only because their actions are trusted and their service is respected by almost all Americans. But where do veterans learn how to be patriots? It is certainly not a class taught at boot camp. Rather, for veterans, learning patriotism is experiential.

Patriotism comes from veterans' participation in the social experiment that is the United States military. The idea of learning how to serve a purpose greater than yourself, for selfless reasons, alongside people who look different than you and come from places with which you are unfamiliar is a quick and enduring lesson in all that makes America great. Veterans subject themselves to a kind of learning that transcends rhetoric, political posturing, and the idea that one side is correct and the other is wrong.

Veterans know that when one group of Americans lose, we all lose—as a military unit or as a nation. It is for these reasons, and the experiential nature of service-derived patriotism, that veterans often scoff at the overblown vitriol that divisive politics has brought to American society; instead more often opting to be quiet patriots in their communities, in the voting booths, and every other place where it truly matters.

THE CIVIC HEALTH OF VETERANS

THE CIVIC HEALTH OF VETERANS

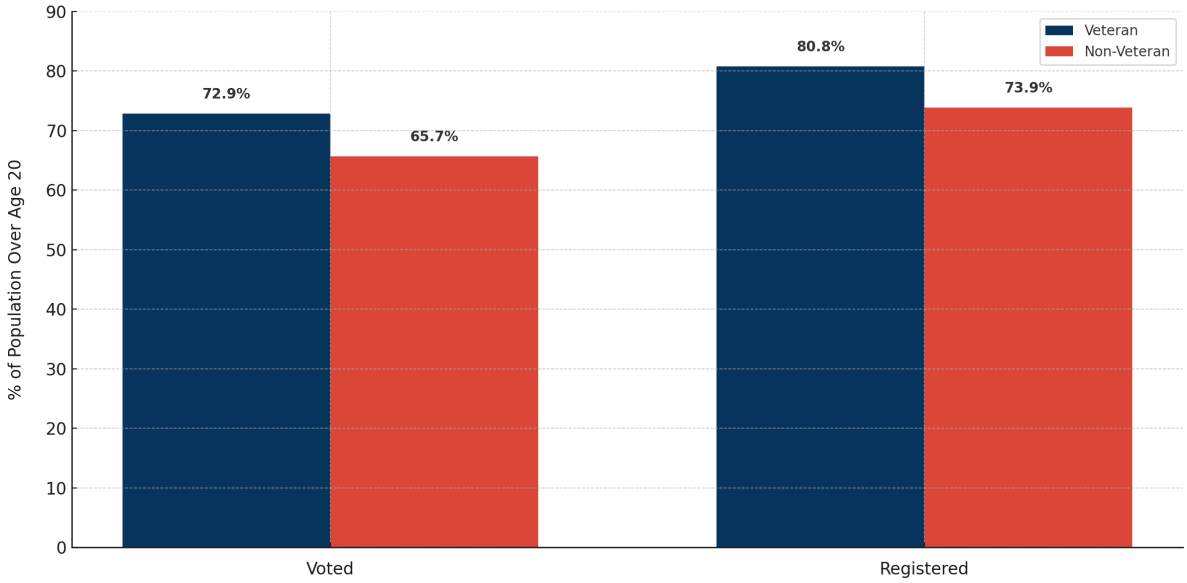
The original purpose of the Veteran Civic Health Index, when established in 2015, was to provide empirical support for the idea that veterans were "civic assets" who should be empowered to lead in their communities. Data on voting, volunteering, giving to charity, working with neighbors, and belonging to civic organizations provided that empirical evidence. Since that publication, the data revealed by the VCHI has been used by countless nonprofit organizations to support their programs, by research bodies conducting related studies, and by corporations to support social responsibility programs aimed at veteran empowerment. The story told by the updated data in this report is relatively similar to what we have previously known about veterans, but it is well worth the effort to regularly reexamine, reevaluate, and reemphasize the numbers that are at the core of veteran civic health.

Voting and Political Engagement

Voting is often considered the most fundamental expression of civic duty, and veterans consistently lead the nation by example. In the 2024 federal election, veterans outpaced their civilian counterparts in both registration and turnout. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, 80.8% of veterans were registered to vote in 2024, compared to 73.9% of non-veterans, and 72.9% of registered veteran voters cast ballots, surpassing the 65.7% turnout among registered non-veterans by a meaningful margin. Similarly in the 2022 midterm elections, veterans were more likely to be registered (78.3% to 68.4%) and registered voters were more likely to vote (64.0% to 51.3%). It is worth noting that, amongst those registered, veterans were 11% more likely than non-veterans to vote in the quadrennial presidential election year, which is impressive. They were also 25% more likely to vote in the mid-term election, signaling a deeper overall commitment to democratic processes.

Veterans have historically shown higher voter participation at local, state, and federal levels. Their consistency over multiple elections, including non-presidential years, off-cycle state and local elections, and special ballots, is another indication of a general commitment to our freedom to self-govern and the democratic process. In fact, veterans are 20% more likely to have voted in the most recent local election (e.g. mayor, school board, etc.) than non-veterans, according to the Census' 2023 Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement. Veterans vote at levels that suggest not habit, but conviction, implying that many veterans view voting as a continuation of their oath to support and defend the Constitution.

2024 PRESIDENTIAL VOTING BY VETERANS AND NON-VETERANS OVER THE AGE OF 20



Veterans also tend to be invested in the electoral process before and after visiting the ballot box. Veterans are over 50% more likely to donate to a political cause than non-veterans, demonstrating their willingness to support campaigns and measures that appeal to them. Perhaps more compelling, veterans are 40% more likely to contact a public official than their civilian counterparts, which implies that veterans remain engaged because they care about and continue to advocate for the outcomes generated by the public officials they help to elect.

