



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BRIEF**

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WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes... A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such as an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues. To make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate.”

Political thinkers since the times of ancient Greece have commented on the importance of civic virtue in healthy democracies and thriving communities. When citizens are engaged, they can exchange ideas, invest in finding solutions, and employ civilized discourse to address the issues facing their communities.

FACTS TO KNOW

- Civic engagement can take a variety of forms, from keeping up with local news or voting in municipal elections to volunteering through a local charity or place of worship.
- Americans' community engagement has been in decline for at least three decades. Most studies documenting this decline point to failing rates of volunteerism, lack of engagement with community organizations, and erosion of trust in public institutions.
- The UN estimates that there are about 1 billion regular volunteers around the world, the equivalent of 109 million full-time workers. Women (57%) are more likely to volunteer than men (43%). Less than 1/3 of volunteers are formal members of the groups or associations they volunteer with; informal engagement is much more common.
- Only 55% of the voting-age American population voted in the 2016 elections. This means that 92 million Americans did not vote. The 2020 presidential election saw the highest turnout in decades, but a Pew Survey ranked the U.S. 30th out of 35 developed countries in voter participation.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

- Civics education involves knowledge of the parts of the government and how they work, as well as understanding the value of community and political engagement. In a 2019 survey, only 39% of Americans could name all three branches of government. Increasing this number will be difficult without stressing the value of regular political participation.
- Obstacles to civic engagement include lack of civility, lack of attention to public affairs, lack of role models, and lack of civic and political awareness. Perceptions of politics in general as inherently combative or unreasonable can deter people from becoming more involved in their communities. Declining trust in news media can leave people unsure of where to go for information about their community.
- Requiring high school students to pass a version of the U.S. citizenship test given to immigrants in order to graduate is one policy that has gained momentum at the state and local levels. However, this may create a barrier to high school graduation, and does not necessarily address students' comprehension of the material. Do you know what civics education curriculum standards your state and school district set?

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Public Awareness Campaigns: Public Awareness Campaigns can increase public knowledge of government and civic engagement opportunities. Civic education does not have to end with high school civics. Nonprofit groups and community organizations can increase public knowledge of how the government works and demonstrate the value of political engagement to people of all ages and walks of life in your community.

Ensuring Access to Local News Media: The decline of printed media relative to online news and social media has harmed the financial prospects of local newspapers in many communities across America. Ensuring the viability of local news outlets and keeping up with local news is an important aspect of community engagement.

Encourage People to Start Small- Community engagement can involve many different forms and levels of participation. Citizens' academies, courses and programs that teach people how their local government works can be a good place to start.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

DOES YOUR COMMUNITY KNOW YOU? Consider how well you know your community, and how well they know you. To begin getting involved, the trick is to start local. Issues and stories are local-- the best place is right on your own block. Do your neighbors know your name? Do the owners of neighborhood shops and restaurants know you? Do religious leaders, of your denomination or not, know you?

DO YOU KNOW YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT? Whether you are interested in being a national leader or getting involved in your state, leadership starts locally and radiates out. To expand your network and understand local challenges and what is happening in your community, you need to know your local government and how your city works. Have you met the teams that run your town, such as police/fire, economic development, parks and recreation, energy, and communications?

HAVE YOU DEVELOPED YOUR FINANCIAL ACUMEN? Have you developed your financial acumen? Interacting with the people who lead your community and local city agencies is key to being further involved and becoming a leader. A large component of this is knowing how to responsibly manage the finances that keep your community running smoothly. Do you know the budgets of your town, library, school, or certain enacted policies?

HAVE YOU BUILT YOUR NETWORK? Have you built your network? Civic leaders are not lone riders; they have broad networks of people with various expertise, focuses and backgrounds. This involves knowing how to play a leadership role in your community and community associations, knowing where to start, and how to prioritize. Are you a local or national leader in your Chamber of Commerce, industry or association? Do you know your local business owners or nonprofit leaders? Are you active in local clubs?

The Policy Circle is a national 501(c)(3) organization that informs, equips, and connects women to be more impactful citizens.