



LITERATURE REVIEW | JANUARY 2022

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & THE CIVIC CIRCLE

Points of Light in partnership with Data Shine



POINTS OF LIGHT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To better understand civic engagement and how to motivate individuals and communities to become more engaged, Points of Light commissioned Data Shine, an independent evaluation consulting firm, to conduct a literature review.

We paired the [Civic Circle framework](#) with an exploratory, inductive approach that allowed the research team to expand the search in real-time. This led us to scholarly journals, news sources, think tank and poll briefings organizational reports, white papers, book chapters, practitioner-focused guides and more.¹ The search produced more than 260 artifacts; we referenced 198 in the synthesis.² Our [web library](#) contains access to reviewed resources as possible.

FINDINGS

What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement comprises prosocial actions and values, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes — or civic mindset — that propel conviction and action. A wide lens is useful to frame civic actions, which can be political (or not) and may occur outside traditional mental models, such as communing in online platforms and providing mutual aid.^{1-6,12,17-18} These two civic engagement components are mutually reinforcing: civic actions can change civic mindset and civic action stems from a secure civic mindset.^{6,8}

Why is civic engagement important?

Civic engagement provides pathways for people to collectively influence projects, programs and policies.^{7,14-15,21} By way of this engagement, it offers opportunities to improve health and wellbeing through 1) improved social connections that can lead to new networks or resources,

empathy for others and trust in institutions and 2) heightened empowerment, agency and efficacy.^{1-4,8,15,18,21,22,24-29}

What is the state of civic engagement?

Civic health, a composite measure of civic engagement, has been shown to be in a delicate state.³⁰ Trust in government, institutions and each other are on the decline and as a result of reduced civic engagement opportunities, so too are chances to foster trust, connection and cohesion.^{21,30-36} Oftentimes, these disconnects — and their negative association with health and wellbeing — are magnified for historically oppressed communities.^{30-32,36}

However, buried in these aggregate findings is promise and potential, such as increased rates in voting and protesting and more young people reporting active engagement, a result amplified for young Black people.^{30,38,39} Similarly, a persistent theme that bubbles up throughout the literature is whether traditional tools to measure civic engagement adequately capture new forms of participation.^{7,64}

Unequal opportunities | Social determinants lead to unequal civic engagement opportunities. On a practical level, this manifests in historically oppressed groups having fewer requests to volunteer, fewer electoral opportunities and less exposure to climates that facilitate civic mindset at home, work and school.^{8,9, 14,25,31, 40,41} At the individual level, fewer opportunities to engage convert to an eroded sense of efficacy and the cumulative effect is an ongoing "centering" of dominant voices in projects, programs and policies.^{8,31}

Organizational contexts | Organizations act as catalysts for civic engagement opportunities.^{2,12,30,43-47} In the context of the Civic Circle, they are hubs for volunteering and donations. However, a thread throughout this discovery is that there is a lack of coordination,

¹ Resources reviewed were primarily published within the past five years and in the US

² Though we prioritized inclusive and non-harmful language, we realize we can always improve; grateful for feedback at colleen@datashineconsulting.com

comfort and knowledge amongst the sector to spur engagement that enables power sharing, racial equity and participatory systems.^{2,25,36,49}

Inequities in civic engagement | Unequal opportunities turn the voices of oppressed groups into "mere whispers," increasing the likelihood that projects, programs and policies do not reflect needs while simultaneously restricting health and wellbeing benefits of civic action to more dominant groups.^{8,32,41,54}

Again, however, the potential for traditional measures to mask untraditional civic actions is relevant, as is the need to recognize the potential and promise of ways systemically marginalized groups engage at greater rates.⁶⁴ Examples include Black women outpacing the average turnout in the 2018 midterm election; Black Americans having proportionately higher military and civic

service; and Black, Hispanic and Asian Americans being more likely to report taking action to understand racial issues better.^{3,8,9,15,56,57}

What has civic engagement accomplished?

This review aimed to identify systems-level change that was stimulated, in part, by civic engagement. To do this, we turned our gaze to large-scale collective action in the form of protests, boycotts, petitions and social movements (a conglomeration of many types of civic actions). Instances of successful social movements on both sides of the ideological spectrum that were powered by grassroots involvement include reducing drunk driving, establishing marriage equality, reducing smoking and expanding gun rights.⁷⁸

THE CIVIC CIRCLE

The Civic Circle is a framework that Points of Light developed during its 2018 strategic planning process to represent a person's power to lead, lend support, take action for causes they care about and lead a civic life. The Civic Circle comprises nine elements, each of which was inspected for trends and potential research gaps.



01 Vote Though it is argued voting should be a social norm, complex structural barriers persist that serve to dim voter registration and turnout.^{80,84} Strategies, often volunteer-driven, have been shown to increase registration and turnout.⁸⁰ A lingering question in this space is the outcomes of mobilization strategies in the context of low-income and low turnout populations.^{172,173}



02 Volunteer The decline in volunteering the data exhibit begs the question of *who* is volunteering less?⁸⁷⁻⁹⁰ Whereas one poll-based study found that the working class was most likely to reduce their hours,⁸⁹ no other sources were found to address this inquiry, and none spoke of on-the-ground implications of a more homogenous volunteer base. Additionally, it has been long acknowledged that traditional volunteering measures undercount informal helping in historically oppressed communities.^{23,92} One such form is mutual aid, which has "ensured the collective survival" of historically oppressed communities throughout history, often post-disaster.^{96,97} However, amidst the ongoing pandemic, questions on mutual aid's prevalence, how to sustain it and what its outcomes might be have arisen.^{94,95,99} Some suggest that the importance of mutual aid may not come from distinct action but the shift in mindset and its ability to impact systems change.^{101,102}



03 Voice The literature review uncovered shifting trends in voice: attending public meetings, writing letters to the editor and donating to political campaigns are decreasing in popularity; these actions are typically associated with older, more white generations of people.^{12,176} Conversely, attending protests, posting social or political issues on social media and discussing politics or social issues with friends and family are increasing in popularity and typically associated with younger populations.^{12,181} And while social media can bring attention to social issues and movements, the public is leery of its benefits, where people often feel worn out, frustrated or distracted by political or social movement posts.^{178,179} Gaining support are protests, which considered highly effective and meaningful for participants and nonparticipants, especially those from BIPOC communities.^{12,60,176}



04 Purchase Power Boycotts and buycotts are the most common purchase power activities, which fall under the broad umbrella of consumer activism.¹⁰³ One critique of purchase power lies in the difficulty to 1) implement change through individual acts and 2) distinguish ethical products and companies.^{106,107} Purchase power also transfers onus from companies to the individuals to solve social and ecological problems, creating equity issues in "who is considered a good consumer."^{106,107} Therefore, the argument continues, that while political and ethical consumerism may have a place in civic engagement activities, they are insufficient for fixing political, ethical and environmental issues perpetuated by corporations.¹⁰⁶



05 Work Data suggest that people want to work for companies driven by purpose and accountable to social and environmental justice issues.¹⁰⁹⁻¹¹¹ In addition, purpose bolsters recruitment (people will even take a pay cut to land a job with a purpose-given company) and employee retention, motivation and loyalty.^{109,111,112} Recent data also show that there is a desire for companies to do more to pursue social justice and equity, including bringing historically oppressed voices to the table.^{110,114,115}



06 Social Entrepreneurship The social enterprise landscape in the US is murky: data suggest that the US has the highest rate of social enterprises and that number has grown substantially over the past few decades; however, there is not a clear count of how many exist.^{122,127} A critique of social enterprises is that they replace the government and public sector role with a reliance on the market to achieve social and environmental outcomes.¹²³ Furthermore, social enterprises do not address power imbalances (only technical issues) and have the consequence of taking civic action out of the equation in favor of market forces.¹²³



07 Donate The nonprofit sector depends on donations from individuals, especially smaller nonprofits.³⁸ Though nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of Americans donated money in the past year, this represents a historical low and the drop in giving is more acute in lower- and middle-income households.⁸⁹ Moreover, as the share of contributing households decreases, and the aggregate value of donations has increased, reliance on wealthier donors has resulted.^{38,185} Finally, grassroots forms of donating, such as through giving circles, move the individual act of donating to the collective realm.¹³⁴⁻¹³⁶



08 Listen and Learn We used three frames for listening and learning: news and media consumption, civic education and equity education. Misinformation takes center in the discussion on news and media consumption. Declining newspaper readership and availability leads to more self-selection of unvetted news sources, the selection of which is tainted with confirmation bias and published in "echo chambers."^{30,138-140} Civic education, though essential to propagate secure civic mindset and build civic skills, has been divested in for decades.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, its prevalence is unevenly dispersed according to race and class lines.^{8,30 and}

though there has been recent movement to rededicate resources to civic education, the methods to do so are hotly debated for fear of swinging too far toward one political ideology.^{146,149,151} For this discussion, equity education is where people commit to educating themselves on racial inequities and systems upholding them. However, if people do not take civic action based on learning, the status quo will be maintained.¹⁵⁴ As a relatively new phenomenon, data on people's resulting actions are limited.



09 Service We focused on historically oppressed groups running for office and national service. Data underscore the homogeneity of public office even though women and people of color perform better in their runs than their counterparts.^{155,157,158} That said, the number of women, women of color and Millennials who ran for office increased considerably in the 2020 election cycle and even just being on the ballot signals progress.¹⁶⁰ However, structural and systemic impediments, such as deficits in capital and networks and persistent biases, can lead to the decision not to run at all.¹⁶¹ Organizations exist to provide services to reduce these barriers, including training and funding candidates from historically oppressed communities.

The positive impact of AmeriCorps on members and communities is well documented. However, structural determinants prevent equitable access to AmeriCorps, such as a lack of housing and criminal background check requirements.¹⁶⁶⁻¹⁶⁸ Policy recommendations to AmeriCorps largely center on providing access to the well-documented benefits of service to those individuals and communities that have historically been excluded from them.¹⁶⁶⁻¹⁶⁸ Notably, the American Rescue plan mandated a living allowance increase for AmeriCorps State, National and VISTA members, the use of culturally responsive strategies in service provision and the diversity of communities and participants to foster more equitable participation and service delivery.¹⁶⁹ In 2021, the Office of Management and Budget also recognized AmeriCorps for its efforts to use data to drive equitable recovery.¹⁷⁰

CONSIDERATIONS

Our process attempted to produce a credible review of the literature on civic engagement and the Civic Circle framework. For the long-standing civic actions of voting and volunteering, we narrowed the review with intention to address the charter within a reasonable scope. We also focused our search on civic engagement as it occurs in and affects systemically marginalized communities. From the body of evidence we uncovered, we have arrived at the following potential lines of inquiry to consider:

Conduct confirmatory research on who is volunteering less A Gallup poll showed that the steepest decline in volunteering was in middle-income volunteers (the decline for low-income volunteers was not as steep, though the rate of low-income volunteers makes up the smallest proportion of the total). How does this play out along racial lines? And what are the implications of these changes in the volunteer base on services provided and decision-making? Are people volunteering less because they are participating in other civic activities? If this is the case, what are they doing instead and why?

Explore new (non-normative) forms of civic action to identify its many shapes and document prevalence What does it mean to be a fully participatory citizen who shows up with our whole civic self? As stated throughout the review, traditional measures of civic engagement may miss those actions taken by historically oppressed groups and young people. Examples mentioned were socializing in gaming, forums and affinity spaces online and producing and publishing digital arts. Additionally, social movements are composed of actions outside of the periphery of traditional, including vigils, prayer

breakfasts, town halls and even bringing lawsuits to court. Taken one step further is the study of how civic and political expression and collective action on social media or in online spaces translates into real-world ramifications (e.g., Trump's campaign rally in Tulsa, OK; citizen journalism via social media; online forums solving crimes; inmates on social media humanizing the experience).

Investigate the implications of never connecting civically to organizations

If historically marginalized communities largely practice neighboring and mutual aid as an act of "collective survival" outside of traditional organizations, what are the implications for the ability of these communities to influence projects, programs and policies (which is the ultimate aim of civic engagement)? On the flip side, what are the implications for nonprofits never connecting to these mutual aid groups and the ability of the nonprofit to carry out its mission and inclusively engage?

Examine how nonprofits contribute to a more civically engaged society (and not those with a mission crafted for this purpose)

How do organizations on-ramp their own target populations, often historically oppressed, into civic and political engagement (outside of traditional volunteering and donating)? What do nonprofits see as their role in this effort and what is their capacity, motivation and knowledge? For those that embed civic engagement into their offerings, what is the prevalence and how effective are they in doing so? Further, can the case be made to show nonprofits that civic engagement (beyond donation and volunteering) is important to the health and vitality of nonprofits?

Study mutual aid during the pandemic

How many people were involved? Are they still involved? Do they identify it as mutual aid, community care, volunteering or something else? What is the difference in these views demographically? This line of inquiry would need to differentiate from Soden's taskforce.

Assess the conversion rate of listening and learning

As a relatively new phenomenon, there seems to be little data on people's actions after participating in antiracist listening and learning. However, the importance of this conversion was underscored by various authors to move from performative to authentic. In addition, it may be worth exploring how commitment of listening and learning may wane as we move farther from a significant, mobilizing event and how to encourage continued commitment (and conversion).

Look into the relationship among Civic Circle elements

We know that the Circle Elements are not mutually exclusive. Certain elements bridge seamlessly to one other as part of a larger, collective action and in some cases, exposure to one element initiates civic action in another. Instances of this "interplay" among Civic Circle elements the data bore out include:

- Volunteering and donating¹⁸⁸
- Civic engagement and news intake¹⁸⁹
- Volunteering as a young person and future voting¹⁹⁰
- Discussing politics at home and later political and civic activity¹²
- Voice on social media and volunteering, recruiting others to political activity and donating¹⁹¹
- Protests influence on people's voting choices, people's decision to run for office and decision to vote at all^{186, 187, 192}

However, the correlation between volunteering and voting is not as clear. As a UK-based research institute wrote:

This is because the drivers of many forms of political and civic activity are, for the most part, very similar: people who possess the resources that makes such

activity easier (such as skills, knowledge, money or time), who exhibit values emphasizing the importance of being politically and civically active and who have developed an interest in political and neighborhood affairs are the most likely to be active in our communities (para. 2).¹⁹³

The examination of the ties amongst Civic Circle elements came at the tail end of our review. It may be worthwhile to explore the relationship further -- with a well-defined lens that includes new/non-normative types of action -- to tease out associations before commencing new exploratory research.