For many veterans, the ability and willingness to engage in the processes of local, state, and federal government is a continuation of service. Veterans understand that every decision made in government can have direct impacts in their own community, on those who are currently serving in the military, and for other veterans – many of whom rely on earned government entitlements. Because of this, veteran-facing organizations have grown to serve the political and electoral needs of veterans.

Traditional veteran service organizations, like the American Legion and VFW, maintain a strong presence in America, especially on Capitol Hill. But these "old guard" organizations have admittedly had a difficult time reaching young and middle-aged veterans. In their place, organizations have emerged to serve the post-9/11 generation. Organizations like the VetVoice Foundation, Mission Roll Call, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and The Chamberlain Network, offer ways for veterans to engage in policy advocacy.

Many of these post-9/11 organizations attempt to activate civic engagement in veterans through nonpartisan efforts. A prime example of this is Vet the Vote, a campaign dedicated to recruiting veterans to become election workers. In the 2022 and 2024 election cycles, Vet the Vote mobilized over 163,000 veterans and family members to sign up to be poll workers, under the motivation that American elections must be run by everyday citizens who step up to serve their local communities. Who better to carry on this important work than military veterans and their military-connected family members? The response was telling and serves as one of the strongest signs of veteran civic engagement, beyond the data.

VET THE VOTE

Veterans Supporting the Electoral Process

In recent years, confidence in American elections has faced significant pressure. As a way to bolster the election system, Vet the Vote looked to America's most trusted community to reinforce the function and integrity of our electoral processes, recruiting veterans and military family members to serve as poll workers in elections.

Launched in 2022, Vet the Vote is a nonpartisan civic initiative that taps into the trusted reputation and sense of duty among the military-connected community to protect one of America's most fundamental institutions: the ballot box. The campaign was created to address a critical shortage of poll workers through the logical application of veteran and military family manpower. In the wake of the pandemic, election polling places found themselves with inadequate staffing, which meant that elections themselves were at risk of delays, disorganization, and an erosion of trust. Vet the Vote recognized that veterans and military families could step into this breach because they are seen as credible, patriotic, and nonpartisan.

By the end of the 2024 general election cycle, Vet the Vote had successfully recruited over 163,000 veterans and family members to serve as election workers, representing four out of every five zip codes in the country. The campaign's success lies not only in the numbers, but also in the message: the veteran and military family community is invested in our system of self-governance and actively perpetuating it. Polling places staffed by veterans and military family members send a powerful signal to voters across the political spectrum that the process is fair, secure, and trustworthy. And studies have validated that Americans' confidence in the process increases substantially when they know veterans and military families are on the job.[26]

Volunteering

Military service is rooted in selflessness, and that ethos carries over powerfully into veterans' post-service lives. In 2023, Census data showed that 27% of veterans regularly volunteered in their communities, which is slightly lower than the 28.1% of non-veterans who volunteer. However, veterans who volunteer do so in larger sums of time, averaging 93 hours per year – nearly 2.5 full-time work weeks. Compare that to 70 hours for non-veterans, and we find that veterans on average volunteer 35% more hours than non-veterans. In total, veteran volunteering totals nearly half a billion hours annually, or the equivalent of 220,000 full time workers.

This commitment is not confined to veteran-specific causes. While many veterans volunteer with traditional veteran service organizations geared toward supporting other veterans, the trend for post-9/11 veterans has long been to support other aspects of need in the community. Veterans volunteer at food banks, on disaster relief teams, for youth mentorship programs, and in local schools. Veterans consistently report that volunteering gives them purpose, structure, and community – all values deeply rooted in their military experience.

Veterans also bring unique skill sets to the volunteer world: logistical expertise, leadership experience, adaptability, and crisis readiness. These assets make them particularly valuable to nonprofits and civic agencies that depend on reliable, mission-driven volunteers.

Organizations that specialize in veteran volunteering have homed in on the skills veterans possess and missions at which veterans tend to excel. For example, Team Rubicon recruits veterans for disaster relief projects – a field veterans tend to feel comfortable in. The Mission Continues (recently acquired by Travis Manion Foundation) has partnered with organizations like the National Parks Conservation Association to let veterans volunteer inside national parks, supporting a greater mission of environmentalism, conservation, and public lands preservation. And Everytown for Gun Safety, the nation's largest gun violence prevention organization, has explicitly engaged veterans in their work, trading on veterans' deep knowledge of guns.

All told, it's reasonable to assume that veterans are also more effective and impactful in the execution of the volunteer work they chose to undertake. All of this benefits our larger society at both national and community levels.

VETERAN & NON-VETERAN AVERAGE VOLUNTEERING HOURS

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness – the measure of how individuals build and maintain meaningful relationships – is an essential component of civic health. For veterans, this social capital is often built upon shared service, mutual support, and a sense of continued mission.

33%

Veterans are more likely (33%) than non-veterans (28%) to speak and spend time with neighbors.

The Census reveals that veterans are more likely to speak and spend time with their neighbors (33%) than are non-veterans (28.0%). Veterans are also 16% more likely to do favors for their neighbors – such as transportation, childcare, or assistance with errands – and slightly more likely (22.5%) than non-veterans (21.7%) to take collective action with their neighbors.

This exhibition of neighborly comradery is not unexpected, given the environment in which veterans thrived while serving in the military. Both at work and at home, military service members are thrust together with people who have different backgrounds, interests, and personalities than themselves. Not only are they asked to live and work with a seemingly random sample of Americans; many are asked to literally go to war with them. These examples of learning how to coalesce with others undoubtedly explains why veterans are also able to communicate with and support their neighbors in their civilian lives.

