



CIVIC DESERTS:

America's Civic Health
Challenge

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction.....	7
Civics & American History Education in the United States.....	9
Connection to Religion.....	11
The Changing Landscape of News Consumption & Confidence.....	12
Trust and Confidence in Government.....	15
Participation in Civic Engagement Activities & Groups.....	16
Political Participation & Engagement.....	18
The Role of the Internet in Civic Life.....	21
Americans Trust in One Another.....	22
The Rise in American Isolation.....	24
Paths Forward to a Civic Renewal.....	27
Conclusion.....	28
Acknowledgements.....	29
Endnotes.....	30
Bibliography.....	31

CIVIC DESERTS

America's Civic Health Challenge

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2000, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* sounded an alarm about the decline in civic life within a generation and issued a challenge for renewal of American community. In response to these concerns and to build from significant momentum after 9/11 to renew America's civic traditions, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) assembled a broad coalition of thought leaders to develop America's Civic Health Index™. Over the past 11 years, NCoC has since reported to the nation on progress and challenge in renewing civic health. Civic health indicators have included: connecting to civic and religious groups; trusting other people; connecting to others through family and friends; giving and volunteering; staying informed; understanding civics and politics; participating in politics; trusting and feeling connected to major institutions; and expressing political views. In turn, these efforts have spawned over 80 local, state, and national civic health reports and initiatives to boost levels of civic engagement and participation.

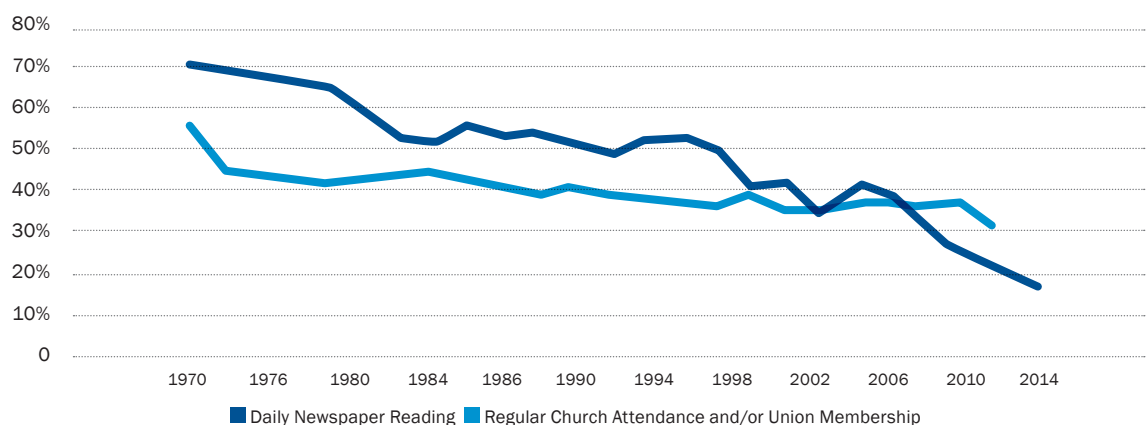
"Civic Deserts" — communities without opportunities for civic engagement — are increasingly common in the United States. The continued decline in a wide range of important indicators of civic health and connectivity threatens our prosperity, safety, and democracy.

Based on data from the Understanding America Study, which is maintained by the Center for Economic and Social Research at the University of Southern California (USC), we report here for the first time that just 28 percent of Americans say that they belong to any group that has leaders whom they consider both accountable and inclusive. This percentage does not vary dramatically among demographic groups, although Latino citizens, people without college backgrounds, and people under 30 lag behind the national average on this measure by 6 to 7 percentage points. This lack of group membership continues a trend previously seen.

From 1974 to 2004, membership in at least one community organization or group had decreased by more than 13 percentage points. Although the General Social Survey did not ask the same questions after 2004, there is evidence that at least some forms of engagement have continued to decline since then (even as others may have stabilized or improved).