One area that specifically springs to mind is the literature on mutual aid and protests suggesting that these activities make for lifelong, committed activists. Considering these activities historically occur in systemically marginalized communities, future research may explore how this plays out temporally. Another is how social media and other forms of voice are related, especially considering that social media usage is increasing while letters to the editor, public meetings and donations to political campaigns are decreasing.^{12,174-183}

BACKGROUND

To better understand civic engagement and how to motivate individuals and communities to become more engaged, Points of Light commissioned Data Shine, an independent evaluation consulting firm, to conduct a comprehensive literature review. The goals of the literature review were to:

- Locate benchmarks for key metrics of civic engagement and the Civic Circle
- Describe civic engagement's role in a strong democracy
- Synthesize the benefits of civic engagement for people and communities
- Explore accessibility of, barriers to and attitudes around civic engagement
- Identify instances of systems change produced as a result of civic engagement

We have noted in the literature review where the accumulation of evidence helped to address each goal, except for the first, because we integrated statistics throughout the narrative, featured key statistics in call-out boxes and created a benchmarking toolkit for institutional usage.

To capture the multidimensionality of the civic engagement landscape, we paired Points of Light's [Civic Circle framework](#) with an exploratory, inductive approach that allowed the team to expand search terms based on literature in real-time. Data Shine reviewed various resources, including academic databases, scholarly journals, news sources, think tank and poll briefings or organizational reports, white papers, book chapters, practitioner-focused guides and more. A primary focus was also peer-reviewed journals and trade publications that featured benchmarks metrics. Resources reviewed were primarily produced within the past five years and within the US. However, there were some exceptions to these parameters when a piece was deemed highly relevant. The search produced more than 260 artifacts; we referenced 198 in the synthesis.³ Our [Web Library](#) contains direct access to reviewed resources when possible.

³ Though we prioritized inclusive and non-harmful language, we realize we can always improve; grateful for feedback at colleen@datashineconsulting.com

FINDINGS

What is civic engagement?

The literature suggests civic engagement comprises two components: 1) civic actions that advance the public good and 2) civic mindset or the psychological dimensions of values, skills, knowledge and beliefs.

CIVIC ACTIONS

Civic engagement activities are prosocial actions that advance the public good.^{1, 2, 3} These prosocial actions "correspond to the human ability not just to act but *to act in concert*," which enables "ordinary" people the power to influence leaders, policies and practices (p21).¹¹ Some civic engagement activities are inherently political, while others contribute to the community without politics.^{2,4,5,6} Of all civic actions (or activities), voting is the "most common and widespread" in the US. The 2020 presidential election cycle saw a record-breaking nearly 158.4 million ballots cast.¹³

The following table provides an overview of traditional civic engagement activities or what Mirra & Garcia (2017) referred to as "normative attributes of civic engagement" (p140).⁷

POLITICAL	
Political voice activities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boycotting, political consumerism, consumer activism• Petitions• Protesting, rallies, demonstrations, marches• Expressing opinions, writing letters to the editor• Attending public meetings• Contacting public officials	Electoral activities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Voting• Campaigning• Registering others to vote• Making campaign contributions
NONPOLITICAL	
Civic activities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boycotting, political consumerism, consumer activism• Volunteering• Informal collaboration• Donating• Membership in fraternal, religious, professional organizations and associations	

^{1, 12, 17, 18}

The definition of civic engagement activities should be fluid and responsive to how people engage with each other and the community. For example, "participatory culture and politics" both in offline and online spaces (e.g., socializing in gaming, forums and affinity spaces online; producing and publishing digital arts; and engaging in social media activism) are vehicles for collective action.^{16,7} Grassroots participation in social movements may also not be captured in traditional definitions of civic action, such as participating in vigils, prayer breakfasts, town halls or even bringing lawsuits to court. Other civic engagement actions that do not fall cleanly within "normative" categories are participatory methods

that involve historically oppressed groups in planning policies and programs that influence them. For example, public engagement "encompasses a variety of activities that meaningfully involve community members, Indigenous rights-holders and/or stakeholders" (p8)¹⁹ to not only provide input on, but also make decisions about and ideally implement policies, programs and services and participatory action research leverages historically oppressed voices -- oftentimes those of young people -- in shaping research questions and implementing research processes.⁷

Literature suggests that civic engagement can influence policy outcomes, where citizen involvement in policymaking increases policy legitimacy by including a multitude of viewpoints, improves government efficiency and showcases concerns for social justice.¹⁴ It is also suggested that civic engagement encompasses a "different kind of politics" that leverages a plurality of beliefs and experiences to better the collective and is not merely concerned with the redistribution of resources" (p139).⁷ All in all, civic engagement activities help people "ensure" that institutional "actors work to change laws and policies....to promote healthy communities...[and provide] a potential avenue for systems change" (p2).¹⁵



Regardless of the political or nonpolitical nature of activities, a key feature of civic engagement is the external nature of the action, where they occur "outside one's own family and circle of close friends" (p39).⁵ Levison (2010) illustrated the need for this external intention, arguing that "good citizens" do not merely keep to themselves or subscribe to a strict mindset of individual responsibility.⁸ Furthermore, the goal of a "good citizen" is not uniform agreement but the embrace of "the importance of knowledgeable, skillful, active involvement in civic and political institutions in order to improve society" (p318).⁸ In other words, good citizens may disagree about politics and determinants of issues but agree that informed action can improve communities.

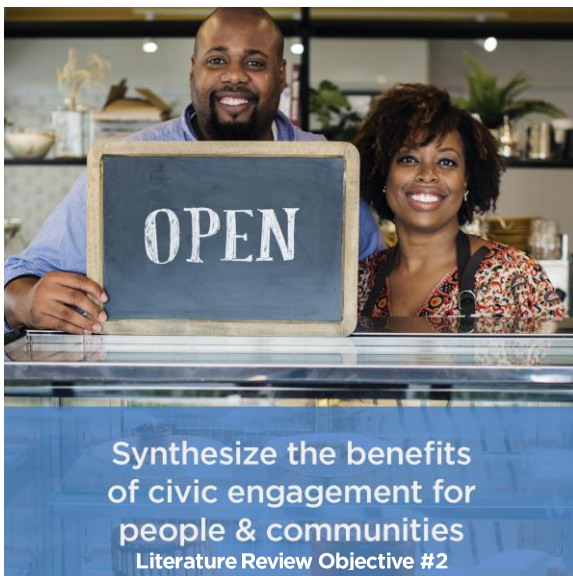
CIVIC MINDSET

The second component of civic engagement goes "beyond behaviors/actions and includes psychological dimensions such as values, beliefs, attitudes, skills and knowledge." These psychological dimensions, which we call civic mindset, reinforce actions and are not necessarily exclusive: beliefs inform actions and actions can change efficacy and beliefs (p11).³ In fact, some even framed civic engagement based on civic mindset, where civic engagement is the *belief* that one can and should improve one's community" (p3).⁶

While some individuals form civic mindset and feel confident to act upon it, others do not. Thus, there is a need to develop "knowledge, skills, values and motivation" to "make a difference in the civic life of our communities" (p925).⁹ According to Verba et al. as cited by Levison, "Those who possess civic skills, the set of specific competencies germane to citizen political activity, are more likely to feel confident about exercising those skills in politics and to be effective—or, to use the economist's term, productive—when they do" (p327).⁸ Confidence in civic skills has been shown to be linked to participation and effectiveness of participation.

Takeaway. Civic engagement comprises prosocial civic actions and values, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes — or civic mindset — that propel conviction and action. A wide lens can frame civic actions, which can be political (or not) and may occur outside of traditional mental models of civic engagement, such as communing in online platforms and providing mutual aid. The two components of civic engagement are mutually reinforcing: Civic actions can change civic mindset and civic action stems from a secure civic mindset. Given this, it is critical to build knowledge, skills, ability and opportunity to cultivate civic mindset.

Why is civic engagement important?



Though the ultimate outcome of civic engagement is the focusing of individual power into a collective that shapes projects, programs and policies, civic engagement also provides individual benefits stemming from involvement in civic actions and the development of a civic mindset. As Kathi et al. (2005) asserted: "Citizen participation not only enhances the end result but also acts as a tool for empowerment and social change" (p559).²¹ Civic engagement creates opportunities for connection, which builds empathy and trust. Being civically involved also confers a sense of empowerment, agency and efficacy in oneself, others and institutions. Taken together, this adds up to greater hope, health and wellbeing.

CONNECTS PEOPLE

Health and wellbeing improve when people connect to other people. Civic engagement provides the opportunity to create or reinforce "social bonds" that connect people and communities. These social bonds "build norms of reciprocity and cultivate community solidarity, which in turn prompt individual and collective civic actions" (p15).³ These social bonds glue societal connections together and are known as social cohesion.^{22, 2}

Halegoua and Johnson (2021) cited various measures of social cohesion: "community bonds, place attachment, empowerment, control, safe place for children, neighborhood satisfaction, expecting to stay in the neighborhood long term, walkability and political efficacy" (p1733).²³ Additionally, one standard measure of social cohesion is social capital. Social capital "is shared group resources like a friend-of-a-friend's knowledge of a job opening,"¹⁸ and it is associated with mortality -- an association that becomes more acute in the face of income inequality. Social capital is shared through networks. These networks also spread positive and negative health behaviors and can protect from risk factors.¹⁸ Zhu (2017) offered that self-reported health and civic activity participation are positively associated, and social capital mediates this association.^{24,1} Furthermore, the depth of social cohesion may have protective effects against economic struggles, where communities with high social capital and trust may result in lower unemployment.²⁵

BUILDS EMPATHY AND TRUST

One aspect of effective participation in civic engagement is the development of social empathy or one's capacity to understand the lives of others through the lens of structural inequities. An established sense of social empathy includes the wellbeing of others in decision-making.⁴ More generally, civic engagement allows people to contribute to community change and a "civically engaged population demonstrates that people not only care about their community and nation but are also motivated to participate" (ix).¹ Trust can also be nurtured through civic engagement. For instance, Kathi and Cooper (2005) noted that allowing citizens to participate in decision-making may stall the loss of trust in government and Fernandez and Alexander (2017) reasoned that civic engagement creates a "generalized trust and commitment to the common good"(p5).^{21,25}

EMPOWERS COMMUNITIES

Empowerment is the "process by which people gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives" (para. 1).²⁶ Empowerment occurs through increased access to social capital and opportunities to take ownership over solutions, both of which occur organically in civic engagement settings by meeting new people and influencing important issues. Civic empowerment is defined as a "psychological construct that overlaps with concepts of agency, efficacy, sociopolitical control and voice" (p21) and stems from feelings of proficiency in helping to address community problems.³ Veeh et al. (2019) cited research that ties civic engagement with increased prosocial behaviors, school engagement and healthy substance choices.²⁷ All in all, better health outcomes happen when people have greater agency and control over their lives.¹¹

FOSTERS EFFICACY

Civic engagement helps to foster efficacy in oneself, others and institutions. As discussed in Copeland and Boulianne (2020), there are two types of efficacies that civic engagement engenders: political and

collective efficacy.²⁸ Political efficacy comprises 1) internal efficacy, where one believes they can capably understand and take part in politics and 2) external efficacy, where one has faith the government is responsive to constituents.²⁸ Having a high level of internal efficacy leads to greater participation and greater effectiveness of the participation. However, while both are important, motivation stems from the hope that change is possible and, as Levinson (2010) stated, "Whether one knows nothing about current events or has an advanced degree in political science...if one doesn't believe that civic and political participation can make a difference, then one is not going to participate" (p327-328).⁸

Collective efficacy encompasses the capacity to create change by leveraging social capital and recruiting others for a shared purpose.¹⁸ More specifically, collective efficacy is defined as "the connections and social relationships among community members combined with the willingness to utilize these relationships to facilitate community change" (p311).² Studies show that collective efficacy reduces crime, violence and substance abuse and increases health and access to social supports and resources, including healthy food, exercise facilities and medical care.²

SUPPORTS HEALTH

While it is "not yet completely clear whether better health causes more civic engagement or vice versa...there is some reason to believe the causal arrows run in both directions."¹⁸ Some of the positive impacts of civic engagement on health include:^{29,15,1,2}

- Reduced social isolation which is linked to decreased life expectancy
- Increased individual resilience by reducing financial stress
- Improved physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Protects against risk factors such as substance abuse and sedentary lifestyle
- Contributes to offsetting the effects of race on inequities in healthcare
- Lower rates of cancer, heart disease, depression and cognitive impairment
- Supports healthy aging
- Empowers individuals to make healthy choices within their community
- Fosters efficacy of a community to increase access to resources that promote health

Takeaway. Civic engagement provides pathways for people to collectively influence projects, programs and policies and, by way of this engagement, offers opportunities to improve health and wellbeing through 1) improved social connections that can lead to new access to networks or resources, empathy for others and trust in institutions and 2) a heightened sense of empowerment, agency and efficacy.

What is the state of civic engagement?

