

OHIO CIVIC HEALTH INDEX 2026

Building Civic Strength for
Economic Prosperity



Leadership
OHIO



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Acknowledgments

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Data Partner

We are proud to utilize data from the Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey in partnership with AmeriCorps.

About the Partners



Leadership Ohio

Founded in 1992, Leadership Ohio strengthens civic capacity by developing leaders who build trust, bridge sectors, and steward institutions for the long-term good of the state. For more information, visit leadershipohio.org.



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 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.



FirstEnergy Foundation

The FirstEnergy Foundation supports 501(c)(3) organizations across FirstEnergy's operational area, helping them build capacity, strengthen outcomes and deliver lasting impact. Giving priorities include housing stability, hunger relief, workforce development and STEM initiatives that reflect community needs and the company's business focus.



Ellis Family Fund

The Ellis Family Fund is a private fund that provides financial support to innovative nonprofit endeavors. It serves as a vehicle for family giving to positively impact society through a range of charitable causes.



Richwood Bank

For over 150 years, Richwood Bank has been, first and foremost, community. Richwood's vision is to inspire, protect, and celebrate anything that helps communities thrive. Their goal is to seamlessly fuse technology and human interaction in a way that creates a better banking experience for our customers and stronger outcomes for our communities.



Shawnee State University

Shawnee State is the regional public university for south central Ohio located along the Ohio River in Portsmouth. It is a global leader of plastics manufacturing and engineering technology, including gaming technology. The university prepares today's students to succeed in tomorrow's world.



Capitol Square Foundation

The Capitol Square Foundation was established to increase public awareness of and to involve citizens in the history of the Ohio Statehouse. Its purpose is to raise funds to obtain, restore and maintain artifacts and other items related to the history and enhancement of this grand monument and its adjoining grounds, so that the seat of Ohio's government may reflect the dignity of the state and its citizens. The Foundation fosters civic engagement, ensuring that Ohio's seat of government remains a living symbol of democracy and heritage.



The Columbus Foundation

The Columbus Foundation, one of the top 10 community foundations in the United States, serves thousands of individuals, families, and businesses that have created unique funds and planned gifts to make a difference in the lives of others through the most effective philanthropy possible.



Ohio Chamber of Commerce

The Ohio Chamber of Commerce is the state's leading business advocacy organization, representing companies of all sizes. Its mission is to champion free enterprise, economic competitiveness, and growth in Ohio by providing resources, shaping policy, and serving as the voice of business in the state.



Cleveland Foundation

Established in 1914, the Cleveland Foundation is the world's first community foundation—and one of the largest today. The foundation works with donors and partners to improve the lives of residents of Cuyahoga, Lake and Geauga counties by investing in immediate and long-term impact and providing leadership on vital issues. Our vision is a vibrant Northeast Ohio where no Clevelander is left behind.

Foreword



Strong communities don't happen by accident. They are built day by day through participation, trust, and a shared commitment to the common good.

That belief has shaped my own journey. I have built a life centered on family and service, partnering with organizations that uplift communities and create opportunity for others. Through my involvement with the Urban League, the Greater Akron Chamber and other civic organizations, I've seen firsthand what happens when people choose to show up for one another and move forward together toward a common purpose.

Civic health is what happens. Communities become more resilient, more innovative and better prepared to meet the challenges ahead.

The Ohio Civic Health Index 2026 offers an important look at how we are doing as a state. By examining data on volunteering, voting, charitable giving, participation in public meetings and other forms of civic engagement, the Index helps us understand how effectively Ohioans are working together to solve problems and improve quality of life across our communities. Just as importantly, it highlights opportunities to strengthen civic habits and grow participation.

Ohio begins from a position of strength. Many Ohioans feel a deep sense of neighborliness and pride in their communities. People help one another, care about their neighborhoods and want their communities to succeed. The challenge before us is to channel that spirit into sustained civic participation—turning everyday connections into a lasting commitment.

Organizations like Leadership Ohio play a valuable role by bringing together leaders from different backgrounds, industries and perspectives to build understanding and collaboration across the state. These experiences help leaders form coalitions, bridge divides and translate leadership into meaningful action within the communities they serve.

Civic health ultimately belongs to all of us. Businesses, educators, nonprofit organizations, community leaders and residents each have a role to play. Employers can encourage volunteerism and civic participation. Communities can create welcoming spaces for dialogue and collaboration. Schools and mentors can help young people discover the value of civic engagement early in life.

The data in this report offers a clear message: Ohio has the foundation it needs to increase civic participation, but progress will require action. By strengthening the connections between workplaces, neighborhoods and civic institutions, and by creating more opportunities for Ohioans—especially young people—to serve and lead, we can turn our state's strong sense of neighborliness into lasting civic strength.

Ohio's future depends on it. And the opportunity to build that future—*together*—has never been greater.

Torrence L. Hinton
FirstEnergy Ohio President

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Torrence L. Hinton". The signature is stylized and cursive.

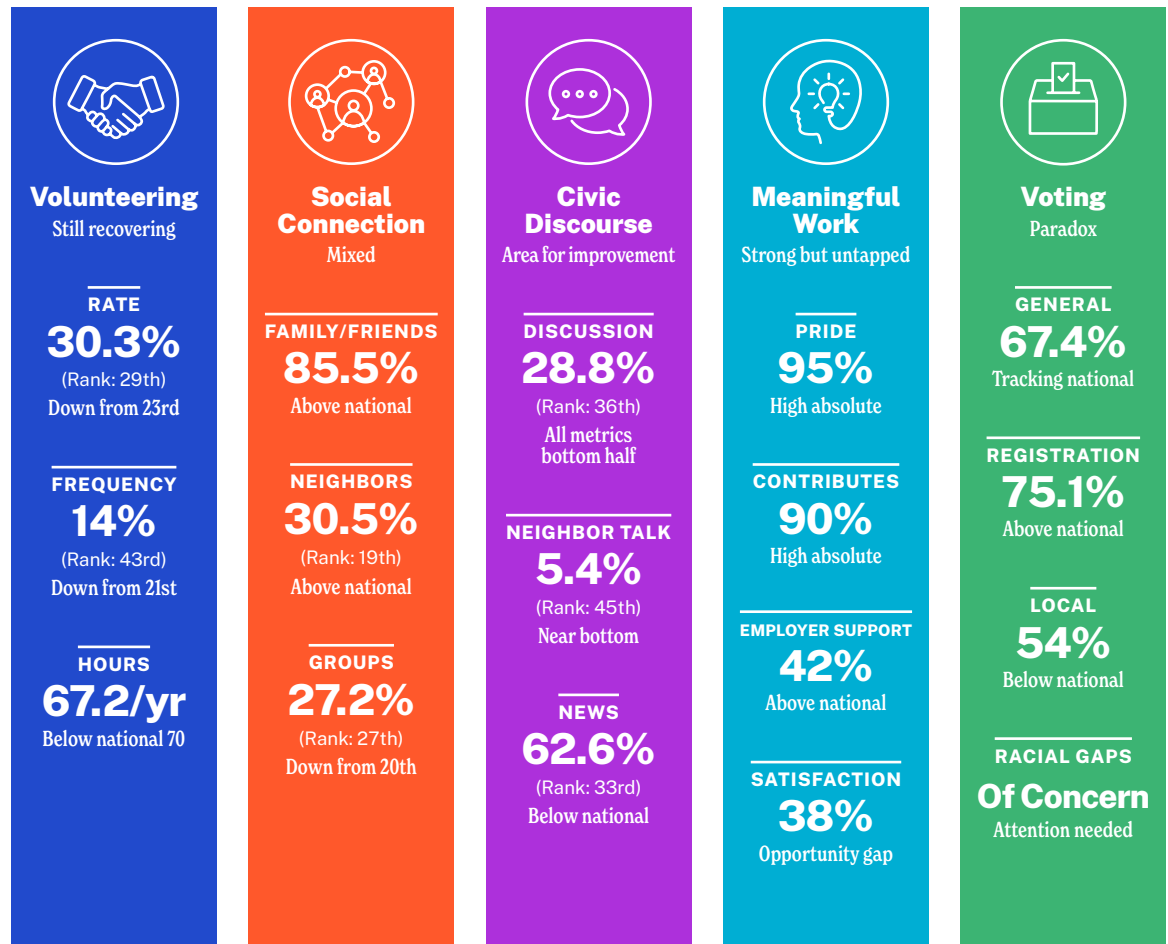
Section 1: Executive Summary

Ohio stands at a powerful crossroads.

As the state of Ohio approaches a trillion-dollar economy and cements its position among the nation's top business climates, there is a less visible but equally critical opportunity: improving the civic health of its 11 million residents. Ohioans are neighborly, quick to help each other, connected to family and friends, and proud of their work. These are important strengths that create a base to increase the more organized civic participation that builds resilient communities, drives innovation, and sustains democracy. By leveraging both its inherent civic assets, and its economic momentum Ohio can secure a path of prosperity for generations.

In America today, the need for building trust and collective problem-solving is reaching an apex. In that context, Ohioans are well-positioned to regain lost ground to become one of the most civically healthy states in the country. It will take commitment and focus, but Ohio is poised to meet the moment. This report charts a path forward grounded in data, inspired by what's working in Ohio and beyond, and tailored to Ohio's unique strengths and needs.

MAJOR FINDINGS SNAPSHOT



But informal helping remains strong at **57.9%**, and **42%** say employers encourage volunteering.

Neighbor-to-neighbor civic talk in Ohio fell to **5.4%** (ranked 45th).

1. Volunteering: Recovering in Numbers, Weakening in Depth

Ohio's volunteer rate rebounded to 30.3%, but the state fell from 23rd to 29th nationally. In 2023, 14% of Ohioans volunteered frequently (down from 25% in 2017), and annual hours dropped to 67.2, below the national average. But informal helping remains strong at 57.9%, and 42% say employers encourage volunteering. These are foundation blocks Ohioans can build on to regain and surpass previous rates of volunteering.

2. Social Connection

Ohioans excel at neighborly connection. Over 85% frequently connect with family and friends, and 30.5% talk with neighbors (both above national). However, only 27.2% participate in organizations like clubs and associations (ranked 27th, down from 20th). Social relationships and interpersonal connections are in place, providing Ohioans a launchpad to convert into organized participation.

3. Civic Discourse

Political discussions are shifting from "frequent" to "occasional," dropping from 35.8% to 28.8%. Neighbor-to-neighbor civic talk in Ohio fell to 5.4% (ranked 45th). News consumption declined to 62.6%, now below the national average. Civic discourse is becoming less habitual in Ohio, as it is nationally. But Ohioans have shown in the past they can engage in political discussions and with effort, can regain ground.

4. Meaningful Work

Nearly all Ohioans take pride in their work (95%) and believe it contributes to the community (90%), yet only 38% find their main satisfaction in work. This suggests that Ohio's private sector represents a significant, underutilized asset to channel workplace pride into civic contribution.

5. Youth Engagement

Young Ohioans (16-29) appear to show stagnation or declines across important indicators such as civic discussion and charitable giving. There are many potential reasons for this, but without a recommitment to civic engagement, Ohio's young adults may be less equipped to lead and solve collective problems.