Yet, one of only two civic health measures where veterans tend to underperform non-veterans also falls into the category of social connectedness. Veterans are less likely than non-veterans to frequently talk or spend time with friends and family: 78.0% to 82.9%.

In the 2021 VCHI, this measure was also identified as an outlier.[27] That report hypothesized that this lack of connection to family and friends could be an impact of geographic proximity. Because military members frequently move between duty stations, veterans have typically spent time away from their homes and may be more likely to settle elsewhere, impacting their social connections. Nonetheless, veterans remain more likely to discuss political, social, or local issues with friends and family, which reinforces the hypothesis that geography is the leading factor in veterans' slight lack of familial connectedness, related to time.

+37%

Veterans are 37% more likely than non-veterans to frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with their neighbors.

In fact, veterans are 37% more likely than non-veterans to frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with their neighbors. This statistic jumps off the page, demonstrating how, while veterans have been geographically separated from their pre-service lives, they have built – and lead in – communities wherever they find themselves.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS OF VETERANS & NON-VETERANS

	Veterans	Non-Veterans
Frequently discus political, social, or local issues with friends and family	33.9%	31.5%
Frequently speak with or spend time with neighbors	33.0%	28.0%
Frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with neighbors	9.3%	6.8%
Frequently talk or spend time with friends and family	78.0%	82.9%
Frequently do favors for neighbors	12.1%	10.4%
Frequently take collective action with neighbors	22.5%	21.7%

Community Involvement

Beyond the ballot box, volunteer roles, and neighborhood involvement, veterans also demonstrate their civic health through a strong awareness of current events and community issues. Veterans are significantly more likely (76.3%) than non-veterans (64.2%) to frequently watch, read, or listen to news about political, social, or local topics. Staying informed is a vital part of staying civically engaged.

It should come as no surprise that veterans also give to charity at higher rates: 55.7% compared to 50.2%. This generosity reflects a continued commitment to the wellbeing of others, even after leaving the military. Veterans often channel their sense of duty and community responsibility into supporting causes they care about, both locally and nationally.

Veterans show up. They are more likely to attend public meetings, a behavior that correlates closely with their tendency to vote and stay socially connected. Additionally, veterans are 30% more likely to belong to a group, organization, or association. While this may partly be due to the widespread availability of veteran-specific organizations in many communities, veterans are also likely to join groups that are not exclusive to veteran membership. Civic organizations, youth mentorship programs, and recreational sports leagues are just a few examples.

It's important for non-veterans to understand that not all veterans readily and consistently identify as "veterans" in every aspect of their post-military lives. Some don't utilize their veteran identity at all; some people just happen to be veterans. This, perhaps, is the key to understanding veterans' roles in society. They are complex individuals who share a former vocation and common ethos. It happens that, in that role, the nation invested in their leadership, team building, and problem-solving abilities. Yet crucially, whether they choose to express it or not, veterans are bringing those abilities to our communities.

VETERANS FOR ALL VOTERS

Country Before Party

For many who serve in the military, politics and service don't mix. While in uniform, some service members abstain from politics altogether. However, when service members become veterans, they show up at the ballot box and take heed of the political happenings in their communities and across the country.

Yet, despite high levels of voter registration and participation in elections, veterans tend to be less partisan than the average American. A 2024 member survey by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America revealed that 55% of these post-9/11 veterans identify as politically independent, with 27% identifying as Republican and 19% as Democrat.[28] Perhaps experience in the military somehow encourages veterans to stay away from partisan posturing.

In a time of hyper-partisanship, this data suggests that the majority of younger veterans prefer to express their political interest independently. Veterans no doubt place a high value on the ability to work through differences to achieve a common mission, and this is exemplified by a relatively new veteran-facing organization that is growing in prominence: Veterans for All Voters (VAV).

VAV is a nonpartisan organization that mobilizes veteran and military family voices to promote structural electoral reforms that increase trust, access, and fairness in American elections, while eliminating the incentives of hyper-partisanship. It was built on the idea that veterans have sworn an oath to defend the Constitution, and many are uniquely positioned to restore faith in the process. By advocating for reforms like open primaries and ranked-choice voting, VAV seeks to depolarize elections, amplify moderate voices, and ensure that all voters – including independents – have a meaningful choice.

VAV is not a veterans' organization in the traditional sense – it's a civic engagement initiative that is led and supported by those who served. Its members include veterans of every political background and service era. They engage with state-level campaigns across the country, testifying before legislatures, organizing community forums, and partnering with civic coalitions to advance reforms.

At a time when many Americans feel disillusioned by politics, VAV reminds us that country must come before party.

COMPARISON TO THE 2021 VETERANS CHI

Since the publication of the last Veteran Civic Health Index in 2021, the good news for veterans is that they have maintained generally higher rates of civic health measurement compared to non-veterans. Veterans only fail to outpace non-veterans in two measures – regular volunteering and spending time with friends and family.

"The good news for veterans is that they have maintained generally higher rates of civic health measurement compared to non-veterans."

The bad news is that some of the civic advantage over non-veterans that veterans demonstrate is decreasing. In 2025, across the 18 primary civic health measurements evaluated by this report, the scores for veterans decreased in 16 measurements. For those 16 measurements, non-veterans also decreased in 15 of them, showing an overall trend of less civic engagement. Also, in many of the measures, the decrease for veterans was quite small – eight measures decreased by less than two percentage points.

An overall decrease in civic engagement could be attributed to numerous causes. Certainly the 2020 Covid pandemic resulted in social and behavioral changes worldwide, some of which persisted for years. A comprehensive civic health indicator analysis has not been performed with the express goal of understanding civic behavior changes before, during, and after the pandemic. However, one can assume that social interactions temporarily decreased, while charitable giving increased, for example. Therefore, the numbers seen when comparing the 2021 VCHI to this report may be impacted by the rebound effect from changes in civic health as a result of the pandemic.