A well-known barometer to measure the state of civic engagement is civic health. The National Conference on Citizenship (NCOC) defined civic health as "the way that communities are organized to define and address public problems" (p3).³⁰ Called a "measure of the wellbeing of public life," civic health is an "all-encompassing term that incorporates social capital, civic engagement and political participation into one" and was initially coined a "social capital lens onto America's soul" (p438).²⁵

KEY ORGANIZATION & RESOURCE

- [National Council on Citizenship](#)
- [Civic Health Index 2021: Citizenship During Crisis](#)

According to some recent publications, civic health has been declining. For instance, research shows that citizen trust in institutions and government has decreased over time.^{30,21} Data also indicate that systemically marginalized groups, whether by race or socioeconomic status, tend to trust government less and have less faith in the value of civic institutions.^{31,32} Additionally, a 2021 survey conducted by Pew Research showed that 88% of Americans feel the US is significantly more divided now than before the pandemic - only 10% of Americans feel the US is united.³³ Although several other nations also reported similar feelings, the US had the largest division, implying that the current state of American democracy is becoming more divided, less trustworthy and less reliable.³⁴

Social interaction is also dwindling. Atwell et al. (2017) described that now, more than ever, people are more likely to live alone, spend less time with neighbors and coworkers and less likely to have friends or relatives on whom they can depend.³⁵ Notably, the contracting of social networks is not felt evenly: low-income people and younger generations are reported to be lonelier and Black and Latinx populations are more likely to feel a diminished sense of trust than their respective counterparts.³⁰ Further dampening the ability to create connections, people are less likely to join groups organizations or associations; and inequities in broadband access exacerbate isolation for those often most vulnerable, such as those in poor, rural and Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities.^{30,36}

These weakened networks, Atwell et al. (2017) argued, create "civic deserts" that lack "adequate opportunities for civic engagement — places for discussing issues, addressing problems together and forming relationships of mutual support" (p5).³⁵ Social isolation not only leads to dampened community-level civic ethos, it is also linked to individual-level health complications including heart disease and stroke; increases in premature death, mortality and deaths of despair; and domestic radicalization and violent extremism.^{18,37,30} One indicator of weakened civic health is the downward trend in volunteering over the past two decades, which some suggest is attributed to and contributes to the social capital decline.³⁸

Amidst these declines, however, some scholars have observed positive trends in civic engagement, such as increases in voting and protesting during the pandemic and a steady uptick in donations to charitable organizations and political campaigns through 2019.^{30,38} A 2021 poll from the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics suggested that more young people are reporting that they are actively engaged.³⁹ Additionally, the study found that the number of young people reporting they are politically active increased from 24% in 2009 to 36% in 2021 and this is magnified for young Black respondents, who are most likely to report being politically active (41%). This age cohort is also increasingly likely to favor government intervention to address climate change, poverty and equity, data show.³⁹

Some researchers disagree on the extent of the decline and question whether it results from error in what counts as civic engagement. These "exclusionary" definitions, Mirra and Garcia (2017) argued, are "not-neutral" and "ignore the value of other skills and, in turn, contribute to a narrow...vision of who does and does not count as a good citizen" (p41).⁷ Overall, these authors maintained traditional measures do not "take into account the systemic inequalities" people of color face (they talk specifically of youth) and therefore fail to "accurately capture their experiences of civic life" (p41).⁷ Others reinforce the risk of omission, stating that community care, informal helping, mutual aid and other "productive engagement activities" are often completed by older people, women, people of color and those with lower-incomes.¹⁹⁴



Takeaway. Civic health is a composite measure of the state of civic engagement, which has been shown by a key authority on the subject, the National Conference on Citizenship, to be in a delicate state. Trust in government, institutions and each other are on the decline and as a result of reduced civic engagement opportunities, so too are chances to foster trust, connections and cohesion. However, buried in these aggregate findings is promise and potential, such as increased rates in voting and protesting and young people reporting that they are actively engaged, a result amplified for Black respondents. In addition, a theme that bubbles up throughout the literature is whether traditional tools to measure civic engagement are adequate to capture new forms of participation, especially those by historically oppressed groups.

UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Research indicates that structural differences in access to civic engagement opportunities shape civic mindset. Holley stated, "the civic engagement environment is not only informed by what we practice, but by how we are positioned in our communities...How we practice civic engagement is tied to our access to resources and opportunities" (p11).³¹

At the most fundamental level, white, English-speaking citizens with higher socioeconomic status (SES) and living in higher SES neighborhoods "undeniably do have greater opportunities to influence government or public policy than do non-white, educationally underserved, economically disadvantaged youth and adults living in neighborhoods with limited social and political capital" (p325).⁸ Simply put, more income and education generate more social capital, resource availability and organizational opportunities.^{25,14,8}

Moreover, along with reduced opportunities to engage, the perceived ability to influence also declines. For example, it has been shown that political efficacy is higher among whites than people of color and increases as income increases.⁸ As Holley (n.d.) found: "those with fewer resources often find participation less useful or impossible, leading them to stop participating in engagement activities altogether, widening the gap in civic voice and power, leading to even more social inequality"

(p15).³¹ Piatak et al. (2018) observed this inequity in volunteer recruitment activities: "the process of recruiting volunteers is by no means perfectly inclusive. In many cases, volunteer recruitment tends to draw from dominant status groups, whereas lower status groups are excluded" (p127S).⁴⁸

According to the research, Black people are asked to volunteer less frequently than white counterparts, white constituents have more electoral opportunities than people of color and people of color and people with disabilities are less likely to be recruited into civic and political activities.^{40,9} People of color and people in poverty are also less likely to discuss civics at home, have a job that develops civic skills or knowledge, participate in voluntary organizations, have models or mentors in civic activity and have less opportunity for higher education "where much political and civic socialization increasingly occurs" (p322).^{41,8} The cumulative impact of inequitable opportunities is that civic engagement efforts "tend to center and privilege voices of white, non-disabled people. This directly contributes to a systemic imbalance of power and representation across all levels of US government and civic life" (p18).⁴⁰

These patterns are likely to be generational. In discussing civic opportunities for youth, Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020) argued that "it is important to study the availability and nature of ecological assets for civic development in high-poverty urban neighborhoods" given data that indicate civic education, service learning and civic-inspiring after school programming are not equally distributed (p16-17).³ Furthermore, not only does the experience of racism shape perceptions about civic engagement, research reveals a weakened political efficacy for youth of color, who feel more alienated from institutions, more mistrust and unfairness in society and that the government is less responsive to people like them.³

With unevenly distributed barriers identified, an additional layer to consider (on a surface level) is the psychology of participation. Research on social movements and protests suggests that being asked to participate, connection to networks and an interest in political issues (e.g., news consumption, expressing interest in politics and enjoying political discussion) are the most influential predictors of individual mobilization.¹⁹⁵ "Biographical availability" is also found to mediate whether people participate in social movements, where those who have more time and less obligation are more likely to participate (e.g., young, unemployed, unmarried or childless).¹⁹⁶ These findings reveal the recurring theme that mobilization is fundamentally less accessible for those with less capital, contacts and control (e.g., low pay/benefit, high demand job; childcare needs), all of which become more acute as we move down the economic ladder.

Takeaway. Social determinants lead to an unequal distribution of civic engagement opportunities to influence projects, programs and policies. On a practical level, this manifests in historically oppressed groups having fewer requests to volunteer and electoral opportunities and less exposure to climates that facilitate civic mindset, including at home, work or school. At the individual level, fewer engagement opportunities convert to an eroded sense of efficacy. The cumulative effect is an ongoing "centering" of the voices of dominant groups in shaping projects, programs and policies.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

There is a documented downtrend in membership and participation in organizations, groups and associations that have acted as civic engagement and community participation laboratories, including religious organizations, unions and neighborhood groups.^{30,42} Membership, prompted by personal interests, provides "accidental" forums to develop and apply civic skills.⁴³ Further, these organizations,

groups and associations have traditions of civic engagement that shape participation into the future, including those through religious, civic and educational pathways.^{44,45} Some examples include those who are active in religion being more likely to volunteer and participate in community groups; youth involved in community organizing being more likely to stay civically engaged, stay in school and become employed; and union members having more racial tolerance and supporting policies that benefit Black communities.^{46,12,30}

As centers for civic engagements organizations, groups and associations can facilitate collective action in a group setting.² These formal and informal and public and private entities represent a "larger web of civic relationships" (p534)⁴² and provide people and notably, youth, "access to networks, ideas and experiences that build individual and collective capacity to struggle for social justice—the chance to engage in critical civic praxis" (p694).⁴⁷

However, some argue that an overall lack of coordination and competition creates inefficiencies in the sector's ability to spur collective action and that intentional "civic infrastructure" dedicated to 1) "support and maintain opportunities for multiracial, multiethnic relationships and power-sharing" and 2) develop leaders is necessary to "advance racially equitable community engagement, problem-solving, democratic governance and public accountability" (p109).^{2,49} Further, whereas the foundations to on-road people into service and volunteering have been laid, Hylton (2018) contended that infrastructure to "aid in our ability to engage in difficult discussions, problem-solving and collaboration—that is, our ability to create and sustain healthy democratic communities" -- is lacking (p90-91).⁴

Some question the role of nonprofit entities as a mobilizing context for civic engagement. In 2005, Barry outlined the general hesitancy for nonprofits to engage in legislative or lobbying activities for fear of risking tax-deductible status (measured in 2021 by lobbying expenditures according to the IRS).³⁶ Others reiterate that in addition to not fully understanding regulations around advocacy, nonprofits focus efforts on serving clients rather than advocacy due to limited funding.⁵⁰ The results of this inaction, it can be argued, are a missed opportunity for nonprofits to mobilize on behalf of historically oppressed constituencies while also on-boarding beneficiaries into the political system, supporting their participation through connection to resources and information.^{36,25} In 2019, Rhayn argued that it is "imperative" for nonprofits to embrace and support self-organizing practices to be part of "lasting" systems change and "effectively facilitate shifts in dominant systems to embrace emergent values" (para. 9).⁵¹

In specific, nonprofits are permitted to conduct activities that are non-partisan (non-partisan voter registration drives, non-partisan candidate debates and non-partisan voter education) and legislative and issue-related advocacy.⁵² A study by Nonprofit VOTE (2019) found that outreach to voters through on-the-ground nonprofits engaged people who were "more likely to be non-white, young and low-income than registered voters in the study" (p6).⁵³ Support in this area does exist, including training provided by Nonprofit VOTE and toolkits and guidance documents (e.g., [National Council's Voter Registration Toolkit](#) [Get-Out-the-Vote in 2020 for the Elections](#); [Voter Engagement Toolkit](#)).⁵³

Takeaway. It is well documented that organizations act as generators of civic engagement and collective action. In the context of the Civic Circle, they are hubs for volunteering and donations. However, a thread throughout this discovery is that there is a lack of coordination, comfort and knowledge amongst the sector to intentionally spur engagement that enables power sharing, racial

equity and more participatory systems. This is a missed opportunity for nonprofits to mobilize on behalf of historically oppressed communities and on-road beneficiaries into the political system.

INEQUITIES IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The literature repeatedly demonstrates a gap in civic engagement activities tied to income, education, health status, race and ethnicity, where dominant groups are more likely to participate.^{8,32,25,15,14,40,9} According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, because systemically excluded communities, such as Black and Latinx groups, "have lesser educational, income and occupational opportunities than whites as a group, their civic participation rates are predictably lower" (p1).³² Research indicates that white individuals and higher earners are more likely to volunteer; homeowners are more civically and politically engaged than renters and higher-income families report more civic discourse at home.^{9,32,41} Additionally, those in good health and with able bodies are more likely to vote or engage civically than those in poor health or with disabilities.¹⁵ Poor health is associated with lower voting rates, including most chronic diseases and substance abuse.¹

Further, it has been said that the voices of low- and moderate-income voters have been reduced to a mere "whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government" (p316).⁸ These "lost whispers" result in "richer white voters having more influence on which laws get passed, biasing economic policymaking...against evidence-based proposals that would combat structural racism and deliver equitable growth" (para. 4).⁵⁴

A defining feature of the 2020 elections was the heightened awareness of differential treatment in voting regulations at polls and how it shaped election results. At the highest level, data indicate that 88% of higher-income individuals voted and only 65% of low-income individuals voted.⁵⁴ Though "turnout rates in 2020 were higher than in the 2016 election for non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian and Hispanic race and origin groups," (para.10) non-Hispanic white votes still outpace all other racial groups.⁵⁵

The inequity in civic engagement participation produces inequitable outcomes at the policy and individual levels, where civic engagement's health benefits are not equally experienced.⁴¹ However, relying on traditional civic engagement measures may mask civic actions taken by historically marginalized groups, such as online activities by youth or volunteering to benefit one's network or neighborhood by lower-income groups.⁶⁴

Along the same lines of acknowledging nontraditional modes of civic participation, it is important to recognize various ways systemically excluded groups participate at greater rates than dominant groups. Black individuals are more likely to participate in protests or demonstrations and engage in civic health issues.^{8,15,9} Black women outpaced the average voter turnout in the 2018 midterm election.⁵⁶ Black Americans have proportionately higher service rates (military and national) than white counterparts.⁵⁷ Black, Hispanic and Asian Americans are more likely to report taking action to better understand racial issues, participating or knowing someone to have participated in a BLM protest and making an effort to support minority-owned businesses than white counterparts.⁵⁸ "Some youth of color in urban high-poverty neighborhoods are highly civically engaged, despite oppressive and disadvantaged circumstances," and when engaged in asset-based programs, demonstrate a strong commitment to "challenging oppression and mobilizing around social justice" (p17).³

Other research suggests that providing civic tools to historically oppressed young people can facilitate "critical civic praxis," or "critical reflection and action," (p698)⁴⁷ and "offer a pathway of challenging [structural racism] through political activism...and become more invested in obtaining civic knowledge and have higher degrees of civic self-efficacy" (p103).⁵⁹

Takeaway. As discussed, the unequal distribution of opportunities to influence projects, programs and policies turns the voices of oppressed groups into "mere whispers," which increases the likelihood that projects, programs and policies do not reflect the needs of the most vulnerable while simultaneously restricting the individual health and wellbeing benefits of civic participation to more dominant groups. Again, however, the potential for traditional measures to mask untraditional civic actions is relevant, as is the need to recognize the potential and promise of ways that systemically marginalized groups engage at greater rates. Examples include Black women outpacing the average turnout in the 2018 midterm election; Black Americans having proportionately higher military and civic service rates; and Black, Hispanic and Asian Americans being more likely to report taking action to better understand racial issues.

What has civic engagement accomplished?