6. Voting Paradox: Rising Nationally, Falling Locally

While it is the norm for voting rates to be lower in local elections, Ohio is seeing a marked divergence between the two suggesting that Ohioans are engaged on national issues but may need to feel a reconnection to local governance. Self reported general election voting rose to 67.4% and registration (75.1%) exceeded the national average. But self-reported local election participation dropped from 60% to 54%. While demographic sample sizes are small, the data may point to concerning racial disparities that warrant additional investigation: one example suggests that Black Ohioans' local voting fell at significantly higher rates than white Ohioans.

WHAT THIS MEANS & THE PATH FORWARD

Ohio has strong assets: neighborliness, workplace pride, and a previous track record of civic discourse. The state has the opportunity to enhance the infrastructure needed to advance sustained civic action. Ohio's economic ambitions, combined with these civic assets, can set the stage for long-lasting success. Three strategies can help maximize the opportunity:

- **Activate the Private Sector** by scaling civic time-off, employer certification, and workplace service programs.
- **Go Hyper-Local** to convert neighborliness into organized action through neighborhood infrastructure and participation.
- **Build a Youth Civic Participation Pipeline** through K-12 civic learning, service pathways, and youth voice in decisions.

These strategies are mutually reinforcing and tailored to Ohio's strengths. This report provides the roadmap for making up lost ground and accelerating to becoming one of the most civically engaged states in the country. Leadership, commitment, and action will ensure Ohio's civic foundation matches its economic momentum.

Section 2: Why Civic Health Matters

OHIO'S CONTEXT: ON THE CUSP

Ohio stands at an inflection point.

The state is edging closer to becoming a trillion-dollar economy,¹ with over 11 million residents² and a growing advanced manufacturing field³ that helps position Ohio as a national leader in production, innovation, and job creation. Business climate improvements have propelled Ohio into the top tier — ranking 5th among states for doing business, according to recent assessments.⁴ Economic development momentum in Ohio is real.

But durable economic prosperity depends on something less tangible but equally critical: civic health. Civic health describes the habits, norms, and networks by which people work together for the common good. It's measured in volunteering rates, neighborly connections, civic discourse, trust in institutions, and participation in democracy, among other factors.

This connection is not theoretical. Indicators of strong civic health have been found to be correlated with competitive economies — in part because strong civic health also correlates with stronger educational outcomes, more resilient communities, better physical and mental health, and more responsive governments.^{5,6,7} Research shows that communities with higher levels of civic engagement outperform on economic indicators.⁸

For Ohio, civic health is not separate from economic success; it is foundational to it, and Ohio is poised to lead in both areas.

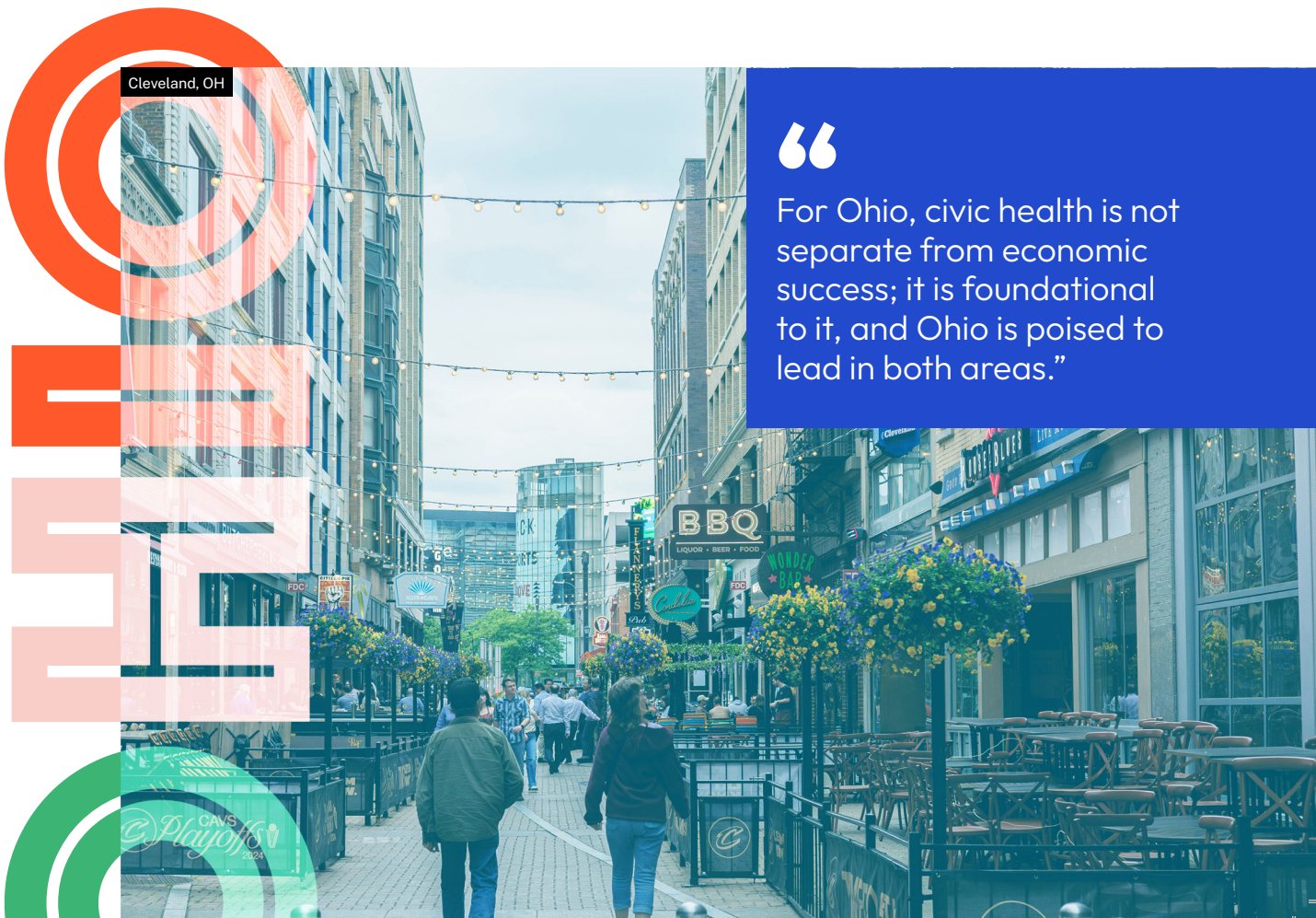


Photo: Connor Gan on Unsplash

THREE CORE CONNECTIONS

1. Stronger Democracy, Better Governance

Citizens are central to representative democracy, and their active participation determines whether democratic institutions are responsive, effective, and trusted. Trust and civic participation are deeply linked: higher levels of trust stimulate community engagement, while distrust reduces motivation to participate, which further erodes both trust and effectiveness.

When citizens are engaged — voting, attending public meetings, contacting officials, discussing issues — they provide essential feedback that helps government and community leaders identify problems and adapt policies to changing needs.⁹ In these ways, better civic participation can lead to more responsive governance.¹⁰ These activities build the habits that help ensure democracy endures.

For Ohio, strengthening civic health means creating an ecosystem where citizens feel their voices matter and where participation produces visible results. This requires not just electoral engagement but sustained civic dialogue, transparency in decision-making, and pathways for residents to shape the policies that affect their daily lives. The alternative — a disengaged citizenry disconnected from local governance — leads to policy drift, reduced accountability, and a government that serves some communities well while leaving others behind.

2. Economic Competitiveness

Community connection and civic engagement can be powerful, often underestimated drivers of beneficial economic outcomes. They build trust and social networks which can lead to higher rates of entrepreneurship,^{11,12} innovation,^{13,14} and better employment outcomes.¹⁵ A community where residents are connected with, and trust each other, and their institutions, is more likely to generate community attachment and retain residents, positively impacting economic development.^{16,17} And a workforce that knows how to collaborate, deliberate, and solve problems together is more productive and innovative.¹⁸ Communities with strong civic health — where people know their neighbors, participate in organizations, and work across differences — are more likely to have stronger economic outcomes.^{19,20,21}

The costs of weak civic health are also measurable. Political polarization was recently ranked the #2 emerging risk for American businesses by the research and consulting firm, Gartner, second only to the rapid adoption of generative AI.²² Workplace incivility — in some cases driven by political and social division — has been shown to cost U.S. businesses an estimated \$2 billion per day in lost productivity, absenteeism, and turnover, according to research from the Society for Human Resource Management.²³

Ohio's business climate rankings reflect the state's tax policy, regulatory environment, and natural resources like land, energy, and water. But they also reflect aspects of the state's quality of life and community attachment like good schools and more. So, for Ohio, sustaining those rankings also requires the social cohesion, constructive problem-solving, and collaborative capacity that strong civic health provides. This means recognizing that investments in civic engagement are economic development investments. Civic health and economic health are not competing priorities — they are mutually reinforcing imperatives.



Civic health and economic health are not competing priorities—they are mutually reinforcing imperatives.”



Photo: Shane Wynn

3. Health and Well-Being

Physical and mental health are deeply connected to civic health. Community connection and civic participation can improve individuals' social connectedness which can protect against disease, extend lifespans, and improve mental health outcomes.

In his 2023 advisory, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warned that social disconnection increases the risk of premature death by 26% to 29% – an effect similar to smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Loneliness and isolation are associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and elevated risks of anxiety, depression, and dementia. The economic toll is equally concerning: social isolation among older adults adds nearly \$6.7 billion annually in Medicare costs due to increased health problems; and stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated \$154 billion per year.²⁴

For Ohio, these national trends have acute local relevance. Ohio is still fighting its way out of an opioid crisis, substance use epidemic, and mental health crisis, in which the state witnessed some of the highest rates of overdose and suicide deaths in the country. Nearly 25% of Ohioans live with a mental health issue, and approximately 15% live with a substance use disorder.²⁵

While the causes of these crises are complex, research consistently shows that social connection generally, including community connection and engagement, function as protective factors.²⁴ For example, people with a strong sense of purpose – which can be anchored in helping others and contributing to the community – experience lower levels of depression and anxiety and demonstrate greater resilience in the face of stress.^{26, 27, 28}

Strengthening civic health is a public health strategy. It can reduce isolation, build social support networks, and build up protective factors against mental health issues. Civic engagement is not a luxury – it is a necessity for individual and community health and well-being.

Nearly **25%** of Ohioans live with a mental health issue, and approximately **15%** live with a substance use disorder.

Photo: Andrew Spencer on Unsplash



Chesterland, OH



Civic engagement is not a luxury—it is a necessity for individual and community health and well-being.”



**READING THE DATA:
TRENDS, COMPARISONS, AND SUBGROUPS**

For each dimension of civic health, this report presents three types of analysis:

Trends over time (2017-2023)

We track how Ohio’s civic health has changed, with particular attention to the pandemic period (2021) and the recovery since. Understanding trends helps distinguish between temporary disruptions and structural shifts in civic behavior. Some changes in participation rates are small in percentage terms but represent tens of thousands of Ohioans — and those shifts matter.

Comparisons across states

We compare Ohio to the national average, to peer states in the Midwest (Michigan, Illinois), and to top-performing states. Rankings provide context: Is Ohio’s performance exceptional, typical, or lagging? Comparisons also surface policy and cultural approaches that other states are using successfully — lessons Ohio can learn from.