In particular, four large-scale, integrating civic institutions built up during the 1900s have shrunk significantly since the turn of the century: churches and other religious congregations, unions, metropolitan daily newspapers, and political parties as vehicles for grassroots participation that are sustained beyond specific campaigns. In 1970, a majority (54 percent) of all Americans either attended church regularly or belonged to a union, or both. By 2012, this proportion had fallen to 34.2 percent. The proportion who read a daily newspaper fell by almost 50 percentage points in the same time.¹ By that time, political parties had become less dependent on volunteers and local party organizations and evolved into labels for candidates who ran their own campaigns.²

Chart 1. Decline of the 21st Century Civil Society



To be sure, other forms of engagement have burgeoned since then, some of which serve beneficial purposes. But churches, unions, parties, and newspapers have historically had six features that have proven hard to replicate:

- They reach large numbers of Americans and sustain themselves over many years;
- They allow people to hear from others with diverse viewpoints;
- They magnify individuals' power and voice;
- They are autonomous but connect to government and other formal institutions;
- They offer reasons other than civic engagement to draw people in, but then they encourage civic engagement by their members;
- They offer paths to leadership for some of their most active participants.

Accompanying these declines in civic engagement is evidence of greater social isolation. Americans are now much more likely to live alone than they were before, as the rate of one-person households has risen by more than 114 percent since 1960 and today more than 35 million Americans live alone.³ Meanwhile, citizens spend less social time with their neighbors, and employees are more likely to work remotely than ever before, making them less likely to interact with coworkers on a day-to-day basis.⁴ Recent data have also indicated that people are slightly less likely to have friends or relatives they can count on in times of need.⁵ These trends have left many to worry that Americans are increasingly socially isolated and lonely.

Growing isolation threatens to create social and civic dead zones throughout the country. The title of this report, “civic deserts,” describes places without adequate opportunities for civic engagement—places for discussing issues, addressing problems together, and forming relationships of mutual support. Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Felicia Sullivan coined this phrase with an analogy to “food deserts,” places where nutritious food is not available. They estimated that 60 percent of rural young Americans – as well as nearly a third of urban and suburban young Americans – perceived their own communities to be civic deserts.⁶

As civic and socio-economic opportunities decline, bitter partisanship and polarization have also infected the nation's public debate. Increasingly, partisans on either side of the aisle view their counterparts with animosity and move to the polar extremes in an effort to avoid primary opponents. Data show that Republicans and Democrats are seeking news sources and neighbors that share their beliefs, rather than embracing the unique differences upon which America was built. The most recent election also brought disturbing developments that undermine the very institutions of American democracy – with a rise in “fake news,” distrust of the media, attacks on judges and the independent judiciary, and efforts to undermine the rule of law. The proposal for a “Muslim Ban” has generated controversy over constitutional questions of equal protection, due process and the First Amendment. One silver lining to all of this upheaval is that Americans are learning more about their Constitution, the limits of government power, and the rights of individuals.

This fragmentation can be seen in disheartening recent events across the nation. Historically low levels of social and institutional trust, a lack of shared understanding of basic facts and values, and increased partisanship all contribute to the fraying of American communities. Racial tensions are reaching a peak in the post-Jim Crow era, made clear by recent events in Charlottesville involving White Nationalist Hate groups. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups in the United States has more than doubled since 1999.⁷

Other trends captured in this report include:

- Both American history education and civics education have been largely stagnant in participation and achievement since the 1990s;
- The percent of Americans who read a newspaper every day has declined in tandem with dwindling rates of trust in all forms of news media;
- Confidence in all branches of government continued to decline, as turnout in both presidential and congressional elections dropped in 2016 and 2014, respectively;
- The percent of Americans who spend time online and use social media platforms continued to rise, raising the possibility of the potential of new technologies to bolster civic engagement in new ways; and
- Volunteering in the United States has fallen significantly from nearly 30 percent of the population in 2005 to less than 25 percent in 2015.

These trends paint a mostly bleak picture of America's civic health. In this report, we will share the data and trends that show that America is becoming rife with civic deserts: places where people report no actual civic engagement themselves and no opportunities to engage if they wanted to do so.

Yet, there are still reasons to be hopeful about the possibility of a civic revival. As the Internet and social media become more prevalent, there are a growing number of tools that can be used to combat isolation and increase engagement, among individuals, within communities, and for the nation at large. While volunteering rates have decreased since 2005, Americans are still volunteering more often today than they were in the 1980s and are more likely to help a stranger today than they were a few years ago.