Evidence indicates that individual volunteering and donations are fundamental to nonprofits and elections, designed and regulated to be free and fair, are a cornerstone of representative democracy. We know; therefore, these activities are universally necessary for a healthy, thriving society and, in theory, create measurable change. Other distinct forms of civic engagement, such as protests, boycotts, petitions and social movements (a conglomeration of many civic engagement activity types), are more challenging to gauge for impact. This section discusses the literature on the process and systems-level outcomes of these larger-scale, collective civic engagement activities, starting with protests.³⁸



PROTESTS

In an Atlantic article, *Do Protests Even Work?*, the author suggested that the power of protests is in their long-term impact on participants and society, their credibility that results from collective effort, the level of risk that protesters accept and how they de-legitimize authority.⁶⁰ Whereas some large scale protests have questionable impacts (e.g., the Iraq war and the Occupy movement protests), Tufekci contended that the most recent rise against racial injustice (rooted in the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin) has been successful in "convincing people of the righteousness of their cause. In the long run, that's of profound importance" (para.12).⁶⁰

At the core of successful protests are clear outcomes. For instance, Dusson (2020) described that if the conviction of police officers who use brutal force is the goal, then it is likely; however, if the goal is to

eliminate racism, then success may be less likely.⁶¹ Satell and Popovic (2017) underscored this necessity in the recommendation to clearly define "the change you want to see" (para. 4) and again, nodded to the Occupy movement as one that may have failed due to fuzzy goals.⁶²

Strategies to engage matter, too. Social movements must engage a critical mass in activities of quality and depth that lead to new networks, social bonds and collective identity that help sustain the movement.⁶³ Benefit also rests in recruiting not just from those who actively agree with the movement. It is essential to spend time pulling in "passive supporters" and focusing on "neutral groups" -- this engages more people *and* erodes the opposition's base.⁶² Protesters often turn into lifelong activists, which "gets to the final reason that protests work: Collective action is a life-changing experience" (para. 14).⁶⁰ From these collective action experiences, people continue to demonstrate commitment through continued support at the ballot box and in other forms of civic engagement.⁶¹

A strong and resourced organizational structure is key to the success of protest movements.^{60,61,63} For example, "networked movements" invest resources to "seed and support collaboration...among groups and grassroots leaders....to adopt goals, plans and practices...rather than a single, undifferentiated, nationally focused strategy" (p117).⁶³ Moreover, leaders are required to be "leader-ful" and promote power-sharing and embrace decentralized, bottom-up tactics.⁶³ Further, Satell and Popovic (2017) contended that it is vital to consider the "after" period of a social movement that includes changing the "beliefs that lead to actions" (para. 22).⁶²

BOYCOTTS

The impact of boycotts is under debate. Habits play a role in consumer decisions and therefore, revenue may not decrease considerably. On the other hand, reputation is another matter and, like protests above, the desired outcome needs to be clear. Reed (2017) summarized this notion: "If the aim is to hurt company sales, boycotts rarely succeed. But if the aim is to undermine companies that stand in the way of a movement, there is a greater chance that a boycott may tarnish a brand" (para. 1).⁶⁵

Research suggests, for instance, that boycotts become more impactful as media coverage increases, which can lead to falling stock prices and behavior change in the company.⁶⁵ Others suggest that most impacts are in the short term and companies even target marketing to long-range strategies that may risk support from certain groups (the example offered was Nike signing Colin Kaepernick, which may run the risk of losing older shoppers but builds long term loyalty with younger demographics).⁶⁷

PETITIONS

Petitions have a long history in western democracies and "from the 18th century beginnings of the United States...[were] regarded as a basic practice—the act of adding your name, with others, to an official appeal asserted, not only identity, but also rights." (para. 2)⁶⁸ Public purpose petitions request the government take action; online petitions may not request action but help raise awareness.⁶⁸ That said, the goals of petitions have always remained the same: to "assert strength in civic numbers in an effort to compel policymakers to listen and act" (para.16).⁶⁸

With most petitions today distributed through platforms like Change.org and We the People, online petitions have become "part of an ecosystem" (para. 7).⁶⁸ A study found that viral petitions shared the

use of active, positive and descriptive words and tailored the petition to the locality compared to their less popular counterparts.⁷⁰

Notably, in a 2019 CNN article that detailed the ten most impactful Change.org petitions of the decade, the evidence cited moves beyond the mass of signatures to include the shift in the policy environment in creating more just outcomes (e.g., Rodney Reed, Cyntoia Brown and Eric Garner).⁷¹ That said, it is difficult to attribute change to petitions like other advocacy and awareness-raising activities. However, post-petition decisions may have been influenced by the "assertion of strength in civic numbers" resulting from the petition. Examples given include:⁷¹

- Honoring Nipsey Hussle: less than two weeks after a petition obtaining 500,000+ signatures was launched asking for an intersection to be named "Nipsey Hussle Square," the Los Angeles City Council voted to do so.
- Ending the ban on gay Boy Scouts: nearly 500,000 signatures were gathered to support a petition for an openly gay boy scout to receive an earned Eagle Scout; shortly after, Boy Scouts of America ended its ban on gay youth.
- Getting TripAdvisor to address sexual assault: a petition by a survivor who was assaulted by a tour guide promoted by Trip Advisor led the company to tighten up policies and form partnerships with sexual assault support groups.

An analysis by Pew (2016) of We the People during Obama's presidency also revealed some markers of change that may have resulted from petitions, including:⁷²

- Signing a law making it illegal for telephone companies to prevent phones from working on other carriers' systems
- Informing President Obama's position that conversion therapy should be banned
- Awarding Yogi Berra the Medal of Freedom based on a petition.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements are characterized by the collaboration of people against "power holders" around a cause, often responding to "situations of perceived inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands" (p1).⁷³ Notably, not all social movements are progressive -- they run the ideological spectrum. Social movements envelop all types of civic engagement activities.

There are various times in history when social movements have been deemed successful, including "abolition, public education, agrarian reform, labor rights, civic rights, women's rights and environmental protection" (p59).⁷⁴ Some more recent shifts the literature suggests produced by -- at least in part -- social movements include: ^{63, 60, 75, 76, 67, 65, 77}

- BLM and protests against racial injustice encouraged the suspension of 'no-knock warrants,' prohibiting DAs from taking funding from police unions, redirecting funding from police departments to other social supports; removal of confederate monuments; and recognition of Juneteenth as a holiday
- Pharmaceutical protests impacting how medical research is conducted (see ACT-UP), donations are accepted (see the removal of the Sackler family name from the Louvre and the Met) and
- Marriage equality at the level of the US Supreme Court

- President Obama's grassroots campaign that mobilized the youth vote and campaign donations, including 3.1 million individuals making contributions to the campaign and 5 million people volunteering for it
- Parkland shooting protests and walkouts leading to small shifts in gun legislation that led to some states passing control legislation and a nationwide boycott of companies with links to the NRA
- Changes in company practices from boycotts, such as Nike, Driscolls, Walmart, FoxNews and Chick-fil-A
- DACA upheld by the Supreme Court in 2020 as a result of largely undocumented organizers
- #DeleteUber that sought for the reversal of a refugee ban on Muslim-majority countries that led to the Uber CEO leaving Trump's business council

In *How Change Happens: Why Some Social Movements Succeed While Others Don't*, Crutchfield (2018) dissected the multi-layered strategies taken by both successful and unsuccessful social movements, further illustrating the types of civic engagement activities that can "move public opinion, shift behaviors and reform laws, policies and regulations to favor their side" (p11).⁷⁸

They organized, mobilized and canvassed door-to-door; they educated, persuaded, lobbied -- and when that didn't work, they sued, protested, marched and demonstrated; they held vigils and town halls and prayer breakfasts; they gathered signatures, got out the vote and some backed political candidates and influenced elections. They raised money (some more than others) and pitched the press...And when the internet became ubiquitous, they used social media -- friending, texting and tweeting up storms (ibid).

Crutchfield also offered the following changes that occurred or are in progress as a result of several key historical social movements (p4):⁷⁸

CHANGES THAT HAPPENED	CHANGES IN PROGRESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acid rain reduced • Drunk driving reduced • LGBT marriage equality established • Gun rights expanded • Polio eliminated (globally) • Mass incarceration increased • Smoking reduced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carbon emissions reduction • Criminal sentencing reform • Gun violence prevention • Living wage increase • Obesity and diabetes control • Racial tolerance and justice • Public education equity

In the examination of these movements, Crutchfield delineated six essential factors to success:⁷⁸

1. Turn Grassroots Gold: social movements thrive when on-the-ground activist networks are nurtured, connected and empowered
2. Sharpen Your 10/10/10/20 = 50 Vision: localized and incremental efforts create small wins that accumulate over time, making federal reform more possible
3. Change Hearts & Policy: successful social movements seek to "connect with people at their human core" (p13) to change attitudes and opinion, which can lead to behavioral change, and, in the long run, systems change

4. Reckon with Adversarial Allies: organizations in the same space working to achieve a collective goal are more likely to succeed collaboratively, though compromise will be necessary
5. Break from Business as Usual: leverage the power of for-profit businesses in moving the needle on social issues
6. Be Leader-ful: the most successful movements strike a balance between being leader-less (e.g., a protest) and leaderful (e.g., top-down), where leaders encourage local action while implementing a national strategy

Social movements need to be nurtured, as Crutchfield described. In addition to the six essential factors outlined above, several organizations and even "social movement schools" help provide foundational skills, educate on collective action and its history and create connections amongst potential and current participants.⁷⁹

Takeaway. This review aimed to identify systems-level change that was stimulated, in part, by civic engagement. To do this, we turned our gaze to large-scale collective action in the form of protests, boycotts, petitions and social movements (a conglomeration of many types of civic actions). Successful collective action typically has clear goals and strategy and, when long-term buy-in is necessary, dedicates time to cultivate a strong network and properly resources activities. Social movements are more likely to be successful, too, when they "connect with people at their human core" to win hearts, minds and actions. Instances of successful social movements on both sides of the ideological spectrum that were powered by grassroots involvement include reducing drunk driving, establishing marriage equality, reducing smoking and expanding gun rights.

THE CIVIC CIRCLE

The Civic Circle is a framework that Points of Light developed during its 2018 strategic planning process to represent a person's power to lead, lend support and take action for causes they care about and to lead a civic life. The Civic Circle comprises nine elements, each of which is inspected below for recent trends and potential research gaps.

Importantly, the Civic Circle offers multiple ways for people to show up as their whole civic selves, heeding the caution advised by Martinson and Minkler (2006) (cited by Martinez et al.) to embrace a wide definition of civic engagement: "When civic engagement is reduced to the act of formal volunteering, other activities associated with civic life, including voting, engaging in community activism, staying informed about current events, caregiving and having informal connections, are notably ignored" (p24).¹⁹⁴ The following section provides an overview of the evidence base for each of the Civic Circle's nine elements.



01 Vote

Vote represents an individual's ability to participate in a democratic process. It includes all political processes from participating in national and local elections to supporting efforts that increase engagement in electoral processes.

Voting is often used as an indicator of the civic health and political engagement of a democratic society - civically healthy nations have high rates of voter registration and turnout while struggling nations have lower rates.⁸⁰ Further, as Fieldhouse et al. (2020) argued that because the democratic system would be "damaged" if nobody voted, voting must be a "social norm" to maintain the US democracy.⁸⁴ However, even as the most common form of civic engagement and a right to US citizens, various documented barriers prevent people from registering to vote or casting ballots.⁸⁰ For this discussion, voting and its barriers are divided into two acts: voter registration and voter turnout.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Most US citizens can vote at 18 years of age, but individuals must register to vote. This process can be difficult for young voters and is not commonly taught in schools.⁸⁰ Additionally, registration is not automatic, requires proof of physical address, photo ID, proof of US citizenship and must be updated with every address or name change.⁸⁰ Some states even require an additional cost to register to vote.⁸⁰ Voter registration forms may also be difficult to understand or complete, making the process frustrating for many.⁸⁰

There are more barriers to maintaining registration status. Many states purge voter registration records after periods of inactivity or minor errors that invalidate paperwork.⁸⁰ Additionally, registration deadlines, partisan identification requirements and barriers to registering based on citizenship or incarceration history provide added challenges.⁸⁰ There is also inconsistency in the registration process between states; some states have automatic registration or pre-registration for those under 18, while others have added steps that complicate the process.⁸⁰ These state-by-state barriers to voter registration create inequities between states. Within states, barriers prevent low-income individuals, renters or those with complicated citizenship or incarceration history from registering.⁸⁰

VOTER TURNOUT

Voter turnout is the act of registered citizens casting ballots. However, many barriers prevent registered citizens from voting. These barriers include limited polling sites and hours, insufficient information and lack of accessibility regarding technology or transportation.⁸⁰

These barriers have an additional impact on low-income communities. Adults are less likely to vote and model civic behaviors; therefore, low-income, urban youth are less likely to form voting habits.⁷ Despite knowing these barriers, the full impact on voter inequity is still unknown. Much of the civic education research occurs in an academic setting and does not fully represent communities of color. The impact of barriers is mostly speculation and has not yet been adequately researched.⁷

The 2020 US presidential election had the highest voter turnout of the 21st century,⁷ with more young voters and more nontraditional voting methods than previous years.³⁰ The election was also notably

divisive, with approximately two-thirds of Americans believing US government leaders were purposely misinforming or misleading them.³⁰ Voter confidence was also uneven: while two-thirds of Americans were confident ballots were counted appropriately, one-fourth of Americans were not at all confident.³⁰

Voting in the 2020 US election has influenced US civic health, highlighting just how important it can be for overall national health.³⁰ These higher rates of voter registration and turnout were, in part, attributed to increased political engagement and mobilization strategies such as deep canvassing and partisan pressure.³⁰

Mobilizing citizens to vote can be a difficult task. Although voting itself is associated with positive feelings of civic duty, sense of purpose and fulfilling responsibility to society,⁸⁰ democratic theory suggests that humans are not necessarily politically motivated but politically apathetic.⁸² This paradox of human nature and political/democratic disinterest versus civic engagement makes it difficult to motivate individuals to be politically active in a nation where political engagement is essential for civic health.⁸²

Voter mobilization – the act of promoting voter registration, turnout and political engagement used by individuals, groups or organizations –⁸⁰ is recognized as an important strategy to encourage voting, strengthen political activism and enhance overall civic engagement and health. A variety of groups and organizations have developed strategies to mobilize voting efforts of US citizens and reduce voting inequities.