Differences across communities

When possible, we examine how civic participation varies by age, race and ethnicity, education level, and employment status. These subgroup analyses can offer insights as to which Ohioans are most engaged, which may face barriers, and where targeted interventions can have the greatest impact. We also note where sample sizes for certain subgroups are limited, tempering conclusions accordingly.

**A Note on
Pandemic Impacts**

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly changed civic life: Schools closed, community organizations suspended activities, and public meetings moved online or stopped altogether. Volunteering plummeted as nonprofits curtailed programs and would-be volunteers stayed home. The 2021 data in this report capture the depth of that disruption.

But the pandemic’s impact was not uniform. Some forms of civic engagement—informal helping of neighbors, online civic discussion—held steady or even increased. Some communities and demographic groups experienced steeper declines than others. And recovery has been uneven: some indicators have rebounded to or beyond pre-pandemic levels, while others remain depressed.

It will be important to understand the pandemic’s lasting effects. Which changes were temporary, and which represent enduring shifts in how Ohioans engage? Are there habits of civic life that are returning? Or are new patterns emerging? The answers to these questions, and the actions taken to address them, will shape Ohio’s civic health for years to come.

WHAT FOLLOWS

The findings that follow paint a detailed picture of Ohio’s civic health — its strengths, its challenges, and the opportunities to build on assets while closing gaps. The data reveal a state with strong neighborly connections and workplace pride, that can be leveraged to increase formal civic participation. They suggest a generational divide, with young Ohioans engaging in civic life at lower rates. They warn of racial disparities in local voting participation. And they point to bright spots: employers encouraging volunteering, and neighbors helping each other.

Understanding these patterns is the first step toward action. The recommendations that follow the findings section will translate data into strategy, offering pathways for Ohio to build the civic infrastructure its economic and democratic future demands.

A Note on “Frequency”

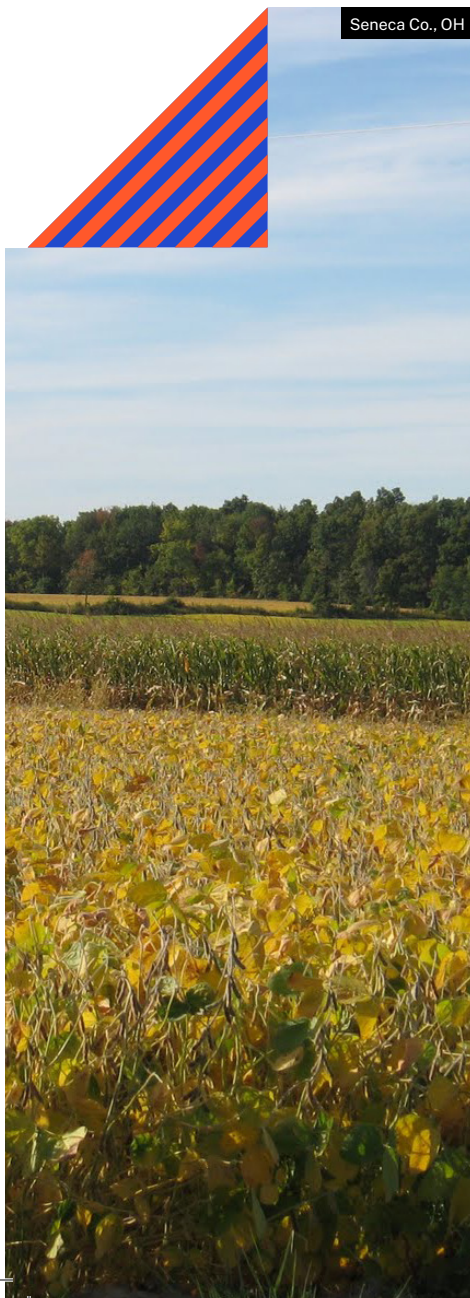
Throughout these findings, frequency is used to summarize how often survey respondents engaged in certain activities asked in the survey. “Frequent” includes the responses “basically every day” and “A few times a week.” “Infrequent” includes the responses “a few times a month,” “once a month,” and “less than once a month.”

Finding Area 1: Volunteering & Service

WHAT IS MEASURED

Ohio's volunteering landscape is assessed through five key indicators:

- **Formal volunteering rate:** The percentage of adults who say they volunteer for an organization or association
- **Frequency of volunteering:** How often respondents say they volunteer (frequently—basically every day or a few times a week; or infrequently—a few times a month, once a month, or less than once a month)
- **Hours volunteered:** The number of hours per year respondents say they volunteer
- **Employer encouragement:** Whether or not employers encouraged employees to volunteer or contribute to a cause
- **Informal helping:** How often respondents say they and their neighbors do favors for each other



Seneca Co., OH

OHIO'S STORY

RECOVERY IN PROGRESS

Overall Trends

Ohio's volunteerism reflects a state in recovery after the pandemic's disruption, yet still seeking to regain its former strength. In 2019, volunteering rates in Ohio were 37.1%. After decreasing to 24.3% during the pandemic (2021), volunteering rates rebounded to 30.3% in 2023 — an encouraging sign of renewal, but still below the 2019 position.

When it comes to the depth of commitment, only 13.8% of Ohioans volunteered frequently — almost every day or at least a few times a week — in 2023, compared to nearly 25% in 2017. This means that while some Ohioans are returning to service, they're doing so less consistently. Ohioans volunteer fewer hours per year: averaging 67.2 hours in 2023, down from 100.1 hours in 2017 and slightly below the national average of 70 hours.

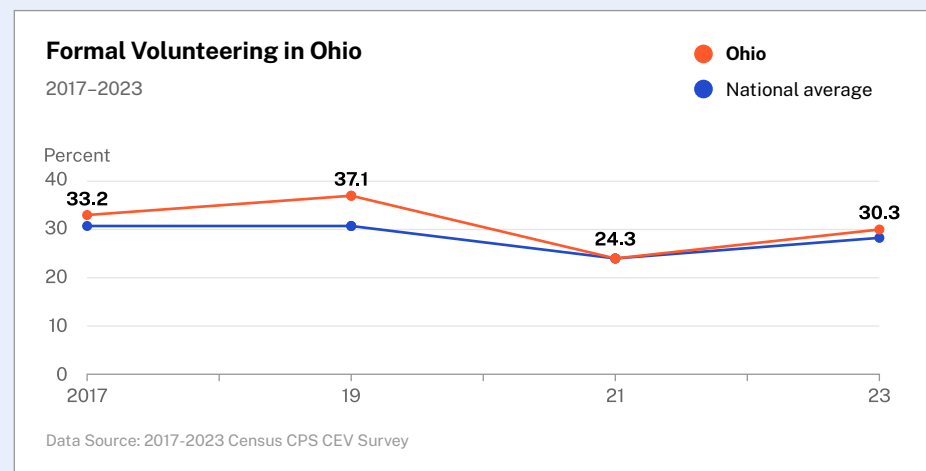


Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center



Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center

Columbus, OH

Still, in 2017, Ohio ranked **23rd** nationally in formal volunteerism; by 2023, the state had dropped to **29th**.

During the pandemic, frequent volunteering among working Ohioans peaked to **23.3%** but then dropped to **11.3%** in 2023.

Comparative Standing

Nationally, volunteering fell by similar margins during the pandemic so a decline is not unique to Ohio. Still, in 2017, Ohio ranked 23rd nationally in formal volunteerism; by 2023, the state had dropped to 29th. When it comes to how much volunteering Ohioans do, the state dropped from 21st to 43rd in the percentage of residents who volunteer frequently.

While Ohio far exceeds Michigan on volunteering rates (26.4%, ranked 38th), it sits just below Illinois (30.3%, ranked 28th). Meanwhile, it is less-populated states that lead the nation: Utah, which has consistently held the top spot in volunteering nationwide, maintained its lead at 46.6% in 2023, along with Nebraska (40.3%, ranked 3rd), Minnesota (40.3%, ranked 4th), Kansas (39.6%, ranked 5th), and South Dakota (37.8%, ranked 6th).

Demographic Groups

While sample sizes are limited, data suggest that volunteering rates may have decreased among specific communities within Ohio, driving down overall rates:

Working Ohioans and Black Ohioans may have faced significant declines. During the pandemic, frequent volunteering among working Ohioans peaked to 23.3% but then dropped to 11.3% in 2023, whereas rates for unemployed Ohioans only dropped by 5 percentage points. Sample sizes are small, so further investigation is needed, but data suggest formal volunteering among Black Ohioans may have dropped. White Ohioans' volunteering tracked closer to overall state rates: recovering from a pandemic low of 25.7% in 2021 to 32.2% in 2023. As discussed below, economic pressures could be one factor for lower rates among these groups.

Women and men show diverging patterns. Women in Ohio consistently volunteer more than men. The volunteer rate for women held at just above 35% from 2017 to 2023, whereas for men it dropped from 29.6% to 24.4%. While both declined during the pandemic, women recovered significantly but men declined.



Columbus, OH

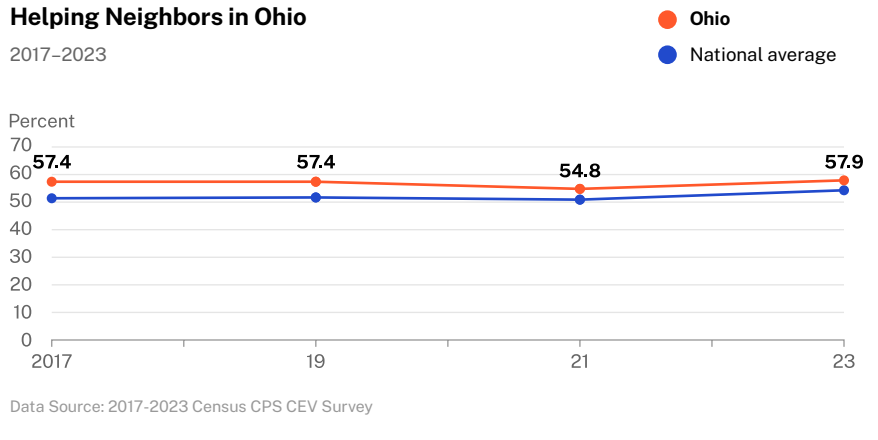
Photo: Allison Goebel



Helping neighbors remains robust. Ohioans have always helped their neighbors, often exceeding national rates.”