Looking more closely at the largest changes witnessed in 2025, the first standout statistic is a 10% decrease in frequent volunteering for veterans from 30.1% in 2021 to 27.0% in 2025. During the same period, non-veterans dropped from 29.9% to 28.2%. While the pandemic hangover may have some impact on volunteering measurements, another factor could be the average age of veterans. Veterans are getting younger on average, and with fewer older, retired veterans, perhaps veterans – overall – have less disposable time. No matter the cause, it is concerning to see veterans performing relatively worse on a key indicator of civic engagement like frequent volunteering.

Veterans also saw a nearly five-point drop in likelihood to belong to a group or organization, whereas non-veterans saw a two-point drop in the same category. Veterans saw decreases in both donating to political causes (13.3% in 2021 to 11.2% in 2025) and donating to charity (59.4% in 2021 to 55.7% in 2025). Non-veterans saw decreases in both measures, as well, but by less.

In one marker – frequently discussing political, social, or local issues with friends and family – non-veterans' participation dropped by 16%, while veterans saw a small marginal decrease of less than one percentage point (a 2% change). This is the category where veterans climbed ahead of non-veterans, after being less likely to discuss issues with friends and family in 2021. This may be a result of hyper-partisanship and political polarization. The more contentious political rhetoric creeps into daily life, the less people are willing to discuss these issues with friends and families. However, veterans tend to be more independently minded and might be demonstrating just that through this statistic.

Veterans in 2025 were more likely (+1.0%) to be registered to vote than in 2021, as were non-veterans (+1.1%). But neither participated in the elections to the same degree. Veteran voter turnout (among registered voters) was down from 74.7% to 72.9%, and non-veterans were down from 66.9% to 65.7%. Nevertheless, veterans were still much more likely to vote.

It's difficult to determine the causes of the decrease in civic health indicators for veterans. On one hand, it's understandable to see veterans following the same trend as the general population, but also it's disappointing to see general civic health diminishing. And while the most meaningful comparison is veterans to non-veterans – where veterans continue to outperform – it would be very much worthwhile to explore both factors that might be depressing veteran performance as well as the potential threats to overall veteran civic health in the long run.

THREATS TO VETERAN CIVIC HEALTH

Despite strong positive civic health indicators for veterans, significant barriers remain. Threats to veterans' civic health can prevent them from fully realizing their full potential as leaders and civic assets. These challenges often intersect with issues of public perception, identity, mental health, and changing societal dynamics. Addressing these issues should be essential to efforts to strengthen the civic health of the nation overall.

Persistent Misperceptions

> "Perhaps the most foundational challenge is the persistent misperceptions of veterans by the public."

Perhaps the most foundational challenge is the persistent misperceptions of veterans by the public. Polling shows that veterans are among the most trusted members of society,[29] yet paradoxically damaging stereotypes continue to burden the veteran community, perpetuating the enduring "broken hero" trope.[30] Many Americans, influenced by media narratives, assume that most veterans are struggling with trauma, instability, or isolation.[31] In reality, the majority of veterans are thriving, civically engaged, and eager to lead in their communities.

These misperceptions are not harmless. They can influence hiring decisions, reduce trust in veterans, and create social barriers. Perhaps most alarmingly, they are thought to have a significant negative impact on military recruitment. Veterans often report being treated with pity rather than respect or seen as liabilities rather than assets.[32] This "soft discrimination" in the workplace, civic organizations, or volunteer settings, can cause veterans to feel tokenized, overlooked, or underutilized. Over time, these perceptions may discourage civic involvement.

Mental Health and Social Disconnection

While the civilian public may think that most veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, data collected by the VA leads to estimates that less than 10% of veterans are currently dealing with PTSD,[33] and only 15% of all veterans experience PTSD in their lifetime.[34] PTSD proved to be less prevalent in post-9/11 veterans than in Vietnam-era veterans, and more than 90% of the Americans who deal with PTSD in a given year are not veterans.[35] Nonetheless, the incidence of PTSD is manifestly higher (approximately double) in the veteran population, and all mental health issues can be serious and deserve attention, resource commitment, and treatment.

The combination of overstating mental health issues and the negative stigma around seeking help make the veteran mental health conversation an extremely complicated one. PTSD, military sexual trauma, depression, anxiety, andv moral injury are all more prevalent among veterans, and stigma around mental health or treatments can lead to isolation – a facet of social connectedness where veterans perform poorly compared to civilians. This disconnection, the mental health conditions themselves, or the resulting misperceptions can all blunt the sense of civic belonging and inhibit participation in public life.

Appropriate treatment for mental and physical ailments is essential for veterans who require it and critical to enabling veterans to realize their potential as leaders and civic assets. Veteran service organizations, veterans, and their many allies fought for years to ensure the VA could support the needs of post-9/11 veterans through adequate benefits, healthcare, and mental wellness opportunities – most notably, those provided by the 2022 PACT Act.[36] A retreat from the current levels of service and coverage is likely to have meaningful consequences to veterans' and their families' basic needs and will almost certainly have resulting impacts on veterans' capacity to continue their service to America and their local communities.

Political Polarization

Although about half of all veterans identify as independent or moderate, veterans are frequently portrayed in media or politics as leaning heavily toward one side of the ideological spectrum – often the far-right. This miscasting not only misrepresents the views of veterans, but can be a barrier for civic organizations, public officials, or employers from seeing them as independently minded, nonpartisan contributors.