Moreover, Millennials have emerged as a civic force, volunteering at higher rates than Boomers did when they were the same age, connecting through online technologies to share interests and organize civic and political engagement, and believing in the ability of community action to affect positive social change. There still is a strong "Civic Core" of millions of Americans who volunteer, vote and engage in community projects, and seem to do most of the work of civic engagement in the country. It is essential that the momentum from these emerging trends be used to bring citizens together in the shared vision of building an America devoted to its creed of equality of opportunity; that is more diverse, inclusive, and culturally rich than ever before; and one that is committed to restoring confidence in the ability of Americans and their leaders to solve public challenges again.

Here we assemble evidence that many Americans live in civic deserts, that these circumstances have become more prevalent, and that they represent a threat to American democracy and society. We also present some signs of civic renewal as Americans work hard to restore our civic life.



CIVIC DESERTS: America's Civic Health Challenge

**VOTE
HERE**

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam succinctly characterized in one phrase the collapse of American civic life from the 1970s to the turn of the century. Sadly, many of the downward trends in civic connectedness and engagement have continued in the 21st century. There have also been disturbing new developments that affect our communities and democracy.

This report provides the 2017 Civic Health update to the nation on our progress and challenge across leading indicators of civic life. Our nation does a superb job reporting on its economic health. The public, cross-sector leaders, and policymakers regularly see leading indicators of our economic health, such as the stock market, manufacturing activities, inventory levels, retail sales, building permits, the housing market, and new business startups. We also see regular updates on lagging indicators in our economy, such as changes in the Gross Domestic Product, income and wages, unemployment rates, the Consumer Price Index, currency strength, interest rates, corporate profits, the balance of trade, and the value of commodity substitutes to the U.S. Dollar. All of these indicators keep the nation's economic health front and center on the national agenda and help us understand the vitality of our economy, see where it is robust and weak, determine how it is affecting different populations, track trends over time, and shape appropriate policies and actions to keep our economy strong.

Our nation's civic health is critical to our prosperity, our security, and our republican form of government. A wealth of studies show links between components of civic health (on one hand) and economic and educational success, public health, safety from crime, and good government (on the other). Civic health is also intrinsic to self-government, as people who participate in discussing issues and improving their communities demonstrate civic health. When it is absent, we see disengagement, polarization, and alienation that threaten our political system, which depends heavily on public participation. Severe disparities in who participates also threaten the social fabric.

In 2006, the National Conference on Citizenship, along with a working group of thought leaders and the premier social scientists of the time, teamed to create American's Civic Health Index™, an idea that grew out of the Nunn-Bennett National Commission on Civic Renewals' final report in 1998. This index reported on a wide variety of civic indicators in an effort to educate Americans about our civic life and to motivate citizens, leaders, and policymakers to come together and strengthen the nation's civic health. In the early reports, more than 40 indicators across 9 categories were identified and reported, including connecting to civic and religious groups; trusting in other people; connecting to others through family and friends; giving and volunteering; staying informed; understanding civics and politics; participating in politics; trusting and feeling connected to major institutions; and expressing political views.

Since the creation of the original Civic Health Index™, NCoC has worked with partners to produce over 80 reports, infographics, and websites to update Americans on emerging trends in civic life and community. This work has contributed a great deal of knowledge on what ails communities across the nation, as well as illustrated promising trends of where civic life is flourishing and concrete initiatives that have been undertaken to improve it.

A decade of America's Civic Health Index™ and associated research by the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) and its partners has shown that there is a strong relationship between civic health and a thriving economy. In 2013, the "Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment" report illustrated that volunteers are 27 percent more likely to land a job after being out of work than non-volunteers, especially those volunteers who lack a high school degree or live in rural areas.⁸ Similarly, the 2011 Civic Health Index™ found that several indicators of civic health were tied to resiliency against unemployment, including attendance at public meetings, volunteering, and voter-registration.⁹

NCoC has also released population-specific Civic Health Indexes, such as reports focused on Latino citizens, veterans, and Millennials. These reports found that Latino rates of volunteering lag behind that of other demographics, while veterans are more likely than their peers to work with neighbors on addressing community problems. Furthermore, Millennials were identified as a potent civic and political force, which has continued to the present day, as Millennials now comprise the largest voting bloc of any generation, while also prioritizing community engagement as a way to catalyze positive social change.