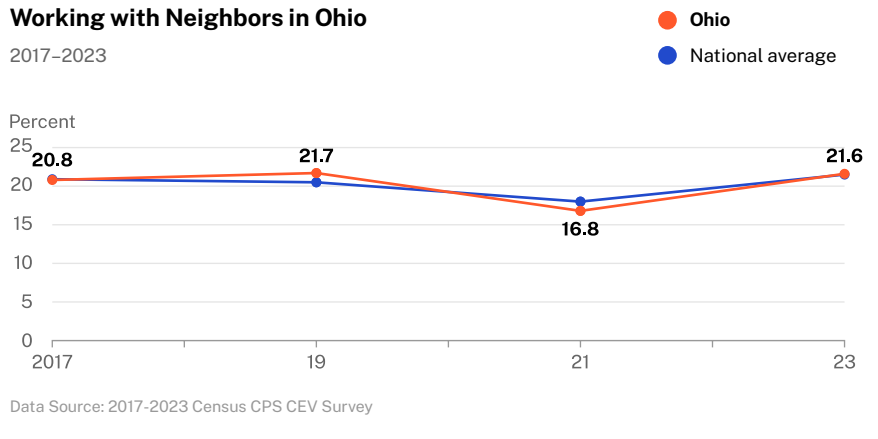
Helping Neighbors in Ohio

2017-2023



Working with Neighbors in Ohio

2017-2023



Bright Spots: Informal Helping and Employer Encouragement

Ohioans demonstrate strong *informal* civic participation. And many Ohioans report that their employers encourage participation:

Helping neighbors remains robust. Ohioans have always helped their neighbors, often exceeding national rates. There was a slight dip during the pandemic (from 57.4% in 2017 to 54.8% in 2021), but full recovery by 2023, back up to 57.9% — above the national average and sitting at 22nd place among states. Frequently doing favors for neighbors sits at 11.6%, still shy of Ohio’s pre-pandemic high of 14.3% in 2019.

Working with neighbors on community projects took a hit during the pandemic (falling to 16.8%, below the national average of 18.0%), but rebounded to 21.6% by 2023, matching pre-pandemic levels (21.7% in 2019) and meeting the national average.

Employer encouragement shows promise. A noteworthy 42.4% of Ohioans reported that their employers encouraged volunteering — slightly higher than the national average and ranking Ohio 23rd among states. This is a significant asset, especially when compared to peers: Ohio ranks above Michigan (28th) and Illinois (30th) on this measure.



The decline in formal volunteering, ... may reflect ... a deeper cultural transition in how people approach service.”

With **42.4%** of employers already encouraging volunteering, scale best practices like civic time-off policies, volunteer hour matching, and workplace service challenges.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

The decline in formal volunteering, particularly in frequency and hours may reflect post-pandemic fatigue, competing economic pressures, and a deeper cultural transition in how people approach service. It may show signs of the traditional model of long-term, loyalty-based volunteering giving way to new forms of engagement shaped by changing lifestyles, values, and technologies.

The suggestion of declines among Black Ohioans, working adults, and those without college degrees should be further investigated as they may point to barriers: time constraints, economic pressures, and lack of accessible pathways into service. Yet Ohio’s strong informal helping culture and above-average employer encouragement of participation, suggest there is civic capacity waiting to be activated through outreach and trust-building efforts.

WHAT COULD WORK

Lower barriers to entry. Create micro-volunteering opportunities, skill-based matching platforms, and service options that fit modern schedules. Utah has seen success from making service easy to find, fund, and access.

Incentivize service. Explore tuition benefits, student loan forgiveness, or stipends for extended service (similar to SAFER grants for firefighters in Ohio or AmeriCorps models). Connect service to workforce pathways.

Leverage employer support. With 42.4% of employers already encouraging volunteering, scale best practices like civic time-off policies, volunteer hour matching, and workplace service challenges.

Celebrate and elevate. Public recognition campaigns, service ambassador programs, and media coverage of volunteer impact can normalize service as a valued form of community leadership.

Build youth pathways. Continue to integrate service into K-12 education through service-learning, connect it to civic skill development, and create clear on-ramps from episodic youth service to sustained adult engagement.

Photo: Alison Goebel



Photo: Christi A. Richter



Mansfield, OH

CASE STUDY

Volunteer Firefighting— Answering the Call to Serve

Ohio's volunteer firefighting system illustrates the consequences of declining local volunteerism. The supply of citizens willing and able to respond to emergencies is eroding and the stakes are high: smaller communities depend on these volunteers for essential protection, and when departments are understaffed, response times lengthen. Delays can mean the difference between minor damage and total loss, between rescue and tragedy.

Out of the roughly 1,200 fire departments across Ohio, about 70 percent rely primarily on volunteers. Concerningly, their ranks are shrinking. Between 2018 and 2021, Ohio saw a 6.5 percent decrease in volunteer firefighters even as emergency calls rose by 9 percent through 2020.²⁹

This pattern mirrors a national trend. The National Fire Protection Association reported approximately 676,900 volunteer firefighters nationwide in 2020—a six percent decrease from the prior year and the lowest number ever recorded. Just as in Ohio, of all American fire departments nearly 70 percent are volunteer-based. This saves taxpayers an estimated \$46.9 billion each year in personnel costs.³⁰ Considering that, replacing volunteers with full-time, salaried firefighters would likely increase local tax burdens, especially in Ohio's less populated townships and villages.

The reasons for these declines are complex; economic pressure on dual-income families, longer work hours, and more demanding training requirements have all reduced the available pool of recruits. Becoming a volunteer firefighter can require up to 150 hours of training, often without pay, while the physical and emotional risks remain high. Exposure to hazardous materials, mental health strain, and the trauma of emergency

response may deter new entrants.³⁰

Recognizing the urgency, action is being taken on several fronts. For example, the Ohio Department of Commerce's Division of State Fire Marshal launched the Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment Portal in 2024 to connect citizens directly with local firehouses. The portal streamlines applications, publicizes openings, and provides basic information about training and expectations.

Nationally, the federal Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants have provided departments with resources for recruitment, retention, and training but these funds cannot cover all needs. Some lawmakers are exploring targeted incentives—such as student loan forgiveness or tuition benefits—for volunteer firefighters, similar to those offered to AmeriCorps participants.³¹ Other proposals include apprenticeship programs and mentorship initiatives designed to attract younger recruits. Such approaches could be integrated into broader state service efforts, tying public safety service to education and career advancement opportunities.

The outlook is not without hope. State leaders have noticed a small generational shift since the pandemic, with younger volunteers enrolling in firefighting courses. Some are high school students drawn by a renewed sense of community duty.³⁰ Sustaining this momentum is achievable both through programs like Ohio's new portal, and SAFER that make it easier and financially feasible to serve. But it is also possible through celebrating what volunteerism at its best can achieve: citizens stepping up to protect one another.

Sources: [Ohio Department of Commerce's Division of State Fire Marshal Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment Portal](#), [FEMA Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response](#)



Finding Area 2: Social Connection & Belonging

WHAT IS MEASURED

Social connection is assessed through four indicators:

- **Socializing with family and friends:** How often respondents say they talk to or spend time with friends or family
- **Socializing with neighbors:** How often respondents say they talk to or spend time with neighbors
- **Organizational membership and participation:** Whether or not respondents say they have belonged to groups or associations over the past year; and if so, how many organizations



Akron, OH

OHIO'S STORY

STRONG SOCIAL CONNECTION

Overall Trends

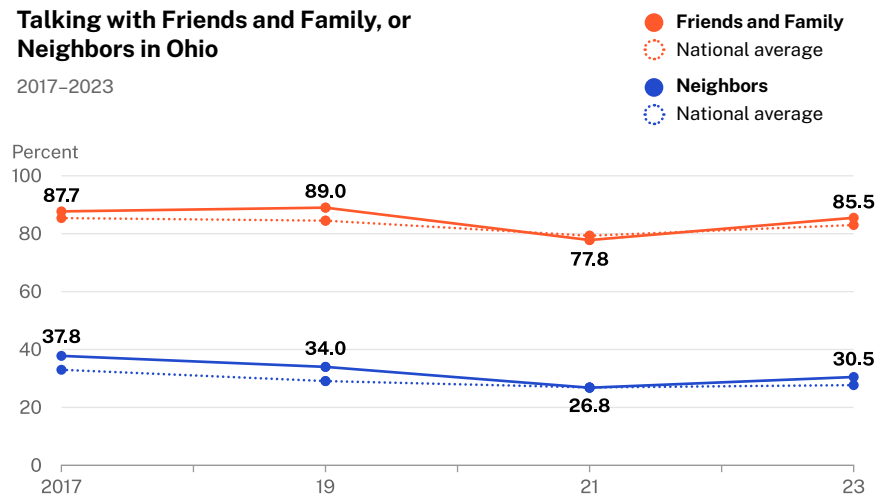
Ohio's social connection data reveal Ohioans maintain strong informal bonds but are slipping with formal organizational participation in groups like clubs or associations. The state is still working to reach pre-pandemic highs across most indicators.

In 2023, 85.5% of Ohioans reported frequent contact with family or friends, compared to 89.0% in 2019. Frequent neighbor interactions, now at 30.5%, have declined from a high of 37.8% in 2017.

Group participation has declined marginally over the years, even before the pandemic — starting at 32.2% in 2017 and decreasing by roughly 3 percentage points in each survey cycle. In 2023, however, group participation increased slightly to just above 27%, and Ohioans participating in groups typically belong to an average of two organizations.

Talking with Friends and Family, or Neighbors in Ohio

2017-2023



Data Source: 2017-2023 Census CPS CEV Survey

Photo: Tim Fitzwater

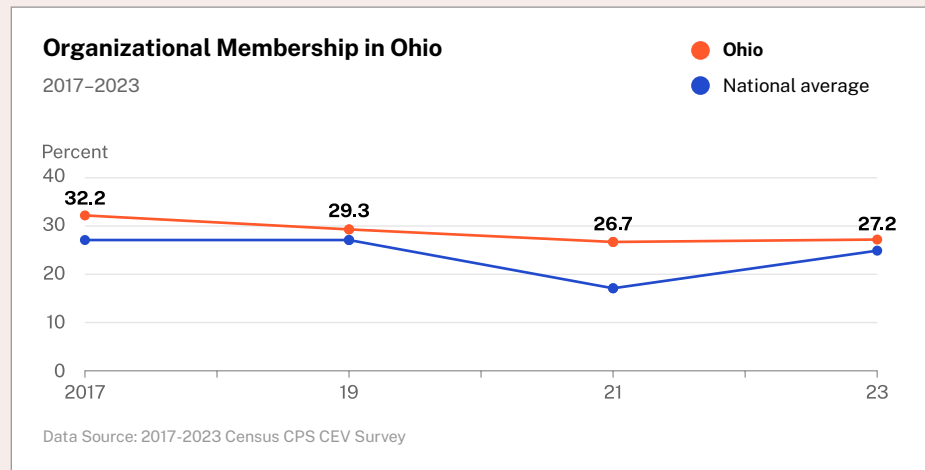
About 28% of the nation reported frequent neighbor interaction, compared to **30.5%** in Ohio, earning a 19th-place rank.

Comparative Standing

Ohio continues to outperform the nation on core social connection measures. Nationally, 82.9% reported frequent contact with family or friends compared with Ohio's 85.5%. About 28% of the nation reported frequent neighbor interaction, compared to 30.5% in Ohio, earning a 19th-place rank.

Group participation in Ohio remains above the national average — 27.2% versus 24.9% — but sits 27th among states, after ranking at 20th in 2017. This suggests Ohio is maintaining an advantage even as participation declines, and can take the opportunity to lead other states by focusing on growing organizational life.

The Midwestern region mirrors the national data for social connection, with some states well above and some far below national averages. Ohio outperforms Michigan across all areas, while Illinois ranks slightly higher in neighbor interactions (23rd) and group membership (25th).