Furthermore, while veterans have been targeted by violent extremist groups looking to exploit their training, discipline, and perceived credibility, in fact, veterans are less likely to support extreme views and organizations than non-veterans.[37] While veterans who choose extreme ideologies represent a small minority, the public conflation of veterans with political violence or radical movements has the potential to undermine decades of trust and civic leadership development. Veterans' organizations must continue to promote inclusive, non-partisan values rooted in commitments to patriotic American ideals to counteract this narrative.

The Patriotism Paradox

One might think that the very best example of patriotism is military service, and that veterans could corner the market on love of country. But, like so many other rhetorical symbols in this hyper-partisan era, the typical symbols of American patriotism have recently been associated with more conservative political movements, as the political left has dissociated with some of the symbolism and language of being a "patriot." This leaves veterans – as they may be for their service to the nation – with their patriotic expression often stuck irreconcilably between extremes.

Yet the defining characteristics of patriotism are not tied to one political ideology or another. A veteran, or any American, with left-leaning views should never be made to feel ashamed for proudly flying an American flag, just as an American with right-leaning views shouldn't feel that flying the flag alone is a way to prove their patriotism. As veterans know, this country has but one flag, and it's meant to be a symbol for an entire nation – the United States. When the concept of patriotism, and indeed acts of positive patriotism, become associated with one party or ideology, the ultimate result is veterans being left out in the cold, unable to adopt either "side's" patriotic social currency, but unwilling to let go of their own love of the country.

VETERANS IN FEDERAL SERVICE

Public Servants Twice Over

For many veterans, public service doesn't end when they leave the military, rather it evolves to a mission serving as a federal employee. This group of veterans are, in a phrase coined by the Partnership for Public Service, "public servants twice over." Of course, the experience of veterans in the federal workforce has often been shaped as much by political tides as by personal commitment. Nowhere was this more apparent than in early 2025, when the severe reduction in the size of the federal workforce disproportionately impacted veterans.

Veterans make up nearly one-third of the federal workforce. Many work in roles that require stability, expertise, and nonpartisan execution – traits that are foundational to good governance and found in abundance in veterans. In addition to layoffs in early 2025, federal veteran employment programs were underfunded, union protections were weakened, and future advancement was made less accessible. Despite these setbacks, many veterans continue to serve quietly and effectively across agencies.

Veterans don't need handouts to thrive in the federal workforce – they need fair systems, stable structures, and leadership that respects their service. The American people have invested in veterans, and we should all be committed to systems that allow us to reap the benefits.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION VS. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

"The Next Greatest Generation"

In November 2011, Time magazine featured a cover that captured the expectations of a nation. Against a backdrop of stoic, battle-worn faces, the headline declared post-9/11 veterans to be "The Next Greatest Generation." It was more than a nod to military service; it was a cultural coronation. These were not just warriors, they were future leaders, problem-solvers, and bridge-builders. The phrase suggested that, like the World War II generation – and perhaps unlike intervening generations – these veterans had not only the skills, but also the public trust to return home and remake America.

But more than a decade later, we must ask if that promise materialized. The short answer is: not yet.

The post-9/11 generation of veterans returned home to a country full of goodwill, but short on understanding and connection. Many Americans offered sympathy rather than empowerment, charity instead of investment. At the same time, a crowded field of veteran nonprofits – often well-meaning, but poorly calibrated – reinforced a narrow view of veterans as broken, dependent, or in need of fixing. The result is a civic story half-written – a generation with the potential to lead but still hampered by perceptions and societal factors beyond their control.

"The Sea of Goodwill"

The "Sea of Goodwill" is a term coined in 2011 by the then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen. The moniker meant to capture the outpouring of public support for service members and their families. The metaphor stuck, and it became a guiding idea in veteran philanthropy. Billions of dollars and thousands of initiatives followed, all buoyed by the belief that America's collective affection for its veterans could be harnessed into meaningful support.

But goodwill, like seawater, can overwhelm as much as it uplifts. The Sea of Goodwill often translated into a vast, uncoordinated flood of services – many redundant, some ineffective, and others inadvertently harmful. With no rudder to guide it, this well-meaning surge reinforced the idea that veterans were a problem to be solved, not partners in progress. Programs multiplied, but few focused on civic development, leadership, or long-term empowerment. As a result, the Sea of Goodwill may have diluted impact rather than deepened it. It helped veterans survive but failed in many cases to position them to lead.

Broken Heroes...and Raising Money

Efforts to convey the gravity of supporting injured veterans to a public disconnected from military service have often led to confusion that furthers the civilian-military divide. Many well-intentioned nonprofit organizations have built their brands by portraying veterans as broken. These groups may raise awareness and funds, but often at the cost of perpetuating the very myths that marginalize veterans in civic life. Their narratives feed the public imagination that veterans are either superheroes or hopeless cases, leaving little room for the millions of veterans who are neither.

A common violation of veteran perception for the purposes of fundraising is the myriad nonprofits – large and small – that have portrayed veterans to the American donor class as damaged goods to raise money. This tactic was successful in raising billions of dollars over a decade or more, and in many cases the work done by these organizations was laudable. Nevertheless, the cost of these models is not theoretical. The hyper-publicizing of charity programs exclusively focused on veterans' injuries and mental health challenges dilutes trust, and crowds out other needed and impactful programs. It also distorts the public narrative, making it harder for veterans to be seen and to see themselves as civic leaders, rather than objects of sympathy.

Empowerment Over Pity

Over the last decade or more, a new generation of organizations has emerged and thrived by rewriting the narrative. These groups reject the notion that veterans are a burden. Instead, they see veterans as leaders and civic assets – capable, motivated, and already leading in communities across the country. Many of these forward-thinking efforts have been supported by foundations that have intentionally directed resources toward organizations that invest in veterans' civic capacity, not just their needs.