Research suggests an opportunity to mobilize low-income populations due to notably low voter turnout.^{172,173} Most current mobilization strategies and candidate campaigns target middle-class populations, rarely discussing issues that most impact low-income populations.¹⁷³ A potential after-effect is that low-income voters vote 20% less than high-income voters.¹⁷³ Other possible reasons include health challenges,¹⁷² lack of interest or feelings that their voice does not matter.¹⁷³ Despite an apparent inequity, specific mobilization strategies that target low-income individuals or low-turnout populations have not been heavily developed and researched.^{172,173}

However, progress has been made in recent years. For example, in 2020, the Poor People’s Campaign commenced research on voting behaviors and voting potential in low-income groups.¹⁷³ The Poor People’s Campaign’s goal is to increase overall civic engagement of low-income populations, resulting in higher voter turnout.¹⁷³ The organization determined that low-income voters could successfully mobilize if properly engaged by electoral candidates or campaigns or if they believe their voice can make a difference.¹⁷³ In addition, in 2021, McGuire et al. researched low-income, working-class voter turnout and its potential ties to health.¹⁷² This was a relatively small-scale study of two US cities that determined that the health burdens of low-income populations prevent them from voting or being motivated to vote.¹⁷² Both McGuire et al. and the Poor People’s Campaign recommend more research on voting behaviors and voter mobilization strategies of low-income populations.^{172,173}

NONPROFIT INVOLVEMENT

Nonprofits can be involved with voter mobilization and IVE by using their voice.⁸⁰ Techniques nonprofit organizations can use to mobilize voters include election time reminders, personalized messages, outreach to limited English-Proficiency voters, outreach to low-income communities,⁸⁰ and work with clients to offer voting assistance.¹⁷¹

Takeaway. Though it is argued voting is a social norm, complex structural barriers persist that serve to dim voter registration and turnout. Strategies that can be volunteer-driven exist that have been shown to increase registration and turnout, many of which are driven by nonprofits. A lingering question in this space is the outcomes of mobilization strategies in the context of low-income and low turnout populations.

Stats

66.8% of US Citizens voted in the 2020 Election, a record-breaking high up from 53.4% in 2018 and 61.4% in 2016⁸³

↑ **8%** Young voters (18-34) from 2016 presidential election, the largest population voting increase³⁰

62% of Americans believe US government leaders purposely mislead people and only 33% trust them to "do what is right"³⁰

20% less low-income Americans vote than high-income Americans¹⁷³

Resources

- [Civic Health Index 2021: Citizenship During Crisis](#)
- [How to Defeat Trump and Heal America: Deep canvassing and political persuasion in the 2020 presidential election](#)
- [Compendium on Civic Engagement and Population Health](#)
- [How can your 501\(c\)\(3\) organization mobilize voters in 2018?](#)
- [Effective voter mobilization: 5 tips for organizers](#)
- [How to encourage Black and Latino young adults to get politically active?](#)
- [Changing the Conversation: About Deep Canvassing](#)

Notable Organizations

- [People's Action](#)
- [Poor People's Campaign](#)
- [Everyday Democracy](#)
- [Black Futures Lab](#)
- [Voto Latino](#)
- [Vot-ER](#)
- [Civic Nation](#)
- [Campus Vote Project](#)
- [HeadCount.org](#)
- [Andrew Goodman Foundation](#)



O2 Volunteer

Volunteer represents an individual's ability to choose to lend their time and talent to a cause they care about in order to advance the cause or help solve a societal issue without concern for personal gain (monetary or otherwise)

Though volunteering is woven into the fabric of the United States in informal and formal ways, Grimm et al.'s research revealed a decrease in the proportion of US residents volunteering while noting an increase in the number of hours contributed by those who did volunteer,^{87, 88} and Jones (for Gallup) noted a similar decline in Americans volunteering.⁸⁹ Chambre, on the other hand, described that volunteer rates predictably fluctuate based on macro events in the political, social and ecological spheres.⁹⁰ In either case, it appears that while the pandemic may have given rise to more untraditional helping actions, a recent study suggests that it may have diminished formal volunteer rates, where two-in-three volunteers decreased or stopped volunteering due to the pandemic.⁹¹

This, in turn, begs the question *who* is volunteering less? The literature suggests that middle-income Americans were most likely to reduce their volunteering and "lower-income Americans, who are much less likely to volunteer, show only a slight decline" (para. 9).⁸⁹ Here, we note a potential area for research: to explore the implications and document the effect of the changes in the composition of the volunteer force.

Additionally, it has been acknowledged that traditional measures of volunteering likely undercount the phenomenon of mutual aid and informal helping that occurs in historically oppressed communities.^{92,23} Neighbors want to work together and help each other, as exemplified in Halegoua and Johnson's 2021 case study: "Neighbors would like to connect with one another via common obligation, reciprocal assistance or collaboration, communal investment in a project or property values or collective problem-solving that will benefit their neighborhood or domestic space." (p1748).²³ In 2015, AmeriCorps reported that "three in five helped their neighbors with such tasks as watching each other's children, helping with shopping or house sitting" (para. 5)⁹³ and yet as the definition of "helping" evolves, this rate may change.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has cemented this desire to help, where "new forms of generosity we are seeing – organizing, networks, projects, donations, support and outreach – are numerous beyond counting, a superbloom of altruistic engagement," (para.4)⁹⁴ including providing grocery delivery, sewing homemade masks, leading virtual art classes and coordinating low-barrier financial assistance. Also, during this time, our nation's reckoning with racism has given rise to mutual aid networks issuing bail funds and supplies to BLM and other anti-racist activists.⁹⁵

Mutual aid is a form of civic engagement where "people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable" (p6).⁹⁶ Through mutual aid, structurally marginalized communities have "ensured collective survival" through community care and protection "to both spectacular and everyday disasters" (para. 6).⁹⁷

But mutual aid is not just about caring for one another.^{94, 96} Domínguez et al. (2020) cited Gould by stating that mutual aid is characterized by "a desire to overcome structural injustice through social transformation" and action and solidarity, not charity" (p6).⁹⁶ It also has a long history in structurally marginalized communities -- as cited in a PBS article, mutual aid has "always been an aspect of

indigenous community care and relationality...Anybody who was your clan, they were considered your relatives...if they were struggling, if they needed any assistance, it was part of your duty to make sure that they were okay and they were cared for”(para. 32).⁹⁸

Additionally, evidence suggests that mutual aid actions are often spurred in response to emergent disasters and, therefore, can be time-limited.^{95,94} Haleboua and Johnson (2021) questioned the process of how these neighborly networks form, especially when the area has little social cohesion. Others probe how to sustain these mutual aid networks in the face of a persistent and prolonged public health crisis. For example, Fernandes-Jesus et al. (2021) suggested that localized action and resources, trust, community alliances, shared identity and a loose but organized leadership structure were critical to the success of COVID-19 mutual aid groups.⁹⁹ A multi-disciplinary working group is currently investigating how they are implemented, who joins, what organizational alliances exist and how they will be sustained¹⁰⁰

Many mutual aid groups have begun planning for sustainability and building infrastructure due to the coronavirus's persistence.¹⁰¹ Solnit (in Tolentino 2020) offered that while most people tend to return to “normal,” after an emergent situation, effects may be internalized: “If we think of mutual aid as both a series of networks of resource and labor distribution and as an orientation, the former may become less necessary as 'normal' returns, but the latter may last”(para. 32).¹⁰¹ Further, Wuest (2020) argued, “If there is a lesson from mutual aid’s role in these past triumphs [e.g., the Great Depression], it is that such community work was subordinated to the tasks of invigorating trade unions and pushing the state to enact universal programs” (para. 25).¹⁰² Thus, while the short-term benefits of mutual aid are clear, it may be its impact at the systems level that can produce lasting effects.

Takeaway. The decline in volunteering begs the question: *who* is volunteering less? The literature suggests that the working class was most likely to reduce their hours. Additionally, it has been long acknowledged that traditional measures of volunteering likely undercount the phenomenon of mutual aid and informal helping that occurs in historically oppressed communities and the COVID-19 global pandemic and rise against racial injustice have cemented this desire help. Mutual aid is a form of civic engagement where historically oppressed communities have “ensured collective survival,” oftentimes in the face of emergent disasters. Questions have arisen on how to sustain and nourish these networks and mutual aid groups have commenced planning for sustainability and building infrastructure. The importance of mutual aid, often temporally limited, may not come from its civic action, but the shift in civic mindset and its ability to impact systems change.

Stats

58% Americans who volunteered in the past year to religious organizations or other charitable causes, down from 64% in 2017 (Gallup 2020)

Resources

- [Philanthropy's Future in Flux as Volunteering and Giving Rates Waver — Independent Sector](#)
- [Mutual Aid Can't Do It Alone | The Nation](#)
- [A Look at America's Widespread Decline in Volunteering in Cities and States](#)

- [The way we get through this is together!': the rise of mutual aid under coronavirus](#)

Notable Organizations

- [Leadership Learning Community](#)
- [Momentum](#)
- [What we do - The Social Change Agency](#)
- [Building Movement Project](#)
- [Mutual Aid Hub](#)
- [Do Good Institute](#)
- [AmeriCorps](#)



03 Voice

Voice represents an individual's ability to influence their network, interpersonal connections and even people they don't know to raise awareness, promote, protest, advocate or advance a cause or social issue. (Includes social media, advocating against injustice or for social issue online or in person, speak up, petitions, letters, protest, art, join organization)

Voice allows people to express their thoughts and beliefs without fear of discrimination; it is a fundamental human right that, when used, encourages health, wellness and improves quality of life.¹⁸⁰ Voice is used to raise awareness about causes, issues or injustices important to an individual, encouraging others to enact change.¹⁸⁰ Voice is used in social movements, protests, public forums, social media, elections, media, contacting public officials, signing petitions, letters to the editor and having conversations with family and friends.^{176,180}

SOCIAL MEDIA

2020 exhibited a rapid increase in the use and popularity of social media to advocate for social change, with 23% of US social media users saying social media changed their perception of an issue.¹⁸¹ Social issues that gained popularity on social media and transformed people's perceptions are BLM, police brutality, political parties and race issues.¹⁸¹ Despite the increasing use and support of social media activism, there are concerns to address.

Most social media users have not changed their views due to social media and only 9% of adult social media users say they regularly post or share political content or social issues.¹⁸² In 2020, 55% of social media users were feeling "worn out" by political social media posts.¹⁷⁹ These feelings are reported to be caused by the worsening political discourse in the US, with many reporting that political social media discussions are increasingly stressful and frustrating and less informative.¹⁷⁹ Additionally, a study conducted by Pew Research Center showed that social media is effective in raising awareness and building momentum for social movements, but can be a distraction and "lull people into believing they are making a difference when they're not" (para. 1).¹⁷⁸

Relatively costless, online activism that displays a lack of motivation or interest to put in significant effort to create sustainable social change is known as "slacktivism".^{178,183} The increased use of social media, including use by organizations and social groups, has made it easier for people to contribute "token acts" of activism without putting forth much effort.¹⁸³ Thus, slacktivism is rising and communities see more people making these small, token activism efforts without engaging in person to make sustainable, meaningful change.¹⁸³ "Token" support for social causes includes small acts that do not require much effort or behavioral change; these acts may consist of wearing shirts, bracelets or pins for a cause, sharing posts on social media or signing a petition.¹⁸³ "Meaningful" support for social causes require more effort and often a behavioral change, such as volunteering or donating money; these acts are more tangible and sustainable.¹⁸³

Although social media increasingly contributes to token support or slacktivism, it is essential to note that these small acts do positively contribute to a social cause over time.¹⁸³ Slacktivism increases the number of conversations surrounding a cause and make the difference in a small organization, social cause or

movement.¹⁸³ Additionally, the more consistently an individual participates in slacktivism, the more likely they are to contribute meaningful support in the future.¹⁸³

Social media also opens up space for discussion on political or social issues with family and friends.¹² Open discussions about political or social issues in households positively impact family units and youth.¹² Civically engaged parents have kids who are more civically engaged and “children that report having political discussions with their parents also report higher rates of volunteering, news consumption and political activism” (p.16).¹²

Overall, social media provides an easy-accessed platform for users to voice their support for social causes and increase momentum for political or social movements though its drawbacks should be considered.^{12,176-183}

PROTESTS

Between 2017 and 2021, over 13 million Americans attended 27,270 protests across 4,000 cities about racial justice, immigration, gun control, healthcare access, education funding and the environment.¹⁷⁴ Nearly half of Americans believe protesting unjust policies make a good citizen and three-quarters believe having the right to protest peacefully is important.¹⁷⁶ Protests are a way for groups of people, especially marginalized groups, to mobilize and create visibility for a cause to create policy change.¹² Change can happen in two ways: direct, where protests gain policy makers' attention or indirect, where protests gain media or public attention.¹² Protesting is less common than voting and involves more BIPOC voices.¹²

The Black community has consistently participated in peaceful protests since the early 19th century, beginning with the St. Louis Massacre in 1917 and continuing today with BLM.¹² Other communities have less consistent engagement, but current protests include immigration rights and protests against acts of violence against Asian-American Communities.¹²

Protests have both risks and rewards; protests that turn violent can cause physical harm and negative media backlash, whereas protests that remain peaceful can draw enough attention to unjust policies or acts and drive positive change.¹² Protests also have positive mental health benefits resulting from recognition, respect and increasing perceptions of equality.¹²

Protests are effective because they change the mindsets of people both involved and not involved, they garner the attention of media, the public and policymakers about unjust actions or policies and over time, they create sustainable societal change.⁶⁰ Protests also work because “they change the protesters themselves, turning some from casual participants into lifelong activists, which in turn changes society” (para. 14).⁶⁰ Change from protests can be witnessed in changes to policies, public opinions and generational shifts in perspective.⁶⁰

PUBLIC FORUMS

Public forums allow individuals to voice their support for or against policies through petitions, public meetings, contacting public officials or writing letters to the editor.