McConnelsville, OH

Photo: Courtney Wentz on Unsplash

Demographic Groups

Men and women show diverging patterns in neighbor interactions. Men speaking with neighbors frequently declined significantly, even before the pandemic — from 37.5% in 2017 to 30.7% in 2019, then to 25.9% during the pandemic. In 2023, it increased only slightly to 28.6%. Women's frequent neighbor conversations also dropped during the pandemic to 27.7%, but rebounded to 32.4% in 2023, though still short of the 2017 level of 38.2%.

Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center



Lorain, OH



Ohio's strong informal bonds represent an opportunity. Social and neighborly connections can protect against isolation."

WHAT THIS TELLS US

Ohio's strong informal bonds represent an opportunity. Social and neighborly connections can protect against isolation. But without an effort to increase participation in organizational infrastructure, Ohio's civic life may not see the kind of collective problem-solving that addresses community-wide challenges. This is important because when people stop joining together or connecting across differences, social trust weakens.

WHAT COULD WORK

Build hyper-local organizational infrastructure. Support neighborhood associations, block clubs, and neighbor networks through micro-grants, training programs, and recognition. Help informal connections become organized.

Invest in third spaces. Libraries, parks, recreation centers, community centers, and faith spaces serve as gathering places. Well-resourced civic commons create opportunities for connection and participation.

Create bridge-building programs. Deliberative dialogues, cross-neighborhood collaborations, and diverse coalitions around shared interests (parks, schools, safety) can help Ohioans move from bonding (connection within similar groups) to bridging (connection across differences).

From informal to formal. Develop clear pathways for people who help neighbors informally to join or form organizations. Provide or utilize existing toolkits, training, and support for starting civic groups.



Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center



Photo: National Parks Gallery

Cuyahoga Valley National Park, OH

LOCAL PROFILE

Civic Opportunity in Greater Cleveland

Civic opportunity is high in the greater Cleveland area, and while its constituents are more engaged than others across the nation, by many measures, there is room for its civic participation to grow. According to the [Civic Information Index](#), an effort that combines 21 publicly available, county-level datasets to assess the strength of a community’s civic health, Cuyahoga County (where Cleveland sits) scores 61 out of 100 on civic participation. This means it performs better than 61% of counties in the nation. The majority of civic participation in the county comes from charitable contributions, with 1.5% of the county’s adjusted gross income being claimed as charitable contributions, better than 85% of counties in the nation. There was also a high self-response rate in Cuyahoga County for the 2020 Census: about 67% of housing units responded to Census surveys, putting the county within the top third highest response rates in the nation. However, the 2020 Census Hard to Count map shows a much lower self-response rate for the city of Cleveland itself—just under 50%.

A new study, called [MapAgora](#), which aims to strengthen democracy by mapping civic opportunities across the nation, rated Cuyahoga

County 5 out of 5 in terms of civic opportunity. This means community members have many civic places, spaces, and groups to be involved in. The county hosts roughly 2,500 organizations that provide civic opportunities for constituents, ranking Cuyahoga County number 11 out of 88 counties in the state—just behind Franklin County (Columbus)—and 475 out of 3,234 in the nation. Within the 2,445 organizations, 81% offer membership opportunities, 59% offer public event opportunities, 39% offer volunteering, and just 5% offer opportunities for residents to take civic or political action. The most common type of civic organization in the county is social & fraternal, organizations that bring people together, often based on a shared identity.

Even with an abundance of civic opportunities that can provide meaningful connection, Cuyahoga County residents still experience loneliness at one of the higher rates across the state. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 37% of adults in the county experience loneliness, above the national average of 33%.⁵¹ Interestingly, a much smaller percentage lack social and emotional support—22.6%, just below the national average of 23.4%.

Finding Area 3: Civic Information & Political Discussion

WHAT IS MEASURED

Civic discourse and information consumption are tracked through four indicators:

- **Discussing issues with family or friends:** How often respondents say they discuss political, societal, or local issues with friends and family
- **Discussing issues with neighbors:** How often respondents say they discuss political, societal, or local issues with neighbors
- **News consumption:** How often respondents say they read, watch, or listen to political or civic news and information
- **Posting political views online:** How often respondents say they post views about political, societal, or local issues on the internet or social media



Hamilton, OH

OHIO'S STORY

CONVERSATIONS COOLING

Overall Trends

Ohio sits just below national percentages in most categories, and its shifts mirror national trends. Frequent political and civic discussion is shifting downward in Ohio, moving from “frequent” to “occasional” conversation. Frequent discussions between family and friends fell from 35.8% in 2017 to 28.8% in 2023, while occasional discussion rose to 41.8%. At the extremes, 29.4% of Ohioans say they never discuss such issues with family and friends.

Neighbor-level civic discussions have been historically low and grown weaker still. Frequent discussions with neighbors dropped from 7.3% in 2017 to 5.4% in 2023.

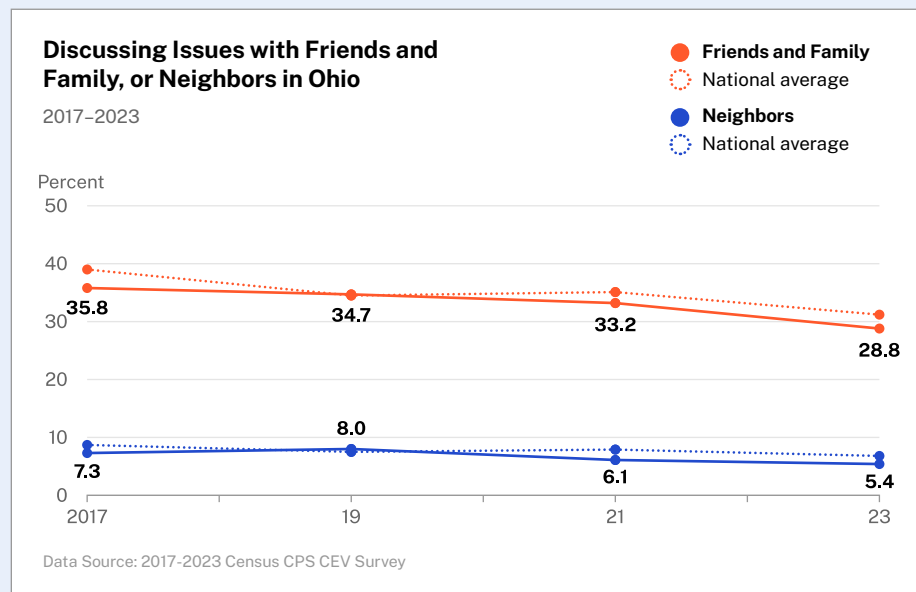
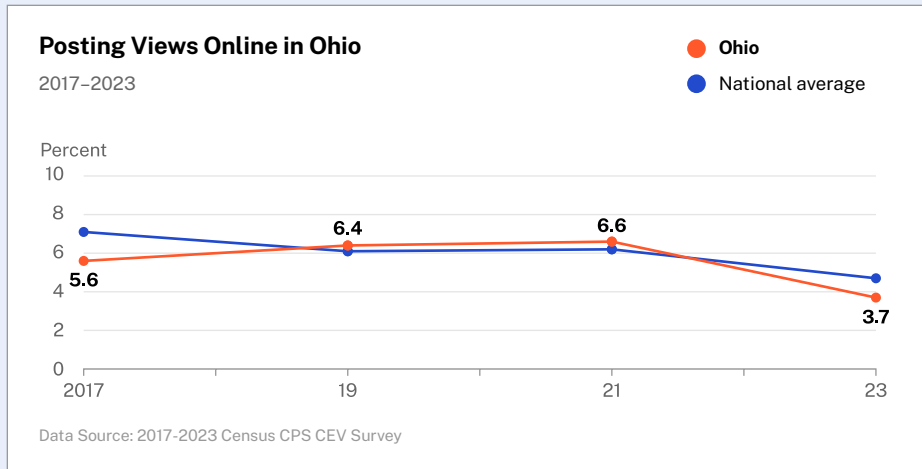


Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center



Online expression has been muted in Ohio: only 3.7% of Ohioans frequently post political views on social media, while 80.4% report never sharing online.

News and information intake has also changed. Ohioans who frequently consume political and civic news dropped from 76.8% in 2017 to 62.6% in 2023 – now below the national average. Occasional news intake grew from 12.4% to 20.8% during the same period.

Ohio ranks **36th** in the nation for frequent discussion about societal or political issues with family and friends, and **45th** for frequent discussions with neighbors.

Comparative Standing

Ohio ranks 36th in the nation for frequent discussion about societal or political issues with family and friends, and 45th for frequent discussions with neighbors. It is 42nd for frequently posting political views on social media.

Regionally, Ohio falls behind both Michigan and Illinois. Illinois outperforms Ohio on most discussion metrics, ranking 24th and 25th for discussing issues with neighbors and with family and friends, respectively. On frequent news consumption, Ohio ranks 33rd in the U.S..

Demographic Groups

Several communities in Ohio require a closer look. While sample sizes are small, data suggests decreases of 10 percentage points or more in frequent political and civic discussions with family and friends:

Young Ohioans (16-29) may have experienced a dramatic decline. About 34% engaged in frequent discussion on issues with family and friends in 2017, dropping to just 21.9% in 2023. In contrast, middle-aged Ohioans (45-64) remained frequently engaged, holding steady around 37%.

College-educated Ohioans had fewer issue discussions with family and friends, dropping from a pandemic high of 49.3% to just 33.3% in 2023.

Urban Ohioans saw the biggest decline between 2017 and 2019 (from 41.4% to 30.8%) and continued to decrease, landing at 28.1% as of 2023.

Women are having less frequent political and civic discussion with family or friends in 2023 (26.1%) than they were in 2017 (37%).



Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center

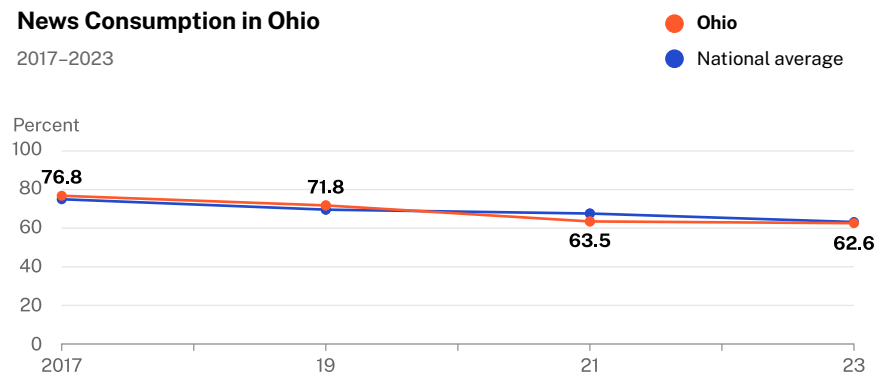


Photo: Cleveland Neighborhood Progress

Cleveland, OH

News Consumption in Ohio

2017–2023



Data Source: 2017-2023 Census CPS CEV Survey

Information Intake

Daily and weekly news consumption is decreasing in Ohio. Ohioans are significantly less likely to frequently read, watch, or listen to news about political, civic, or local issues in 2023 (62.6%) than in 2017 (76.8%) — ranking 33rd nationally and below the national average. Occasional news intake (a few times a month or less) grew from 12.5% to 20.8%.