The Mission Continues (the sponsor of the 2021 VCHI) organizes veteran-led service platoons that tackle pressing local challenges in cities across the country.[38] More Perfect Union brings people together in real life to bridge divides through service projects, meaningful conversations, and civic engagement.[39] Beneath the Service equips veterans and their families to become influential leaders in their communities.[40] Veterans for All Voters engages veterans to advocate for inclusive, nonpartisan election reforms in their states.[41] We the Veterans & Military Families invites veterans and their families to continue their service through programs like Vet the Vote.

These organizations don't offer veterans a handout; they offer a platform. They recognize that veterans already possess the discipline, leadership, and civic commitment our country needs. What's missing is not motivation, but access to opportunity, support, and recognition. By shifting the focus from trauma to talent, these groups are helping the post-9/11 generation fulfill the promise imagined on that Time magazine cover. By doing it in the public eye, they begin to shift perceptions of veterans for everyday Americans.

What Now?

To honor the potential of post-9/11 veterans, we must reinvent the narrative. Veterans are ready to lead, but society must pivot from focusing largely exclusively on charity and start building efforts to engage them in civic life. This means investing in leadership programs, showcasing veterans in public roles, and funding organizations that cultivate engagement rather than dependency.

The phrase "The Next Greatest Generation" was never meant to be a compliment. It was a challenge.

To be clear, organizations and government policies that ensure the basic needs of veterans and military families are met are essential to the foundation on which this group's civic health is built. But misperceptions, ill-conceived fundraising efforts, and twenty years of continuous war have been a barrier to this community reaching its full civic potential. Veterans will continue to step forward in city halls, classrooms, nonprofit boards, and polling places. And America must not only meet them there, but support their journey. Only then will the full civic potential of this generation come to light. Only then will we fulfill the promise of what veterans can become – not symbols of sacrifice, but architects of America's civic renewal.

EVALUATING THE MILITARY-CONNECTED COMMUNITY

For decades, research and public narratives have focused almost exclusively on veterans when considering civic contributions from the military population. Veterans' track record as civic leaders sets a standard for the nation to follow. But a critical question remains: do these civic values extend beyond the uniform and into the lives of those who stand beside those who serve?

"But a critical question remains: do these civic values extend beyond the uniform and into the lives of those who stand beside those who serve?"

This question sits at the heart of civic opportunity. If, as the data suggests, connection to military service instills a strong ethic of community participation, then the military-connected community may represent a large, underappreciated civic network. Understanding and measuring the civic health of military and veteran families complements existing research on veterans and may uncover a powerful force for strengthening America and our civic institutions.

Unfortunately, military-connected individuals often fall through the cracks of traditional civic measurement tools. They are not tracked like veterans through the VA. They are not categorized by Census labels. They are only occasionally the subjects of broad-based surveys, many of which don't include civic engagement-related questions. Still, the data we do have – and the culture we can observe – suggests that the ethos of service extends beyond the person in uniform.

Defining the Community

Defining the "military-connected community" is no easy task. It certainly includes the spouses of currently serving active-duty service members. While their dependent children of active duty fall under this definition, the civic participation of minors is beyond the scope of this report, so only adult children of active duty are a relevant population. Also included would be the spouses and adult children of currently serving military members in the National Guard and reserves. All told, this population of military family members (over the age of 18) is estimated at over one million.[42]

Of course, the primary focus of the VCHI is civic participation after military service. Therefore, it makes sense to include the spouses and adult children of military veterans, as well as gold star families – those whose service members passed away. This population is estimated at 105 million, which brings the size of the entire military-connected community to nearly six times that of the veteran population and approximately 40% of all adult Americans.[43]

What unites this diverse population is their proximity to service. But the very qualities that bind this group together also make them difficult to measure. Military spouses change locations every few years. Veteran families may not readily identify with their connection to service. Up-to-date surveying requires investment and intentionality that most civic research tools aren't built for. Despite these challenges, there are data sources and anecdotal evidence that offer windows into the civic lives of this population.

Evidence and Analysis

A growing body of research suggests that military-connected individuals carry many of the same sentiments and civic habits as those who wore the uniform. A 2011 Pew survey found that adults with family connections to the military are 40% more likely than those without these connections to consider themselves highly patriotic.[44] In a 2024 nationwide poll from Blue Star Families, 20% of military-connected respondents had served as election workers, compared to only 12% of non-military connected.[45] In addition, 93% of these individuals believe that voting can influence the country's direction, which was nearly double the rate of confidence found in the general population.[46] If the military-connected community volunteers for elections and has faith in their results, we can reasonably assume that they are voting at higher rates than the general population.

The significant faith in "the system" – a component of which provides the livelihood and community for this subpopulation for much of their lives – is also an important distinction for military-connected Americans. They essentially become "super-voters" and "super-volunteers" in their communities, which provides strong evidence of high civic participation across the board.[47]

Qualitative research reinforces these findings. Military spouses often take on leadership roles in volunteer organizations, PTA boards, base family support groups, and local nonprofits. They coordinate food drives, organize school events, and lead community coalitions – even when moving every two to three years. Their ability to plug into new communities, identify needs, and mobilize solutions is a civic skill set unto itself. This leads to a safe assumption that military family members are volunteering at higher rates than the average American.

It is unlikely that the civic traits observed among military-connected individuals are coincidental. They are certainly correlated and likely causally linked to the civic health indicators modeled by veterans. Military families also often possess heightened awareness of national and local politics. They are attuned to policies on healthcare, education, veterans' benefits, and military funding, because they directly impact their lives. This policy literacy typically translates into civic participation, from voting to advocacy to community organizing.

"It is unlikely that the civic traits observed among military-connected individuals are coincidental."