There is a generational difference in public forum activities: older, more educated adults tend to contact public officials and donate to political campaigns more often than young adults.¹⁷⁶ On the contrary,

young adults tend to attend political rallies and be more active on social media than older adults.¹⁷⁶ Although public forum participation hints at a divide across generational lines, contacting public officials is still considered the most common political act shared between generations and highly effective for creating policy change.¹²

Signing petitions is a direct act of political engagement and can implement change through ballot initiatives and legislation.¹² For-profit organizations can write petitions and set legislative agendas and those who sign petitions are more likely to be higher-income individuals.¹²

Writing letters to the editor as a political act is declining and most often used by older, more white and more male populations.¹² This is primarily because writing letters to the editor is more effective when the letters are well-written and still uphold the reputation of the editor or company.¹²

Takeaway. The literature review uncovered shifting trends in voice: attending public meetings, writing letters to the editor and donating to political campaigns are decreasing in popularity and are typically associated with older, more white generations of people. Attending protests, sharing or posting social or political issues on social media and discussing politics or social issues with friends and family are increasing in popularity and typically associated with younger adult populations. Contacting public officials and signing petitions remain relatively consistent across generations and trends.

Social media can bring attention to social issues and movements but can lead to slacktivism. Some critique slacktivism, saying that showing only “token support” of a social cause by participating in easy, effortless acts of online activism is not sustainable or meaningful. Protests continue to gain popularity and are considered highly effective and meaningful for participants and nonparticipants. Protests allow BIPOC communities to use their voice to create social change and impact policies. In 2020, protests changed many Americans’ minds on the following social issues: BLM, police brutality and political parties. A consideration for research is to investigate the generational shift of voice, social media risks and rewards and how social media impacts societal change combined with protests or other civic activities.

Stats

27,270 protests between 2017 and 2021¹⁷⁴

13.6 million Americans attending protests between 2017 and 2021¹⁷⁴

↑ **29%** Americans reporting supporting BLM in 2021 than in 2016³⁰

76% Americans who thought racism is a “big problem,” versus 26% in 2015¹⁷⁵

34% people posting about political consumerism on social media²⁸

51% Americans discussing politics with others at least a few times a week¹⁷⁶

Resources

- [Healthy People 2030: Social Cohesion](#)
- [Statistics on Protests](#)
- [Perceptions of the Public's Voice in Government and Politics](#)
- [Political Engagement, Knowledge and the Midterms](#)
- [Americans think social media can help build movements, but can also be a distraction](#)
- [55% of U.S. social media users say they are 'worn out' by political posts and discussions](#)

Notable Organizations

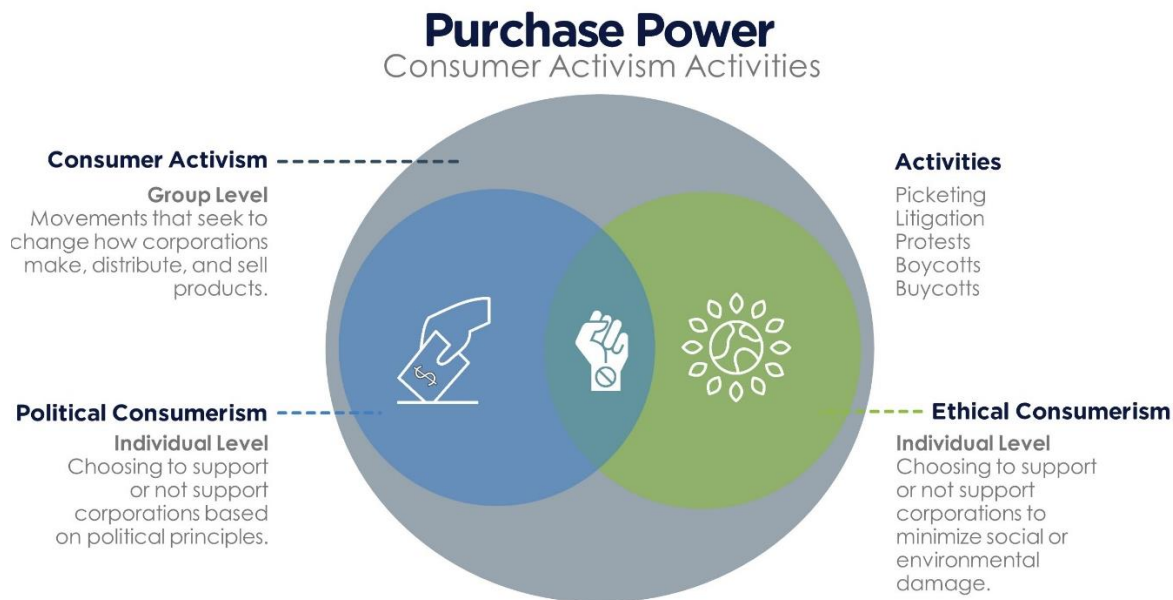
- [Black Lives Matter](#)
- [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#)
- [The Trevor Project](#)
- [The Human Rights Campaign](#)
- [Rhize](#)



04 Purchase Power

Purchase power is an individual's ability to make decisions around spending or consumption of goods or services. These purchasing decisions may reflect their values or advance a social cause or issues. Buyers may deliberately purchase or avoid purchasing a product or service based on a company's policies, social causes, size and scale, environmental footprint and more.

The literature review uncovered three variations of purchase power: consumer activism, political consumerism and ethical consumerism. Consumer activism is the process by which individuals and groups seek to influence the way in which goods or services are produced or delivered. Political and ethical consumerism are more specific types of consumer activism, in which the focus is an individual's choices or activities. Boycotts and buycotts are the most common purchase power activities.



CONSUMER ACTIVISM

Consumer activism encompasses a variety of activities and movements that seek to change the behaviors of corporations and how they make, distribute, advertise and sell products.¹⁰³ These movements include boycotts, pickets and litigation and participation can be on both an individual and a collective (group) level. The theory behind consumer activism is that corporations will change their behaviors to meet the demands of the consumer and to maintain the supply and demand balance.¹⁰³ This supports the idea that the consumer has power over corporations and can manipulate their behaviors to meet the demand within a capitalist society. Targets of consumer activism can be either corporations or the government.

POLITICAL CONSUMERISM

Political consumerism identifies instances when people evaluate and choose producers and products because they want to change ethically, environmentally or politically objectionable institutional or

market practices and is when political decisions infiltrate aspects of daily life typically considered non-political, such as purchasing goods and services.¹⁰⁴ An important distinction of political consumerism is that the target of attention is the corporation, not the government. Individuals participating in political consumerism feel that it is their duty to put political pressure on corporations to make a change.¹⁰⁵ Political consumerism focuses more on the purchasing activities of the individual consumer to affect the behaviors of the corporation.

ETHICAL CONSUMERISM

Ethical consumerism is the decision of an individual to purchase a good or service that is produced by means that minimize social or environmental damage.¹⁰⁶ Ethical consumerism is when an individual consumer's activity is influenced by ethical beliefs. By practicing ethical consumerism, consumers can "vote" to use their dollars at corporations that align with their ethical values and beliefs. This process then allows consumers to exercise their right to positively impact the environment or society, holding corporations accountable for their actions.¹⁰⁶

Boycotting and buycotting are forms of political and ethical consumerism. Boycotting is the act of an individual intentionally avoiding purchasing a product. Buycotting is the act of an individual intentionally purchasing a product. Large-scale boycotts or buycotts have the potential to directly influence corporate or public policy.¹⁰⁷ Boycotting and buycotting are ways to show either avoidance or approach to a corporation in political or ethical solidarity. Boycotting has been used for many corporations, including Nike, Walmart, Driscoll's and Kellogg.¹⁰⁷ Chick-fil-A has been the target of both boycotts and buycotts, demonstrating the polarizing nature of a corporation that takes a clear political stance, especially in a bipartisan democratic society.¹⁰⁷

Some critique ethical consumerism, noting that it is highly difficult to successfully implement change, especially environmental change, through individual acts.¹⁰⁶ Determining which corporations or products are ethical or unethical is challenging due to the complex, capitalist, free-market within which the US operates. Even if there was a way to determine if corporations or products are ethical or not, it would still be extremely difficult for many populations to avoid buying certain products due to availability or financial constraints.¹⁰⁷ This then raises the ethical argument that if an individual in poverty must purchase a less ethical or sustainable product because it costs less, are they an unethical person? Therefore, the concept of ethical consumerism actually raises more questions of equity - if somebody must purchase a less-sustainable item, does the concept of "voting with your dollar" mean they are voting against sustainability? Triller (2021) argued that "if every act of consumption carries moral weight, then one's ability to be good is ultimately constrained by one's wealth. Unless one accepts the premise that the poor can never be good, it's difficult to see how the ethical consumption framework can be universally applied" (para. 15).¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, others critique the notion of purchase power, noting that the framework places the burden of creating political, ethical, societal change and "fixing the problem" on the individual consumer, when corporations and organizations should fix the problems they create. The idea of consumers holding power over sellers to create change implies that the consumer should fix an ethical issue and that sellers can do what they can to make and distribute a product. This creates an ethical slippery slope, where consumers are now held responsible for climate change or political consumerism because they made unethical purchasing "decisions". The shift in responsibility to the consumer hides the fact that corporations should be held responsible for making unethical business decisions.¹⁰⁶

While political and ethical consumerism may have a place in civic engagement activities, they are insufficient for fixing political, ethical and environmental issues perpetuated by corporations. These individual-level acts are important and can make an impact, but in order to sufficiently address our nation's problems, there needs to be more organized, higher-level consumer activism. These acts may include community organizing, large-scale boycotts, rallies, strikes and other political activism movements. To be effective, purchase power activities need to shift from individual acts to organized, community-level movements.¹⁰⁶

The recent Kellogg Strike illustrates the effectiveness of both individual and community-level movements. In October 2021, 1,400 Kellogg union employees went on strike after Kellogg attempted to negotiate employee contracts that followed a tiered pay system and reduced employee benefits.¹⁰⁸ Kellogg then began hiring temporary workers to fill in for the striking employees, while making no progress on the contracts and hiring to permanently replace striking union employees. This permanent replacement of employees is considered an unethical business practice by many, including President Biden since it is the right of those union workers to use their voice to ask for change within their workplace.

In response, social media activists organized to inundate Kellogg's application portal with fake applications, resulting in a website crash and forcing Kellogg to pause hiring. Individuals boycotted Kellogg products, displaying acts of ethical consumerism at the individual level.¹⁰⁶ The impact of these individual and collective activities is to be determined.

Takeaway. The literature review uncovered three variations of purchase power: consumer activism, political consumerism and ethical consumerism. Consumer activism is the process by which individuals and groups seek to influence the way in which goods or services are produced or delivered. Political and ethical consumerism are more specific types of consumer activism, in which the focus is an individual's choices or activities. Boycotts and buycotts are the most common purchase power activities. Some critique the foundations of purchase power. For instance, it is highly difficult to successfully implement change through individual acts and to determine which products and companies are ethical. It also transfers onus from corporations to the individuals to solve social and ecological problems, which can create issues of equity in "who is considered a good consumer" based on income and wealth. Therefore, the argument continues that while political and ethical consumerism may have a place in civic engagement activities, they are insufficient for fixing political, ethical and environmental issues perpetuated by corporations. One recent example of coordinated response to a corporation is when social media activists organized to inundate Kellogg's application portal with fake applications, resulting in a website crash and forcing Kellogg to pause hiring of temporary employees during a strike and individuals also boycotted Kellogg products.

Stats

According to the 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) Time-Series Study, political consumerism is considered a mainstream, not marginalized, political act with which most Americans are familiar.

56% Intentionally bought or avoided buying a product or service for political reasons

46% More likely to engage in political consumerism than belong to organizations

34% Post about political consumerism on social media

Resources

- [The SAGE Encyclopedia of Business Ethics and Society, entry on consumer activism](#)
- [The Limits of Ethical Consumerism: Can we save the world, one bamboo spork at a time?](#)
- [Consumer Activism for Social Change](#)
- [Shopping Has Become a Political Act. Here's How it Happened.](#)
- [Watchdogs and whistleblowers: a reference guide to consumer activism](#)



05 Work

Work represents an individual's ability to make choices about their employment based on the values and purpose of the place they work, how they influence their workplace or own business toward solving social problems or effecting social change. (Type of job, workplace as platform, entrepreneurship in or outside of existing company)

Data suggest that people want to work for companies driven by purpose and accountable to social and environmental justice issues. Most people believe that companies must commit to making a positive impact through a purpose,¹⁰⁹ which impacts both customer and employee satisfaction.¹⁰⁹

Purpose bolsters recruitment and this becomes more pronounced as we move into younger generations. Millennials and Gen-Z are most likely to use purpose as a filter in making decisions about employment.^{111,112} In one study, 40% of Millennials reported taking a job based on environmental practices when compared to alternative offers.¹¹² In addition, the majority of people report they would take a pay cut to land a job at a company with a strong purpose and again, this proportion goes up for younger respondents.^{109,112}

Employee retention is also impacted by purpose. Evidence indicates that employees at purpose-driven companies are more likely to stay; feel motivated and productive; and be loyal.^{109,111,112} And the opposite is also true: when employees feel a company doesn't do enough to contribute to social causes, they tend to look for a job elsewhere.¹⁰⁹ Recent data also suggest that there is a desire for companies to do more to pursue social justice and DEI.¹⁰⁹

Recent publications discuss the importance of corporate social responsibility and corporate social justice and the role of companies in bringing historically oppressed voices to the table to design, implement and monitor programs.^{114,115} Evidence also shows that companies with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs are more profitable than those without.^{110,114}

Takeaway. Data suggest that people want to work for companies driven by purpose and accountable to social and environmental justice issues. In addition, purpose bolsters recruitment (people will even take a pay cut to land a job with a purpose-given company) and employee retention, motivation and loyalty. Recent data also suggest that there is a desire for companies to do more to pursue social justice and DEI, including bringing historically oppressed voices to the table.