AGE DISPARITIES

In 2023, Ohioans age 45 and older were much more likely to frequently consume news than those 44 and younger.

EDUCATION GAPS

Though small sample sizes are small, data suggests that Ohioans with no high school diploma dramatically reduced their political and civic information intake from 2019 to 2023.

GENDER GAPS

While news consumption was relatively even in the past, 2023 data shows women (57.9%) are now less likely to learn about political and civic issues than men (67.5%).



Daily and weekly news consumption is decreasing in Ohio.”

WHAT THIS TELLS US

The shift from frequent to occasional discussion signals that civic discourse is becoming less habitual, less deep, and less sustained. When conversations move from regular practice to occasional occurrence, some of the skills of democratic deliberation soften. Information ecosystems become more fragmented, with some Ohioans highly informed and engaged while others drift away from civic news entirely.

Young Ohioans are developing civic habits during a period of cooling discourse and declining news consumption. If these patterns persist, they could carry forward a less informed, less deliberative approach to civic life.

The near-disappearance of regular neighbor-level civic talk (just 5.4% frequent) means that political and civic issues are less often discussed where important collective work happens, and trust is easily built — neighborhoods. This disconnect between where people live and where they talk about public issues weakens the ability to collaborate locally.

WHAT COULD WORK

Civic discourse training. Schools, workplaces, libraries, and community organizations can teach constructive conversation skills — how to disagree productively, listen across differences, and find common ground.

Continue to invest in and strengthen local journalism. Community news infrastructure provides the shared information base that enables informed civic discussion. While many local news sources have folded in Ohio, a number of new ones have come online in recent years, funded by local philanthropy or economic development groups. This and other types of support for local news outlets, public media, and community information hubs are essential.

Create deliberative spaces. Structured dialogues, community conversations, and deliberative forums can model productive civic discourse and give people practice engaging across differences.

Trusted messengers and information hubs. Community-based organizations, libraries, and faith communities can serve as sources of credible information and spaces for civic discussion.

Digital literacy education. Help Ohioans critically evaluate information sources, recognize misinformation, and engage constructively online.



Tiffin, OH

Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center



This disconnect between where people live and where they talk about public issues weakens the ability to collaborate locally.”



Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center

Columbus, OH

LOCAL PROFILE

Civic Opportunity in Columbus

Columbus fares relatively well on civic participation and opportunity, though there is room to continue to improve. The Civic Information Index, an effort that combines 21 publicly available, county-level datasets to assess the strength of a community’s civic health, scored civic participation a 64 out of 100 in the county—meaning that Columbus performs better than 64% of counties in the nation. In Franklin County, where Columbus sits, civic engagement strengths lie within charitable contributions, high 2020 Census self-response rates, and higher-than-average 2020 election turnout. According to the index, 1.3% of the county’s adjusted gross income were claimed as charitable contributions, better than 77% of counties in the nation. About 68% of housing units in Franklin County residents responded to 2020 Census surveys, putting the county within the top third highest response rates in the nation. Large voter turn-out rates also meant the county performed better than more than half of the nation’s counties, with 67% of voting-age citizens voting in the 2020 elections.

The MapAgora study, which aims to strengthen democracy by mapping civic opportunities across the nation, rated Franklin County 5 out of 5 in terms

of civic opportunity, which means the county has a significant number of opportunities for community members to be involved in civic engagement. Franklin County hosts roughly 2,500 organizations that provide civic opportunities for constituents. They mostly consist of membership (83%) and event-hosting (57%) organizations, followed closely by organizations that offer volunteer opportunities (41%). Only 4% are “Take Action” organizations that provide civic or political action opportunities. Franklin County ranks number 10 out of 88 counties in the state—just ahead of Cuyahoga County (the greater Cleveland area)—and 466 out of 3,234 in the nation. There are a variety of organizations in the county, but several types in which Columbus’ share exceeds the national share, most notably: education, housing, professional, and unions.

Similar to the greater Cleveland area, Columbus has ample opportunities for civic engagement that provides meaningful connection, but a large share of residents experiencing loneliness. Roughly 38% of Franklin County adults experience loneliness, the highest in the state according to CDC estimates, and above the national average of 33%. A much smaller percentage lack social and emotional support—22.9%, just below the national average of 23.4%.³¹

Finding Area 4: Meaningful Work & Employer Engagement

WHAT IS MEASURED

The workplace civic dimension includes four indicators:

- **Pride in work:** Whether respondents say they feel proud to be working for their employer
- **Workplace contributes to community:** Belief that one's workplace contributes to the community
- **Work contributes to community:** Belief that one contributes to the community through their work
- **Main satisfaction comes from work:** Whether respondents say their work is the source of their main satisfaction in life

OHIO'S STORY

PROUD AT WORK, SEEKING PURPOSE BEYOND

Overall Trends

Workplace pride is remarkably strong among Ohioans: 95.3% take pride in their work, with almost none strongly disagreeing. About 90% feel that their workplace contributes to the community, whereas 79.3% feel that they contribute to their community through their work. As noted earlier, 42.4% report that their employer encourages them to volunteer.

However, while Ohioans find their work meaningful, only 38% say that their main satisfaction comes from work — a reminder that meaning at work and meaning in life do not fully overlap. This gap between workplace pride and life satisfaction suggests that many Ohioans are seeking purpose and fulfillment beyond their professional roles.

Comparative Standing

Ohio's performance is in line with regional counterparts in the Midwest, where most states sit in the middle of the rankings. Ohio outperforms Michigan on almost measures, but Illinois slightly surpasses Ohio: 96.6% take pride in their work, 94.1% find their workplace contributes to the community, 84.6% feel that they contribute to their community through their work, and 42.1% find their main satisfaction comes from work.

“

This gap between workplace pride and life satisfaction suggests that many Ohioans are seeking purpose and fulfillment beyond their professional roles.”

Photo: Hamah Wernecke on Unsplash

WHAT THIS TELLS US

The data reveal a powerful but underutilized asset: Ohioans take tremendous pride in their work and believe they contribute to the community through their jobs, yet most seek their primary satisfaction elsewhere. This gap represents an opportunity rather than a deficit.

The fact that 42.4% of employers already encourage volunteering puts Ohio ahead of the national average and demonstrates that the private sector recognizes the value of civic engagement. However, few employers have systematically connected workplace pride to community contribution through formal civic engagement programs.

Ohio can build on what exists — high workplace pride, employer openness to civic engagement, and a workforce seeking meaning — to create pathways that channel workplace energy into sustained civic participation. When employers make civic engagement part of professional development, workplace culture, and talent strategy, they tap into employees’ desire for purpose while strengthening communities.

WHAT COULD WORK

Scale community engagement time-off policies. Ohio employers could offer paid time for employees to volunteer and engage in service opportunities in the community.

Skills-based volunteering programs. Connect employee expertise to community needs — accountants helping nonprofits with financial management, IT professionals supporting digital equity, marketers helping community organizations tell their stories.

Employer civic certification. Create a recognition program for businesses that support employee civic engagement, similar to B Corp certification or “best places to work” designations.

Connect service to professional development. Make civic leadership part of career advancement pathways by taking into account activities such as board service, community leadership, or volunteer management experience.

Cross-sector partnerships. Facilitate connections between businesses and nonprofits or government agencies, creating structured opportunities for workplace teams to address community challenges.



CASE STUDY

Civic Time Off—Investing in Ohio’s Elections

In an era of declining civic participation, the Appalachia-based talent firm, :hire, is proving that businesses can be powerful engines of renewal. Under CEO Larry Kidd’s leadership, the 15-person company launched a voluntary Civic Time Off policy in 2021, offering paid leave to employees who serve their communities as poll workers. The program was sparked by a call from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, and Kidd responded by creating an opportunity for civic engagement in his workplace.

For a small business, the investment is a meaningful one—Kidd estimates the cost at around \$3,000 per year. But he believes the return is greater: “I believe that giving back to the community is a gift to you,” Kidd said. “It shows employees that they are important to the company, and it shows the community that they are important to our business.” He is proud of the contribution his team made, plans to continue the program, and is encouraging other businesses to follow suit. “This is something we can do to make Ohio’s neighborhoods and towns stronger,” he said.

This type of commitment is especially important now, when election workers are facing challenges to recruitment, high turnover rates, and constant changes to election laws.³² The Ohio Secretary of State’s Office is tasked with filling nearly 30,000 poll worker positions each election just to cover the minimum number of roles needed. To help fill those slots, the office produces toolkits and programs to encourage employees, veterans, and high school students to serve in their communities.³³

Kidd feels that serving at the polls is an act of civic duty; but also a chance to work side-by-side with neighbors, united by the shared goal of supporting the election system in Ohio.

Source: Ohio Secretary of State

Finding Area 5: Additional Indicators

In 2023, **52.9%** of Ohioans gave to charitable or religious organizations—higher than the national average (48.5%) and roughly similar to past years.

Charitable Giving

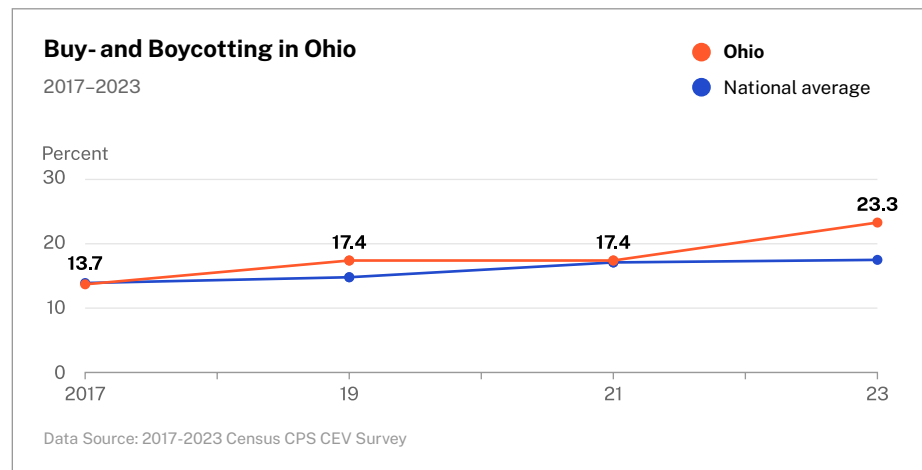
Charitable giving has remained relatively strong in Ohio. In 2023, 52.9% of Ohioans gave to charitable or religious organizations – higher than the national average (48.5%) and roughly similar to past years. Ohio ranks 24th nationally on this measure.

However, it is not clear that all groups follow these trends:

Young Ohioans (16-29) peaked at 45% charitable giving in 2017 but have since declined, hovering between 25% and 30% in recent years.

Women in Ohio consistently make more donations to charitable or religious organizations than men.

Rural Ohioans are less likely to donate in 2023 (55%) than in 2017 (64.5%), representing a 10-percentage-point decline.



Boycotting

“Buy” or Boycotting – deciding whether or not to buy products or services for political or social reasons – has increased dramatically in Ohio. From 2017 to 2023, buy-and boycotting rose from 13.7% to 23.3%, a major increase. Despite a pandemic-era plateau, buy-and boycotting in Ohio jumped 9.6 percentage points over this period. Nationally, this measure has remained relatively static.