Building strong social networks is often the lifeblood of the hyper-mobile military spouse population – a necessary part of moving from installation to installation. After transitioning out of active-duty life, the formal networks may dissipate, but the social habits likely endure. In all, civic participation, policy literacy, and social connectedness seem to function like a contagion, passed through proximity, nurtured by shared experience, and reinforced by cultural norms.

Unfortunately, this civic energy is rarely named, much less measured. Military-connected individuals are often seen as adjuncts to veterans – worthy of support, but not recognized as leaders in their own right. This framing is both inaccurate and limiting. It overlooks the extraordinary civic agency military families already exercise and fails to invite them fully into the nation's civic institutions.

Call to Action

The conclusion is that military-connected individuals represent potentially the largest untapped sources of civic capacity in the United States. With more than 100 million American adults in this cohort, if even a fraction of this population were further activated or supported in their civic engagement, the positive impact on American and local communities would be profound. But such a large cohort can be hard to measure, message, and motivate.

More work needs to be done in this area. It demands intentional, data-driven inquiry, similar to that performed for veteran populations or general civic assessments. Military family identifiers should be added in national surveys like the Census Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey. Grantmakers interested in this area should fund qualitative studies that document civic engagement pathways among the military-connected community. Nonprofit organizations that serve the active military family community should create local pilot programs that measure civic health in high-density military population areas. State and local governments should allow these individuals to self-identify on voter registration forms, motor vehicle records, and poll worker applications.

Just as the VCHI has elevated our understanding of veterans as civic assets, a parallel effort focused on military-connected individuals could reshape national perceptions, policymaking, and community engagement strategies.

CONCLUSION

The 2025 Veteran Civic Health Index confirms, as previous reports discovered, that America's veterans remain exceptional civic assets and leaders in our communities. Across multiple measures of civic engagement—from volunteering to voting to supporting neighbors—veterans continue to outpace their civilian counterparts, underscoring a deeply ingrained ethic of service. These findings reinforce the powerful insight that, for so many, service to the nation does not end when the uniform comes off; it simply transforms.

Veterans apply the leadership, team building, and problem solving skills honed in the military to strengthen civic life at home. From leading volunteer disaster responses to coaching youth teams and serving in public office, veterans are stepping into crucial roles in every sector of society, typically at higher rates than those who have never served. In short, veterans and their families are an ongoing force for civic renewal, and their contributions should be leveraged to help strengthen our nation and communities across the country.

At the same time, this report highlights critical opportunities for society to better support and leverage veteran leadership. Today's veteran population is smaller, younger, and more diverse than in past generations. Post-9/11 veterans are poised to step up as the civic leaders of the next half century. A decade ago, Time Magazine called this generation of veterans "The Next Greatest Generation." However, gaps in understanding between the military and civilian world have hindered the fulfillment of this promise.

Fewer Americans have direct connections to military service. Misperceptions about the status and role of veterans color civilian perceptions. Many Americans mistakenly believe most veterans suffer from PTSD, homelessness, unemployment and other problems, fueled by sensationalized media. In reality, the vast majority of veterans are thriving and more engaged than civilians.

Clearly, veterans should be viewed as assets whose talents and experiences benefit our communities. The challenge before us is to bridge the civilian-military divide and ensure every veteran can be empowered to participate meaningfully in civic life.

By celebrating veterans' ongoing civic contributions and addressing barriers to engagement, we not only honor their service, but also enrich the very fabric of our nation. Veterans' ability to strengthen our communities is reliant upon society's willingness to welcome, empower, and partner with them in service to the nation's civic health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To fully realize the promise of America's veterans as civic leaders, a concerted effort must be made across all sectors. The following recommendations are directed at government agencies, nonprofit organizations, corporate leaders, and civic institutions. These actions aim to improve veterans' civic integration and visibility, dispel misperceptions, and bolster support for engagement by veterans and military families.

Recommendations for Government Agencies

Treat veterans' civic health as a priority and develop programs to support and engage veterans beyond the Department of Veterans Affairs. Less than half of veterans are enrolled in VA services, yet veterans persist in all aspects of civilian life.[48] Thus, issues affecting veterans must be addressed across all agencies. All veterans have been trained with taxpayer dollars to be leaders, team builders, and problem solvers. By ensuring the needs of all veterans are met, we increase the overall capacity of the veteran population to serve our communities. Through intentional engagement and development, communities will reap the benefits.

"To fully realize the promise of America's veterans as civic leaders, a concerted effort must be made across all sectors."

Recommendations for Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofits of all types should actively recruit veteran and military family volunteers and employees. Empowering veterans in your organization not only advances your mission with dedicated talent, but also helps veterans rekindle a sense of purpose and belonging. Similarly, build collaborations with veteran-facing organizations that empower veterans. Such partnerships allow veterans to put their advanced civic health qualities to work for the common good. Likewise, nonprofits should consider veterans and military family members for staff and board roles to infuse veteran insights into organizational leadership.

Recommendations for Corporations

The business community plays a vital role in veterans' civic integration. Hiring veterans is not just a patriotic gesture, it's good for business. Companies that hire veterans often find they promote faster and stay with the company longer than non-veterans, boosting productivity and the bottom line. Corporate leaders should continue to expand recruitment of veterans and military spouses across all job functions. Of course, simply hiring veterans is not enough; companies should also cultivate a workplace environment that values and integrates veteran employees.

Recommendations for Civic Leaders

Local civic institutions, such as libraries, community centers, universities, faith congregations, and civic clubs, should create opportunities for meaningful interaction between veterans and civilians. Social trust is a two-way street, and veterans benefit from feeling welcomed in communities that understand the talents and perspectives veterans bring. Organize community dialogues or "meet your veteran neighbor" events where residents can learn about the experiences of those who served. Perhaps also take the opportunity to publicly recognize veterans' civic contributions through civic award programs.