Stats

71% Want to buy from socially responsible companies¹¹⁵

64% of Millennials won't take a job if their employer doesn't have a strong CSR policy¹¹¹

70% Are more likely to choose to work at a company with a strong environmental agenda¹¹³

Resources

- [Employee Perspectives on Responsible Leadership During Crisis](#)
- [2020 Global Marketing Trends](#)
- [The Power of Purpose: The Business Case For Purpose \(All The Data You Were Looking For Pt 1\)](#)
- [The Power of Purpose: The Business Case For Purpose \(All The Data You Were Looking For Pt 2\)](#)

Notable Organizations

- [Organizations - Corporate Social Responsibility \(CSR\): A Resource Guide](#)
- [Corporate Social Responsibility Organizations | Center for Leadership and Social Responsibility | University of Washington Tacoma](#)
- [Corporate/CSR | FSG](#)



06 Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship is the ability to identify a need that has not been met by traditional institutions, structures and systems and use an entrepreneurial spirit to bring creative and innovative solutions that drive change (primary goal is not to earn a profit but rather to implement widespread societal improvements)

The literature discusses social or impact enterprises as hybrid organizations that address a social need through goods or services, while also pursuing profit, sometimes known as a “blended value.”^{116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121} Some posit that social enterprises may help to fill the gap left by decreasing government trust and social capital, especially for young people.¹²¹ Structurally, social enterprises use volunteers, grant funding and government subsidies to promote social cohesion and benefit to vulnerable populations.¹¹⁸ They can be structured as nonprofit, for-profit or as benefit or low-profit limited liability corporations (B-Corp and LC3, respectively).¹²² Social enterprises access funding through impact investors, venture philanthropists and community development financial institutions in addition to foundations.^{123, 124, 125} Notably, since impact investing began in 2007, there are now more than 1,300 investment organizations and between \$502 and \$715 billion in assets focused on impact investing.^{125, 126}

The social enterprise landscape in the US is murky: data suggest that the US has the highest rate of social enterprises and that number has grown substantially over the past few decades; however, there is not a clear count of how many exist.^{127, 122} There are approximately 1,300 B-Corps and 2000 LC3s in the US.^{128, 129} In addition, a global survey indicated that about 11% of US respondents are involved in social entrepreneurship activities.¹³⁰ Further, a survey on nonprofit leaders found that nearly 60% have considered launching a social enterprise (Community Action Partnership 2011).

Global research indicates that social enterprises help tackle social problems by focusing on poverty alleviation, providing employment services, supporting social networks, empowering women, improving the built environment and forging institutional change.^{131, 132}

Measuring the impact of social enterprises is challenging, however. The UN (nd) stated that “most social enterprises” are “keen to measure their social impact as reflected in their core mission” so tend to report both financials and “social and environmental indicators”(p29).¹²¹ Others suggest that a ‘mission measurement paradox’ exists for social enterprises, where the clear and efficient measure of financial return may be used (rather than a measure of social impact), which can lead to mission drift.¹³³

Ganz et al. (2018) outlined a critique of social enterprises, stating that these enterprises are grounded in the belief that “markets, not government, produce the best social and economic outcomes.” and, in effect, “turns over major public policy domains to private sector organizations, for-profit or nonprofits, replacing our democratic accountability with market discipline” (p59).¹²³ These authors further contended that there is little data on the efficacy of social enterprises in creating “meaningful social change,” especially when not beholden to the same monitoring and evaluation mechanisms as public sector counterparts (p60).¹²³ The authors maintained that social enterprises do not address power imbalances (only technical issues) and have the consequence of dulling civic action to solve problems in favor of market forces.¹²³

Takeaway. Social or impact enterprises are hybrid organizations that address a social need through goods or services, while also pursuing profit. They can be structured as nonprofit, for-profit or as benefit or low-profit limited liability corporations (B-Corp and LC3, respectively). The social enterprise landscape in the US is murky: data suggest that the US has the highest rate of social enterprises, and that number has grown substantially over the past few decades; however, there is not a clear count of how many exist. Measuring the impact of social enterprises is challenging, however. Some report both social and financial metrics; others focus on financial return. A critique of social enterprises is that they effectively replace the government and public sector role to provide services and public goods with a reliance on the market to achieve social outcomes. Furthermore, social enterprises do not address power imbalances (only technical issues) and have the consequence of dulling civic action to solve problems in favor of market forces.

Stats

11% US respondents in a global survey engaged in some level of social enterprise activities¹³⁰

3,300 US B-Corps and L3C companies, a proxy of social enterprises, as of 2021^{128, 129}

\$1.6 billion Amount of foundation grants provided to social enterprises provided since 2016⁷⁴

\$502-\$715 billion Global impact investing market approximation (2021)^{125, 126}

Resources

- [6 Trends In Social Enterprise And Impact Investing In 2020](#)
- [SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP](#)
- [For Social Business to Become the Norm, We Need to Build a Social Business Infrastructure.](#)
- [The Dual-Purpose Playbook](#)

Notable Organizations

- [Social Enterprise Alliance](#)



07 Donate

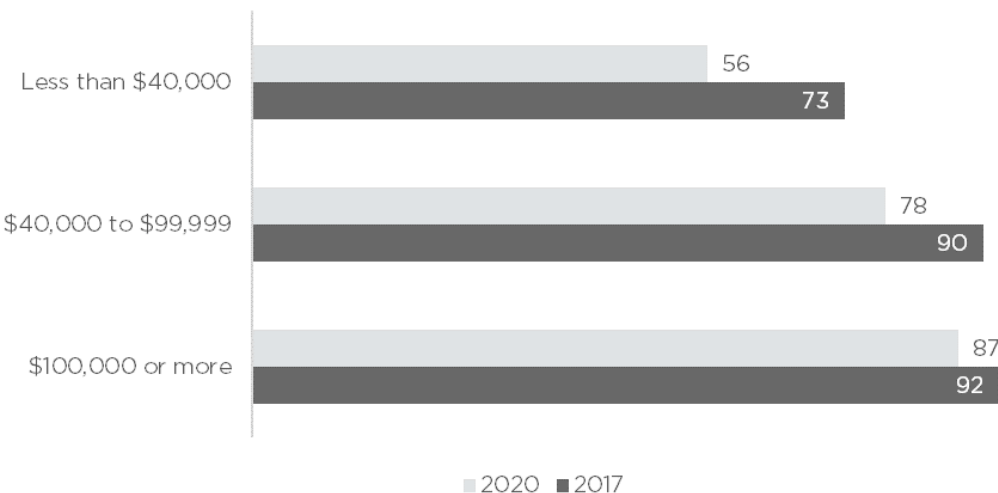
Donate represents an individual's ability to give their personal resources to support the welfare of others or to advance a social cause

The nonprofit sector depends on donations from individuals. This is especially true for nonprofits with less than \$500,000 in expenses -- about 30% of their revenue comes from this pool.³⁸ And while trends in nonprofit giving were stable or increasing through 2019, 2020 changed that: reports from both individuals and nonprofit representatives cite a decrease in giving. Though nearly ¾ of Americans donated money in the past year, this represents a historical low and the drop in giving is more acute in lower and middle income households.⁸⁹ Moreover, as the share of households contributing has contracted yet the aggregate value of donations has increased, a reliance on wealthier donors may result.³⁸ A recent study found that "affluent donors gave an average of \$43,195 to charity during 2020 — 48% more than the average \$29,269 in 2017" (para. 4).¹⁸⁴ According to Candid (2021) these shifts in giving by the "ultra-wealthy" may have negative equity implications: "Rich people give to causes that rich people want to give to. You have a very different supply of goods and services from the charitable community when the rich people give versus when the middle class or lower class gives" (para. 6).¹⁸⁵

The decline in giving by middle income households may stem from changes in giving for secular causes, declines in religious giving, changes in tax codes,³⁸ and diminished social trust.¹⁸⁵ In 2020 individual giving accounted for 69% of total giving, which equates to \$324.1 billion and represents an increase of about 2% over 2019.^{184,197} Though these are pre-pandemic figures, they reinforce the decline in giving at the household level: the average amount donated by households fell from \$1,790 in 2000 to \$1,280 in 2018.¹⁸⁵ Giving rates and amounts also fell for all racial groups with the greatest decline occurring in Latinx households.¹⁸⁵

2020 experienced a record low in individuals giving to charity with 73% giving down from 83% in 2017.⁸⁹

The decline is most acute for those earning less than \$40,000 annually.



Another angle to view donation is in the collective giving movement, moving donating from an individual to a collective action. One example is giving circles. There are about 2,000 in the US that reportedly gave \$1 billion since inception.^{134, 135} Viewed as a way to democratize philanthropy and promote social justice, the collective giving, our search revealed examples of giving circles focus on racial equity, such as [here](#) and [here](#), with notable work being done by Philanthropy Today through a \$1 million grant from the “W.K. Kellogg Foundation to further racial equity and social justice initiatives across philanthropy through the power of giving circles over the next two years”(para. 1)¹³⁶ that includes micro-grants, training, a connection platform and communities of practice. The organization also has done research that discovered that, in the context of giving circles, social justice is not well defined nor are the resources necessary by on-the-ground groups to be effective; it also set its sightlines on further research to determine the types of support that would be most helpful to support social justice in communities.¹³⁶

Takeaway. The nonprofit sector depends on donations from individuals, especially smaller nonprofits. Though nearly ¾ of Americans donated money in the past year, this represents a historical low and the drop in giving is more acute in lower- and middle-income households. Moreover, as the share of households contributing has contracted yet the aggregate value of donations has increased, reliance on wealthier donors may result. Grassroots forms of donating, such as through giving circles, moves the individual act of donate to the collective realm.

Stats

\$324 billion Individual giving to charity in 2020^{184,197}

\$1,280 Average amount donated by households in 2018 (most recent available)¹⁸⁵

Resources

- [Giving USA 2021: In a year of unprecedented events and challenges, charitable giving reached a record \\$471.44 billion in 2020](#)
- [Nonprofit Trends and Impacts 2021. National Findings on Diversity and Representation, Donation Trends from 2015-2020 and Effects of 2020](#)
- [Charitable Giving Statistics](#)
- [Percentage of Americans Donating to Charity at New Low](#)

Notable Organizations

These organizations encourage collective giving with an eye for social justice.

- [Community-Centric Fundraising](#)
- [Community Shares USA](#)
- [Philanthropy Together](#)
- [Giving Circles Collection](#)
- [Amplifier Giving](#)



08 Listen and Learn

Listening and learning will help you truly understand root causes of issues you care about, take in multiple viewpoints and learn what's already being done before you take action.

To better understand the act of listening and learning, we reviewed literature relating to two traditional measures of listening and learning, news consumption and civic education. We also explored the more recent and contemporary measure of equity education, which stems from the need for more privileged groups (e.g., white, cisgender, able-bodied, male) to heed input from systemically marginalized groups and apply the information learned to implement informed action.

NEWS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCOCC) discussed the changing shape of news and media and its influence on civic engagement at length in the Civic Health Index 2021. The authors explain the concept of “information hygiene,” the process by which people take time to evaluate information that is consumed and shared and denote that less than 22% of respondents report solidly hygienic practices.³⁰

As outlined by NCOCC, newspapers -- and their readership -- are on the decline, so much that about two-thirds of US “counties no longer have a daily local newspaper” (p23).³⁰ Newspapers, historically, helped people to sift through misinformation.¹³⁸ Their decline requires people to depend on new media forms.³⁰ ¹³⁸With algorithms and bots formed based on user activities and the human “tendency for like-minded people to connect with one another,” online news consumption is often riddled with confirmation bias in an echo chamber of support.¹³⁹ And, along with biased news consumption, most people (70%) tend to overestimate their ability to identify misinformation.¹⁴⁰

To illustrate the consequences of misinformation, NCOCC cited a study that showed “one in six Americans has stopped paying attention to the news altogether due to misinformation, especially among younger respondents” (p26).³⁰ Further, trust in media is at the lowest point at any other time, except for 2016 (Brenan 2021).¹⁴¹ Other ramifications of misinformation include people having less knowledge about local political events, feeling less effective in influencing policies and having less trust in the government; increased political polarization; and potential impacts on voting choices.^{30, 142, 143}

Stats

70% of Americans feel that fake news has impacted their level of confidence in the government¹⁴³

63% of the public currently registers “not very much” trust or “none at all” in newspapers, television and radio news reporting¹⁴¹

CIVIC EDUCATION

As discussed earlier, “one’s capacity for civic empowerment is greater if one knows about both political structures and institutions as well as about contemporary politics than if one does not know of these

things” (p322).⁸ “Studies have suggested that exposure to democratic practices in schools is associated with a greater commitment to democratic principles and stronger civic knowledge and skills”(p103).¹⁴⁴ Schools and organizations, then, have a formative role in developing civic knowledge and identity through civics education. (These future-focused benefits are in addition to the personal cognitive and SEL benefits of civic participation.³)

However, there has been continual disinvestment in civic education on a national level to where spending represents “1/1000 of that spent on STEM” (para. 2).¹⁴⁵ Real-world examples of this deemphasis include social studies being omitted from the Common Core Curriculum¹⁴⁶ and a highly inconsistent landscape of civic education.¹⁴⁷ Specifically:

- Only nine states and DC require one year of US government or civics; 31 states require a half year; 10 states have no requirement
- No states have “experiential learning or local problem-solving components in their civics requirements”
- Few states require community service credits; about half allow it

The accumulation of this “relative neglect of civic education in the past half-century,” the authors of *Educating for American Democracy* purported “is one important cause of our civic and political dysfunction” (p9).¹⁴⁸

The availability of civic development opportunities that do exist is not equally dispersed. Students from “concentrated areas of poverty” are less likely to have exposure to service activities, civic education and AP courses.^{8,30} Summarized by Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020), “In high-poverty urban environments, unemployment rates are high, educational attainment is low and access to civically engaged adult role models is more limited: These factors are barriers to youth civic engagement”(p19).³ In addition, Atwell et al (2020) underscored recent efforts to “ban the teaching of certain topics and ideas, impeding students’ ability to receive a full and accurate history of the United States” and suggest that “if the nation is to confront its long history of systemic racism...it is important that students have access to instruction that includes these topics” (p27).³⁰ Given that students of color are often largely disenfranchised by traditional forms of civic engagement, Mirra and Garcia (2017) argued that educators should offer a new definition of civic engagement that “inspires hope and action” and “refuse to force youth to conform to dominant systems of civic participation and instead create space for interrogation and innovation” (p144).⁷

In 2021, 24 state legislators debated 88 bills on topics ranging from civic education mandates to incentives for civic activities.¹⁴⁹ A bipartisan bill was also introduced to the Senate, H.R.1814 - Civics Secures Democracy Act of 2021, that would provide \$1 billion in funding for civics education at every level -- this bill, however, has its fair share of critics.¹⁴⁶ Some specific strategies used to incorporate civic education include requiring high school students to pass a US citizenship exam, adopting civics requirements for graduation, required community service, professional development for teachers and increasing the number of AP US government classes.^{147,150} However, these are not uniform in delivery and not without criticism (e.g., a mandatory exam is one more barrier to graduation).