Ohio now ranks 14th nationally in buy-or boycotting, performing above the national average of 17.5%. Only three states in the middle of the country rank higher: Minnesota at 5th (27.5%), Nebraska at 9th (24.3%), and Kansas at 10th (24.2%). Ohio leads its peers Michigan (21.1%, ranked 17th) and Illinois (16.5%, ranked 35th).



Ohioans aged **45** and over rebounded slightly from pandemic lows in self-reported local voting, while Ohioans aged **44** and under continued to decline.

Voter Participation

GENERAL ELECTION VOTING

Self-reported voting in general elections has increased significantly in Ohio. In 2017, 52.5% of Ohioans reported voting; by 2023, this rose to 67.4%. This tracks with national averages, which increased from 53.4% in 2017 to 65.3% in 2023.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Ohio's self-reported voter registration rate (75.1%) exceeds the national average (73.6%), and the state has seen particular increases in urban areas, where registration surged from 69.1% in 2017 to 83.6% in 2023.

However, a puzzling trend emerged: Men's voter registration hit an all-time low at 46.2% in 2023, compared to 68.3% in 2017. Women's registration, in contrast, increased from 71.9% to 74%. These self-reported results should be further examined.

LOCAL VOTING

While the number of Ohioans who say they participated in a general election has gone up, those who say they participated in a local election voting has not. In 2017, 60.5% of Ohioans reported voting in local elections. By 2023, this dropped to 54.1% — a significant decrease that now places Ohio below the national average.

Age disparities are growing. Ohioans aged 45 and over rebounded slightly from pandemic lows in self-reported local voting, while Ohioans aged 44 and under continued to decline.

Racial disparities may be significant: Though sample sizes are small, these data suggest that Black and other non-majority racial groups may be disengaging from the governance closest to home at rates higher than white Ohioans. This warrants further examination.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

The voting paradox — rising national and state participation, falling local participation — reveals a disconnect. Ohioans are engaged in presidential and statewide elections but detaching from city councils, school boards, and county governments that most directly affect daily life.

This matters because local governments determine zoning, schools, public safety, infrastructure, and services. When communities disengage from local governance, policy becomes less responsive to their needs, which further reinforces the sense of distrust — creating a damaging negative feedback loop.

The hints toward racial disparities in self-reported local voting should be thoroughly investigated with larger sample sizes. These limited data suggest urgent questions to consider, understand, and address barriers to participation that non-majority racial and ethnic populations may be experiencing.

The rise in boycotting alongside declining local voting suggests civic energy exists but is being channeled away from formal democratic participation toward consumer activism and other forms of expression. This may reflect frustration with traditional political participation channels or a generational shift toward “lifestyle politics” where purchasing decisions become political statements.



When communities disengage from local governance, policy becomes less responsive to their needs, which further reinforces the sense of distrust— creating a damaging negative feedback loop.”



Cleveland, OH

Photo: Cleveland Neighborhood Progress

FINDINGS CONCLUSION: THE PATTERN THAT EMERGES

Ohio excels in informal social connection, with above-average neighborliness and helping behaviors, high workplace pride (95.3% take pride in their work), rebounding volunteering rates, above-average charitable giving (52.9%), and rising civic activism through actions like boycotting. However, Ohio needs to deepen the frequency and hours of volunteering, strengthen formal organizational participation, revitalize civic discourse that has cooled especially among younger Ohioans, reverse local election participation declines, and close the gap between workplace pride and community contribution.

Ohio can accentuate its strengths by leveraging existing neighborliness into organized participation by going hyper-local, parlay employees' pride in their work to community engagement by activating the private sector, and focusing on youth as future civic leaders since early habits predict lifelong engagement. Many of the raw materials for strong civic health exist throughout Ohio.

With strategic investments,
Ohio can build out the
infrastructure needed to
maximize that capacity.

Section 4: Recommendations

INTRODUCTION TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Ohio is poised to seize on post-pandemic momentum and move the needle on its civic health.

The findings in this report lay out a path forward for Ohio to leverage its strengths in social connection and neighborliness to improve areas of more formal types of engagement. The data suggests that Ohio has additional assets in the private sector and with employers: many Ohioans report that their employers are already encouraging volunteerism, and many Ohioans find their work to be meaningful. Ohio can build durable infrastructure that channels the neighborly impulse Ohioans are already demonstrating, as well as workplace engagement, into sustained, skill-building, and locally directed service. Doing so with a focus on the youngest Ohioans will help ensure that civic health does not fall off over the coming decades, eroding the state's growing economic standing.

It is important to note that barriers to civic participation are multifaceted, including lack of time, financial constraints, and supports like paid leave and family leave. The strategies highlighted here represent strong approaches to increase participation, but they work best alongside broader policies that allow individuals the time, security, and flexibility needed to engage in community life. Comprehensive solutions require action from employers, community organizations, and policymakers working together to address these issues.

Based on these assets and areas for growth, leaders in Ohio should consider three broad, intertwined areas for action.



Photo: Carl Schlabach on Unsplash

TAP INTO THE POWER OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

As mentioned earlier in this report, the private sector benefits significantly from civic health and increased community attachment — stronger local economies, greater population stability, as well as improved workforce collaboration and leadership skills are all positive outcomes of more and higher quality civic participation.

In addition, trust in all institutions has been declining over the past decades, including trust in businesses. This creates another set of incentives for private sector entities to invest in communities and local civic health.

In resource-constrained times, when local and state budgets are stretched, the private sector can step forward and support healthy civic life through cost-effective investments. But it is important to note that economic and time constraints are major barriers to participation in volunteering and civic organizations.^{34, 35} It will take powerful societal shifts to alter this dynamic. But there are steps Ohio's private sector can take now to celebrate and promote the benefits of participation and to drive increased and improved community participation.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

- **Civic time off:** Employers can encourage employees to offer paid time for employees to vote, serve their communities, or volunteer locally.
- **Skills-based volunteering:** Employers can help connect employee expertise to community needs (accountants helping nonprofits, IT professionals supporting digital equity, etc.)
- **Employer recognition:** Governments and nonprofit groups can celebrate and spotlight businesses that support employee civic engagement.
- **Workplace culture:** Employers can make community participation a valued part of professional development and advancement.
- **Investment:** Employers can offer private sector funding for civic infrastructure such as parks, libraries, and community programs.



This creates another set of incentives for private sector entities to invest in communities and local civic health.”



Photo: Greater Ohio Policy Center

INITIATIVE EXAMPLE

The At Work for Ohio Initiative

The private sector of Ohio could bring these recommendations to life by coming together to focus on an initiative to provide employees in the state paid leave to volunteer in their communities. There are already organizations, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, who have created toolkits and sample policies to make it easy for companies and workplaces to put these initiatives in place. The initiative could include a public-facing campaign that brings recognition to the employers providing time off, the volunteers committing to improving their communities, and to the organizations and local groups providing the opportunities to serve.

2 GO HYPER-LOCAL TO BUILD ON EXISTING SOCIAL CONNECTION

Ohio’s strength in informal social connection — neighbors who know and help each other — represents an enormous untapped opportunity. Starting locally builds on the relationships and connections that already bind Ohioans together. One of the best on-ramps to volunteering is being invited to do so by someone you know.

It also helps to build trust. While trust in institutions has eroded significantly over the past decades, people still feel relatively high levels of trust in their neighborhoods and communities. That creates a pathway to invite participation, especially when invitations come from people we know. And once community members are involved, building trust in the institutions and organizations supporting that work becomes more likely.

Focusing locally also does “double duty” by making opportunities proximate and tangible for community members, and the results valuable and meaningful to them. For many, it can be more enticing to help on a project or issue they are familiar with and the outcomes of which they can see.

Working with others toward shared goals can also help increase civic discourse and deliberation, bringing people together in ways that engender cooperation. Of course, this must be fostered intentionally. Too often public meetings turn negative and acrimonious, which can cause harm and turn people away from public life. Effort must be made to ensure experiences that welcome participation and model constructive engagement.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

- **Neighborhood-level infrastructure:** Governments, philanthropies, and private sector organizations can support block associations, neighbor networks, and community organizing through efforts like grants and training.
- **Programing third spaces:** Local governments can invest more in activating libraries, parks, recreation centers, and other gathering places to encourage and deepen connection and engagement — including through public-private partnerships.
- **Bridge-building:** Governments, philanthropies, and other nonprofit groups can work to infuse opportunities for discourse, dialogue, and collaboration on issues that matter locally into existing connection and engagement opportunities and spotlight businesses that support employee civic engagement.



Effort must be made to ensure experiences that welcome participation and model constructive engagement.

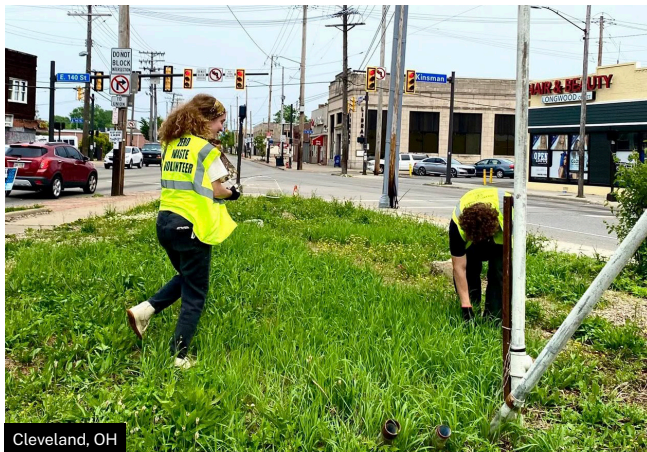


Photo: Cleveland Neighborhood Progress
Cleveland, OH

INITIATIVE EXAMPLE

The Plus One Drive

A coalition of philanthropies and nonprofit organizations could create a campaign that asks existing volunteers and organization members to include a friend or family member. This strategy leverages the strong social connection in Ohio to enhance organizational participation and volunteering in the state. A personal invitation makes it more likely that others will join in, and organizations can prepare to ensure a positive experience for new participants.

3 BUILD A CIVIC PARTICIPATION PIPELINE FOR OHIO'S YOUTH

Building a strong pipeline of civic participation and volunteering from childhood is one of the most effective strategies to encourage lifelong community contribution. Starting in elementary school, students need opportunities to build foundational civic knowledge. By middle and high school, students' opportunities should be driven by experiential civic learning, such as service-learning projects and capstones. Students must build deeper civic knowledge and civic skills so that civic motivation, the habits of heart and mind, are forged.

It is essential to make structured service and engagement work for young adults who, research tells us, are eager to connect their gifts to purpose. Many young people prefer opportunities that align with personal values or identity. Many are motivated by visible, measurable impact and increasingly access service through digital platforms.³⁶

High quality, engaging civic and service-learning is an evidence-based strategy to improve educational outcomes, as well as to increase civic participation rates. For young people, this type of scaffolding

can amount to lifetimes of civic contribution as well as a generation of leadership for Ohio.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

- **Elementary school:** Schools and governments can work to ensure a developmentally appropriate foundational civic knowledge through social studies, service opportunities, and other avenues.
- **Middle and high school:** Schools and governments can implement service-learning projects tied to academic standards and require civic capstones. They can also continue to expand the community service diploma seals program.
- **Beyond K-12:** Schools and governments can explore structured state service programs (such as service year fellowships) that connect young adults' skills to community needs.
- **Throughout:** Both the public and private sector can play roles in creating pathways for youth voice in schools and communities, ensuring young people see that their contributions matter.