VETERAN CIVIC HEALTH MEASURES COMPARED TO NON-VETERANS

CIVIC HEALTH INDICATORS	Veteran	Non-Veteran
Average number of hours volunteering in the past year	93	69
Regular volunteering	27.0%	28.2%
Donate to a political cause	11.2%	7.2%
Donate to a non-political cause	55.7%	50.2%
Frequently talk or spend time with friends and family	78.0%	82.9%
Frequently discuss political, social, or local issues with friends and family	33.9%	31.5%
Frequently speak with or spend time with neighbors	33.0%	28.0%
Frequently discus political. social, or local issues with neighbors	9.3%	6.8%
Frequently do favors for neighbors	12.1%	10.4%
Took collective action with neighbors	22.5%	21.7%
Frequently post views about political. social, or local issues on internet of social media	5.4%	4.5%
Frequently read, watch, or listen to news or information about political. social, or local issues	76.3%	64.2%
Voted in the last local election (e.g mayor or school board)	64.2%	53.3%
Attended a public meeting in the past year	10.6%	9.7%
Contacted a public official in the past year	12.2%	8.8%
Bought or boycotted products of services based on the political values or business practices of that company in the past year	20.1%	17.9%
Belonged to a group, organization, or association in the past year	31.8%	24.7%
Registered to Vote in 2022	78.3%	68.4%
Voted in 2022	64.0%	51.3%
Registered to Vote in 2024	80.8%	73.9%
Voted in 2024	72.9%	65.7%

TECHNICAL NOTES

When analyzing the veteran population, data presented by the Department of Veterans Affairs and that presented by the U.S. Census does not always match. For the purposes of this report, population data from the Census Bureau is prioritized, when possible. When utilizing VA data for ratios and comparisons, VA data is used exclusively.

Unless otherwise noted, data findings presented in this report are based on the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC)'s analysis of the Census Current Population Survey (CPS) data. Any and all data errors are our own. Volunteering estimates are from the CPS September Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement, 2023; voting and registration data come from the CPS November Voting/Registration Supplement, 2024. Using a probability-selected sample of about 50,000 occupied households drawn from geographically based sampling units, the CPS collects monthly data on employment and demographic characteristics of the nation. Depending on the CPS supplement, the single-year CPS sample sizes for veterans included in this report were 3,779 (Civic Engagement Supplement) and 7,0479 (Voting/Registration Supplement).

In order to get the demographic estimates of the veterans' background, the sample data was weighted by the veteran weight, computed by the Census Bureau. The veteran weight is designed in such a way that estimates will accurately track the of official statistics reported by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The comparative non-veteran sample demographics are estimated using the final population weight, also computed by the Census Bureau. For all estimates of civic health indicators, we use the specific weights computed for each supplement. These civic engagement weights account for non-response bias.

In this report, we include all veterans for demographic reporting. For age-specific, group-based reporting, we include veterans and non-veterans who are 20 years old and older. We did this because there are very few veterans who are 19 or younger. In this report, we made comparisons between veterans and non-veterans between ages 20 and 49, and comparisons between veterans and non-veterans aged 50 and older.

All surveys, including federal surveys, are subject to sampling error. Margin of error is influenced by multiple factors including sample size, estimate size, population size, and other parameters. Therefore, we do not report one margin of error across all indicators. With that said - due to the large sample sizes in this report (3,779 for the smallest supplement) - sampling error is quite small, within one to two percentage points. However, 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 Citation: AmeriCorps. Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) Supplement, 2023. Analytical version. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau [producer]. Washington, DC: AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation [producer and distributor].

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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, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act directed NCoC to expand this civic health assessment in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Census Bureau.

NCoC has worked with partners in more than 35 states and cities 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 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

District of Columbia
ServeDC

Florida
Florida Joint Center for Citizenship
Bob Graham Center for Public Service
Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government

Georgia
Georgia Family Connection Partnership
Georgia Municipal Association

Illinois
McCormick Foundation

Indiana
Indiana University Center on Representative Government
Indiana Bar Foundation
Indiana Citizen Education Foundation, Inc.
Indiana Supreme Court
Indiana University Northwest
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs

Kansas
Kansas Health Foundation

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

Michigan
Michigan Nonprofit Association
Michigan Campus Compact
Michigan Community Service Commission
Volunteer Centers of Michigan
Council of Michigan Foundations
Center for Study of Citizenship at Wayne State University

Minnesota
Center for Democracy and Citizenship

Missouri
Missouri State University
Washington University

Nebraska
Civic Nebraska
Nebraska Community Foundation
Nebraska Extension
The Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Omaha Nebraska

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

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

Rhode Island
Rhode Island Council for the Humanities
Rhode Island Department of State

South Carolina
University of South Carolina Upstate

Texas
The University of Texas at Austin
The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life
RGK Center for Philanthropy & Community Service

Vermont
Vermont's Secretary of State
Vermont Humanities
The Center for Rural Studies
SerVermont
Up for Learning

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

ISSUE SPECIFIC

Latinos Civic Health Index
Carnegie Corporation

Veterans Civic Health Index
We The Veterans

Millennials Civic Health Index
Mobilize.org
Harvard Institute of Politics
CIRCLE

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

CITIES

Atlanta
Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta

Greater Austin
The University of Texas at Austin
RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service
Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life
Leadership Austin
Austin Community Foundation
KLRU-TV, Austin PBS
KUT News

Chicago
McCormick Foundation

Kansas City & Saint Louis
Missouri State University
Park University
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

Twin Cities
Center for Democracy and Citizenship
Citizens League
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We the Veterans

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