While there may be agreement that civic education is important, there is debate about how it can be implemented for fear of swinging too far toward one political ideology (see Packer 2021’s recap of the US Department of Education’s proposed rule). As Hess and Rice (2021) offered, “there is widespread

agreement on many—but not all—of the goals of civics education but little agreement on how to get there” (para. 29).¹⁵¹

Takeaway. We framed listening and learning using three key civic actions: news and media consumption, civic education and equity education. Misinformation takes center in the discussion on news and media consumption. Declining newspaper readership and availability leads to more self-selection of unvetted news sources, the selection of which is tainted with confirmation bias and published in confirming communities. Civic education, though essential to propagate secure civic mindset and build civic skills, has been disinvested in for decades. Furthermore, its prevalence is unevenly dispersed according to race and class lines. And though there has been recent movement to rededicate resources to civic education as a way to redress the decline in civic health, the methods to do so are hotly debated for fear of swinging too far toward one political ideology. Equity education is a recent phenomenon where people are committing to take steps to address racial inequities. However, if, people are not taking civic action based on learning, “they’re upholding the status quo, despite being steeped in antiracist literature” (stated by Chudy).¹⁵⁴ Whereas slews of lists curated for white people to take anti-racist actions are available, data on the actions white people take as a result are limited.

Stats

57% Respondents reporting that K-12 Civics Education would have the most positive and meaningful impact on strengthening the American identity¹⁹⁸

23% Parents reporting their students had service-learning opportunities at their school³⁰

Resources

- [The Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy](#)
- [Educating for American Democracy](#)
- [The need for civic education in 21st-century schools](#)
- [What the Research Says: History and Civics Education](#)
- [Civic Education In the Era of Truth Decay](#)
- [Where Left and Right Agree on Civics Education and Where They Don't](#)

Notable Organizations

- [Educating for American Democracy](#)
- [Civic Nation](#)
- [Campus Vote Project](#)
- [HeadCount.org](#)

EQUITY EDUCATION

Approximately one-third of Americans, 2020 polling data indicated, who are white are least likely to take action to understand racism than all other racial groups and are even less likely to actively engage in a demonstration against racism (7%).¹⁵² White Americans are also least likely to agree that “racism is built into the American economy, government and education systems” (para. 12).¹⁵² In contrast, 64% of Black adults report paying a lot of attention to issues of race and 59% reporting paying more attention than before.¹⁵³ Black Americans also more frequently report educating themselves about racial inequality and supporting minority businesses.¹⁵³

These results illustrate a gap in perception of the need and the subsequent willingness to take steps to address racial inequities. In addition, there is a fairly even divide on whether people believe that this increased focus on racial equity will lead to policy change, which may impede sustained involvement and reduce motivation. As discussed earlier, motivation is based on the hope that change is possible.

While anti-racist book clubs cropped up all over the country in the wake of George Floyd’s murder as a method for people to listen and learn together, Cineas (2021) discussed how few of these book clubs are still intact and active even just a year later.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, while educating oneself on racism is an important first step, change requires that education converts to action. Author, historian and antiracist scholar, Dr. Kendi, issued a call to action, stating that “awareness itself doesn’t necessarily lead to structural transformation” (para. 45) and recommending that book clubs commit to applying learnings and taking action.¹⁵⁴ If, in other words, people are not taking civic action based on learning, “they’re upholding the status quo, despite being steeped in antiracist literature” (stated by Chudy).¹⁵⁴ Whereas slews of lists curated for white people to take anti-racist actions are available, ([105 Things White People Can Do for Racial Justice](#); [Dear White People: Here Are 10 Actions You Can Take To Promote Racial Justice In The Workplace](#)), data on the actions white people take as a result are limited.



09 Service

Service represents an individual's commitment of time, energy and talent to a public service intended to serve all members of a community and contribute to the public good, such as national service, military service or public service.

While public service manifests in many ways, this section first focuses on the recent sea change in the composition of people running for public office, barriers to public service and organizations that support running for office. It then turns to national service as a vehicle to reduce inequities.

Recent analysis of election data underscored the incumbency advantage, where those who are already elected will most likely be re-elected and a lack of representation along party lines, resulting in women holding only about a third of offices and people of color only 13 percent of offices.¹⁵⁵ Currently, no Black women currently hold US senate seats nor has a Black woman ever been governor.¹⁵⁶ However, data showed “candidates who are women and people of color perform as well or better than their white male counterparts” in both general and primary elections (p2),¹⁵⁷ and this plays out in the “frequency with which they run compared to men and their representation in Congress...there is no disadvantage when they run” (as cited by Lawless, para.7).¹⁵⁸ “In short: White men don't win elections more often than other candidates — there's just more of them already in office and running” (para. 5).¹⁵⁵

The number of women, women of color and Millennials who ran for office increased considerably in the 2020 election cycle. For example, in 2020, there were 538 women candidates for the House (up by 22.5% from 2018), including at least 248 women of color or the greatest number to-date.¹⁵⁹ An increase of 266% was found for the 259 Millennials running for congressional seats in 2020.¹⁶⁰ Even just being on the ballot signals progress.

However, structural and systemic impediments, such as deficits in capital and networks and persistent biases, can lead to the decision to not run at all. As Garcia (2021) opined: “It's become a truism in electoral politics: Candidates of color from marginalized or underserved communities face higher barriers of entry when deciding to run for office” (para.2).¹⁶¹ Organizations exist to provide services to reduce these barriers, including training and funding candidates from historically oppressed communities. A few examples include:

- Emily's list has helped to elect more than 1,000 women to office, 40% of whom have been women of color^{158,162}
- In 2020, 698 Emerge alums ran for office; 413 were elected¹⁶³
- The Collective PAC has contributed to the winning runs of 300 Black candidates¹⁶⁴
- Running Start reported that 90% of their alumni win elections¹⁶⁵

Takeaway. While public service manifests in many ways, we focused on the changing composition of people running for public office, barriers to public service and organizations that support running for office and national service as a vehicle to reduce inequities.

Data underscore the homogeneity of public office even though women and people of color perform better in their runs for office than their counterparts. As Srikanth (2021) stated, “In short: White men don't win elections more often than other candidates — there's just more of them already in office and running.” That said, the number of women, women of color and Millennials who ran for office increased considerably in the 2020 election cycle and even just being on the ballot signals progress. However, however, structural and systemic impediments, such as deficits in capital and networks and persistent biases, can lead to the decision to not run at all. Organizations exist to provide services to reduce these barriers, including training and funding candidates from historically oppressed communities.

The positive impact of AmeriCorps on members and communities is well documented. However, structural determinants prevent equitable access to engage in AmeriCorps, such as a lack of housing and criminal background check requirements. Policy recommendations to AmeriCorps largely center on providing access to the well-documented benefits of national service to those individuals and communities that have historically been excluded from them. Notably, the American Rescue plan mandated a living allowance increase for AmeriCorps State, National and VISTA members, the use of culturally responsive strategies in service provision and taking into account diversity of communities and participants in order to foster more equitable participation and service delivery. In 2021, the Office of Management and Budget also recognized AmeriCorps for its efforts to use data to drive equitable recovery.

Stats

31% Of officeholders are women compared to 51% of the US population who are women¹⁵⁷

13% Of officeholders are people of color compared to 40% of the US population who are people of color¹⁵⁷

Resources

- [What the 2020 Primary Elections reveal about our democracy](#)
- [Past Candidate and Election Information | CAWP](#)
- [Women Officeholders by Race and Ethnicity](#)
- [Reach Higher: Black Women in American Politics 2021](#)
- [5 Reasons Nonprofit Leaders Should Run for Office](#)
- [Black Americans have made gains in US political leadership, but gaps remain | Pew Research Center](#)

Notable Organizations

- [New Power: A project of New Politics](#)
- [Emerge America](#)
- [Running Start](#)
- [Higher Heights Leadership Fund](#)
- [6 Political Candidate Organizations Helping Women Run for Office](#)
- [13 Initiatives Helping Young Progressives Run for Office—From School Board to Congress -](#)

AmeriCorps reports that 270,000 individuals take part in national service each year (2021) and various studies have documented the positive effects of this service on communities and national service members.¹⁶⁶ However, structural determinants prevent equitable access to engage in AmeriCorps, including a low living stipend, lack of housing and criminal background check requirements.¹⁶⁶ Policy recommendations to AmeriCorps largely center on providing access to the well-documented benefits of national service to those individuals and communities that have historically been excluded from them. Among the many offered, some suggestions include targeting AmeriCorps programs to “urgent community needs,” especially in the wake of COVID-19, shaping recruitment and retention practices to achieve diversity and equity goals; increasing awareness and reducing financial barriers through an increased stipend, ceased of taxation of the education award, instituted Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) for all AmeriCorps members.^{166, 167, 168} Notably, the American Rescue plan mandated a living allowance increase for AmeriCorps State, National and VISTA members, the use of culturally responsive strategies in service provision and taking into account diversity of communities and participants in order to foster more equitable participation and service delivery.¹⁶⁹ In 2021, the Office of Management and Budget also recognized AmeriCorps for its efforts to use data to drive equitable recovery.¹⁷⁰

Resources

- [ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH NATIONAL SERVICE](#)
- [Diversify and Grow AmeriCorps for an Equitable COVID-19 Recovery](#)

CONSIDERATIONS

Our process attempted to produce a credible review of the literature on civic engagement and the Civic Circle framework. For the long-standing civic actions of voting and volunteering, we narrowed the review with intention to address the charter within a reasonable scope. We also focused our search on civic engagement as it occurs in and affects systemically marginalized communities. From the body of evidence we uncovered, we have arrived at the following potential lines of inquiry to consider:

Conduct confirmatory research on who is volunteering less

A Gallup poll showed that the steepest decline in volunteering was in middle-income volunteers (the decline for low-income volunteers was not as steep, though the rate of low-income volunteers makes up the smallest proportion of the total). How does this play out along racial lines? And what are the implications of these changes in the volunteer base on services provided and decision-making? Are people volunteering less because they are participating in other civic activities? If this is the case, what are they doing instead and why?

Explore new (non-normative) forms of civic action to identify its many shapes and document prevalence

What does it mean to be a fully participatory citizen who shows up with our whole civic self? As stated throughout the review, traditional measures of civic engagement may miss those actions taken by historically oppressed groups and young people. Examples mentioned were socializing in gaming, forums and affinity spaces online and producing and publishing digital arts. Additionally, social movements are composed of actions outside of the periphery of traditional, including vigils, prayer breakfasts, town halls and even bringing lawsuits to court. Taken one step further is the study of how civic and political expression and collective action on social media or in online spaces translates into real-world ramifications (e.g., Trump's campaign rally in Tulsa, OK; citizen journalism via social media; online forums solving crimes; inmates on social media humanizing the experience).

Investigate the implications of never connecting civically to organizations

If historically marginalized communities largely practice neighboring and mutual aid as an act of "collective survival" outside of traditional organizations, what are the implications for the ability of these communities to influence projects, programs and policies (which is the ultimate aim of civic engagement)? On the flip side, what are the implications for nonprofits never connecting to these mutual aid groups and the ability of the nonprofit to carry out its mission and inclusively engage?

Examine how nonprofits contribute to a more civically engaged society (and not those with a mission crafted for this purpose)

How do organizations on-ramp their own target populations, often historically oppressed, into civic and political engagement (outside of traditional volunteering and donating)? What do nonprofits see as their role in this effort and what is their capacity, motivation and knowledge? For those that embed civic engagement into their offerings, what is the prevalence and how effective are they in doing so? Further, can the case be made to show nonprofits that civic engagement (beyond donation and volunteering) is important to the health and vitality of nonprofits?

Study mutual aid during the pandemic

How many people were involved? Are they still involved? Do they identify it as mutual aid, community care, volunteering or something else? What is the difference in these views demographically? This line of inquiry would need to differentiate from Soden's taskforce.

Assess the conversion rate of listening and learning

As a relatively new phenomenon, there seems to be little data on people's actions after participating in antiracist listening and learning. However, the importance of this conversion was underscored by various authors to move from performative to authentic. In addition, it may be worth exploring how commitment of listening and learning may wane as we move farther from a significant, mobilizing event and how to encourage continued commitment (and conversion).

Look into the relationship among Civic Circle elements

We know that the Circle Elements are not mutually exclusive. Certain elements bridge seamlessly to one other as part of a larger, collective action and in some cases, exposure to one element initiates civic action in another. Instances of this "interplay" among Civic Circle elements the data bore out include:

- Volunteering and donating¹⁸⁸
- Civic engagement and news intake¹⁸⁹
- Volunteering as a young person and future voting¹⁹⁰
- Discussing politics at home and later political and civic activity¹²
- Voice on social media and volunteering, recruiting others to political activity and donating¹⁹¹
- Protests influence on people's voting choices, people's decision to run for office and decision to vote at all^{186, 187, 192}

However, the correlation between volunteering and voting is not as clear. As a UK-based research institute wrote:

This is because the drivers of many forms of political and civic activity are, for the most part, very similar: people who possess the resources that makes such activity easier (such as skills, knowledge, money or time), who exhibit values emphasising the importance of being politically and civically active and who have developed an interest in political and neighbourhood affairs are the most likely to be active in our communities (para. 2).¹⁹³

The examination of the ties amongst Civic Circle elements came at the tail end of our review. It may be worthwhile to explore the relationship further -- with a well-defined lens that includes new/non-normative types of action -- to tease out associations before commencing new exploratory research.

One area that specifically springs to mind is the literature on mutual aid and protests suggesting that these activities make for lifelong, committed activists. Considering these activities historically occur in systemically marginalized communities, future research may explore how this plays out temporally. Another is how social media and other forms of voice are related, especially considering that social media usage is increasing while

letters to the editor, public meetings and donations to political campaigns are decreasing.^{12,174-183}

We look forward to collaborating with Points of Light and others to explore these ideas, discuss others' impressions and interpretations and use data to shape a research agenda that promotes equity and justice through civic engagement.

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