Cincinnati, OH



Photo: Jessica Tan on Unsplash

INITIATIVE EXAMPLE

Diploma Seal

When young people engage with their communities through meaningful service, something powerful can happen: they develop a sense of belonging, discover their capacity to make a difference, and build skills that will serve them throughout their lives. The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's Community Service Seal harnesses this potential by incentivizing and recognizing students who complete community service projects as part of their pathway to graduation.³⁷

The Community Service Seal is part of the state's innovative locally defined graduation seals system, where students must earn at least two seals to graduate. It requires students to complete a community service project that meets guidelines established by their local school district board of education or school governing authority. School districts have the autonomy to design seal requirements that reflect their unique community values and needs. High-quality community service seals projects empower students to make connections between learning and doing, apply academic and technical knowledge to real-world experiences, and reflect on the needs of the communities in which they live.

These types of diploma incentives and requirements can deliver significant benefits to students and to their communities. Research demonstrates that students who engage in comprehensive civic learning and service experiences are more likely to complete college and develop employable skills valued by employers and colleges. Students show increased rates of voter participation and civic discussion at home, greater confidence in speaking publicly and contacting public officials, and stronger commitment to volunteering and working collaboratively with fellow citizens to solve community problems.³⁸

Of the 611 school districts in Ohio, 587 (or 96.1%) currently offer Community Service Seals. This demonstrates broad support and strong, statewide engagement. The program is a true asset that can be built upon to increase the number of young people who participate in the program and reap the benefits of these experiences—connection and belonging in their communities, essential workforce development skills, and life-long habits of participation.

Sources: [Ohio Department of Education and Workforce](#), [NASBE](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCLUSION

These three recommendations are mutually reinforcing: Together, they leverage Ohio's existing assets—neighborliness, workplace pride, employer support for volunteering—to build sustained formal engagement, youth pathways, and local participation. They address issues identified in the findings: a lag in youth participation, weak connection between informal bonds and organizational action, and untapped workplace civic potential.

Data alone will not change outcomes—action will. Ohio's civic health is a choice. The state is ready to make the strategic investments that convert neighborliness into collective power. As a result, Ohioans will be healthier, more prosperous, and see more representative governance.

The recommendations in this report would require leadership from state and local government, commitment from educators and employers, investment from philanthropy, and participation from residents across all backgrounds. It is no small task. But the question is not whether Ohio can afford to strengthen its civic health—it's whether Ohio can afford not to.

The economic momentum in the state is real. The civic foundation needed to sustain it must be too.

Section 5: Conclusion

Assessing Ohio's civic landscape reveals a state with reservoirs of strength and opportunities for growth.

Ohioans possess some of the essential building blocks of civic health: strong family and friend connections, a genuine neighborly spirit, pride in their work, and a willingness to help others informally. These are not small advantages — they represent wells of social trust and interpersonal bonds that can form the foundation of vibrant civic life. Ohio is poised to channel its strengths into more organized, sustained civic participation.

Ohio's recent economic transformation amplifies the importance of civic investment. The state's rise to near-trillion-dollar economy status and top-tier business rankings reflects real momentum in advanced manufacturing and innovation. Yet economic growth alone does not guarantee lasting prosperity — that requires social infrastructure to support it. When civic participation is strong, regions see better talent retention, faster recovery from economic shocks, and more equitable distribution of opportunity. Ohio's workplace pride and employer support for volunteering signal that connection. By deliberately strengthening civic habits alongside economic development, Ohio can ensure its growth creates not just jobs and revenue, but resilient communities where residents are equipped to solve problems together and where prosperity reaches more people.

The data in this report point to specific areas where focused effort can yield significant returns. Employers already encourage volunteering at higher rates than in many states, yet it's not clear that this support has been enough to translate into frequent, sustained volunteer engagement. Similarly, while Ohioans talk with their neighbors, these conversations don't often turn to civic matters. Young Ohioans need special attention to ensure civic engagement is more accessible, relevant, and appealing. Each of these areas represents an opportunity to build bridges from Ohio's existing civic assets to the organized participation that powers strong, healthy communities and representative government.

Ohio has demonstrated civic strength before and can do so again. The path forward requires intentional investment in civic infrastructure, thoughtful engagement of the private sector, and renewed focus on making civic participation a regular habit rather than an occasional act. By meeting Ohioans where they already are — in their workplaces, neighborhoods, and informal networks — and providing clear pathways to organized civic action, Ohio can transform its existing civic spirit into increased civic health. The foundation is solid; now is the time to build.



Photo: Jake Blucker on Unsplash



Ohio can transform its existing civic spirit into increased civic health. The foundation is solid; now is the time to build.

Appendix

Technical Notes

Unless otherwise noted, findings presented in this report are based on the National Conference on Citizenship's analysis of the U.S. Census Current Population Survey data. Any and all errors are NCoC's own. Volunteering and Civic Engagement estimates are from CPS's September Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement from 2017 through 2023 and voting estimates from the 2024 November Voting and Registration Supplement.

Using a probability-selected sample of about 47,000 households, the CPS collects monthly data on employment and demographic characteristics of the nation. Depending on the CPS supplement, the 2023 Ohio CPS sample size used for this report ranges from 382 to 1,220 residents from across Ohio. This sample is then weighted to representative population demographics for the district. Estimates for the volunteering and civic engagement indicators (e.g., volunteering, working with neighbors, making donations) are based on U.S. residents ages 16 and older. Voting and registration statistics are based on the population of U.S. citizens who are 18 and older (eligible voters). When examining 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 Ohio 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. Furthermore, while helpful in benchmarking, national rankings may be small in range, with one to two percentage points separating the state or district ranked first from the state or district ranked last.

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.

Artificial Intelligence Use Disclaimer

Artificial Intelligence tools were used to assist the authors in revising and editing this report. The authors take full responsibility for the report's content.

The full Census Bureau technical documentation, including survey items, can be accessed here: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpssep23.pdf>.

Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement Questionnaire

The table below lists the measures, question type, question wording, and response options used in the September 2023 Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey conducted in partnership with AmeriCorps.

RESPONSE OPTIONS (UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE)

- (1) Basically every day
- (2) A few times a week
- (3) A few times a month
- (4) Once a month
- (5) Less than once a month
- (6) Not at all
- (DK) Don't Know
- (RF) Refused

MEASURE	QUESTION WORDING	RESPONSE OPTIONS
Talking with friends and family	In the past 12 months, how often did you talk to or spend time with friends or family?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)
Discussing issues with friends and family	In the past 12 months, how often did you discuss political, societal, or local issues with friends or family?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)
Talking with neighbors	In the past 12 months, how often did you have a conversation or spend time with your neighbors?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)
Discussing issues with neighbors	In the past 12 months, how often did you discuss political, societal, or local issues with your neighbors?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)
Informal helping	In the past 12 months, how often did you and your neighbors do favors for each other such as house sitting, watching each other's children, lending tools, and other things to help each other?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)
Taking action with neighbors	In the past 12 months, did you get together with other people from your neighborhood to do something positive for your neighborhood or the community?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Posting views online	In the past 12 months, how often did you post your views about political, societal, or local issues on the internet or social media?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)
Learning about issues	In the past 12 months, how often did you read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal, or local issues?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)

MEASURE	QUESTION WORDING	RESPONSE OPTIONS
Voting in local elections	In the past 12 months, did you vote in the last local elections, such as for mayor or school board?	(1) Yes (2) No (3) Not eligible to vote (DK) (RF)
Attending public meetings	In the past 12 months, did you attend a public meeting, such as a zoning or school board meeting, to discuss a local issue?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Contacting public officials	In the past 12 months, did you contact or visit a public official at any level of government to express your opinion?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Boycotting or Boycotting	In the past 12 months, did you buy or boycott products or services based on the political values or business practices of that company?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Organizational membership	In the past 12 months, did you belong to any groups, organizations, or associations?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Number of organizational memberships	How many groups, organizations, or associations would you say you have belonged to over the past 12 months?	(1) One (2) Two (3) Three (4) Four (5) Five (6) Six (7) Seven or more (DK) (RF)
Formally volunteering through organizations	In the past 12 months, did you spend any time volunteering for any organization or association?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Formally volunteering through organizations	Some people don't think of activities they do infrequently or for children's schools or youth organizations as volunteer activities. In the past 12 months, have you done any of these types of activities?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Frequency of formal volunteering	How often did you volunteer?	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (DK) (RF)
Total hours formally volunteered	In the past 12 months, approximately how many hours did you volunteer?	_____ Hours (DK) (RF)
Virtual volunteering	Thinking about the organization or association with which you most actively volunteer, which best describes the proportion of your in-person volunteering to online volunteering?	(1) All volunteering is in person (2) Volunteering is more in-person than online (3) Volunteering is evenly split between in-person and online (4) Volunteering is more online than in-person (5) All volunteering is online (DK) (RF)
Donating to a political cause	In the past 12 months, did you give money or possessions with a combined value of more than \$25 to a political organization, party, or campaign?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Charitable giving	In the past 12 months, did you give money or possessions with a combined value of more than \$25 to a non-political group or organization, such as a charity, school, or religious organization?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)
Workplace Pride	Now I'm going to read you a list of statements that might or might not describe your main job. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of these statements. ... I am proud to be working for my employer.	(1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Disagree (4) Strongly disagree
Believe in contribution to the community through work	Now I'm going to read you a list of statements that might or might not describe your main job. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of these statements. ... My workplace contributes to the community.	(1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Disagree (4) Strongly disagree
Main satisfaction comes from work	Now I'm going to read you a list of statements that might or might not describe your main job. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of these statements. ... My main satisfaction in life comes from work.	(1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Disagree (4) Strongly disagree
Believe workplace contributes to community	Now I'm going to read you a list of statements that might or might not describe your main job. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of these statements. ... I contribute to the community through my work.	(1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Disagree (4) Strongly disagree
Employer Promotes Volunteering	In the past 12 months, has your workplace or employer asked or encouraged employees to volunteer or contribute to a specific cause, for example by participating in an employer-sponsored volunteering day, providing pro bono services, or donating to a charity?	(1) Yes (2) No (DK) (RF)

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Civic Health Partners

State and Local Partnerships

The National Conference on Citizenship (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 now works 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

Ball State University
Eli Lilly and Company
Indiana Bar Foundation
Indiana University Center on
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The Indiana Citizen

Indiana Civics Coalition
Indiana University Northwest

Kansas

Kansas Health Foundation

Kentucky

Commonwealth of Kentucky,
Secretary of State's Office
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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

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Michigan Campus Compact
Volunteer Centers of Michigan
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Minnesota

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Nebraska Community Foundation
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Carsey Institute
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Rhode Island

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The University of Texas at Austin
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SerVermont
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Center for the Constitution at
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