The powerful data provided by 11 years of releasing a Civic Health Index™ has also produced concrete actions across all levels of society. Notably, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act included provisions for the NCoC to collect civic health data and disseminate an assessment in order to evaluate and compare the civic health of communities. Specifically, the Serve America Act:

“Directs the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), in partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship, and with technical advice from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to conduct a Civic Health Assessment, including collecting civic health data (e.g., volunteering, voting, and charitable giving rates), conducting related analyses, and reporting the data and analyses, in order to evaluate and compare civic health of communities.”¹⁰⁹

In Arizona, The Center for the Future of Arizona has used civic health to set major goals for improving civic engagement and community involvement throughout the state. Similarly, the O'Connor House used civic health indicators to set an ambitious goal adopted by more than 100 organizations to make Arizona a top 10 state on every indicator measured by the Civic Health Index™.

After collaborating on the first Kansas Civic Health Index™ in 2016, the Kansas Health Foundation began awarding mini-grants to organizations in Kansas who focus on increasing voter participation in areas of the state with high rates of poverty, poor health outcomes, and high rates of uninsured residents. In Florida, partners of the NCoC used civic health data to demonstrate the urgency for civic education reform in the state, leading to the passage of the Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act.

The Seattle CityClub, focusing on issues of equity and inclusion, has established an interactive civic health website and is working with the County Elections Bureau and community foundations on an initiative to support voter empowerment in underrepresented communities. Furthermore, every CHI Report engages multiple partners at the community or state level. For example, in Connecticut more than 50 partners have come together to work on advancing civic health in the state with a focus on equity, mental health, socioeconomic benefit, and increasing socioeconomic capital and community well-being.

Today, the NCoC uses the Civic Health Index™ and the initiative it spawned to work with cross-sector partners in multiple communities across 30 states to strengthen civic life in America. In addition, NCoC launched the Civic Renewal Initiative to build upon 10 years of data from studying the nation's civic health and inform their strategic direction. This 2017 report to the nation is designed to build on this outstanding work in communities and states across the country and to spawn further exploration and action around leading indicators of our civic health.

Americans might be reminded that we are a nation of problem solvers and of big ideas. Core to civic renewal is this recognition. Big ideas have historically emerged from outside government, among individuals who envisioned a different future than the times they were living in – working in conventions to create democratic government; working through the little platoons of civil society to found hospitals, libraries, faith-based institutions, public schools and universities; building movements to secure civil rights; taking action to create national parks for the enjoyment and use of all Americans; and sparking revolutions in communications, flight, rural electrification, manufacturing, and technology. Citizens brought government along to adopt sweeping change. Once again, we must rely on ourselves and one another to create a brighter future and restore the civic stocks that make us strong.

This report will seek to capture the ups and downs of America's civic health, and explore potential paths forward to a reawakening of the American spirit of volunteering and community engagement.

CIVIC DESERTS

The withering away of civic institutions that once brought people together does not get enough attention as one cause of our current national woes.”

-David Campbell, Notre Dame

CIVIC & AMERICAN HISTORY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

American historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning author David McCullough, who has keynoted the National Conference on Citizenship in past years, said, “We must teach history. History is as important to being a citizen as any subject we teach. And we don’t just need to teach history in the history classrooms, we need to teach it in all the classrooms.” American history and civic education, including what used to be called, “Problems of Democracy” courses, are vital to equipping future leaders from all backgrounds and sectors with the rich knowledge and understanding they need to be engaged citizens throughout their entire lives. Research has shown that students who receive effective civic learning are more likely to vote and discuss politics; four times more likely to volunteer and work on community issues; and more confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives.¹¹ Students who drop out of high school and do not have the benefits of an education are much less likely to vote, volunteer, and participate in the civic lives of their communities. The stakes are high, particularly as we try to create an opportunity society that boosts the social, economic and civic life prospects of the disadvantaged.

Yet, civics and American history education have gotten very little attention during the recent waves of school reform, especially in the movement towards high stakes testing in reading and mathematics. This comes at a time when connections to community-based institutions – religious and secular – have diminished. These institutions used to provide opportunities for civic learning outside of school. What’s as worrisome is the rise of polarization and fake news, which make strong civic knowledge all the more important.

So how have American students been doing on measures of historic and civic literacy? Not well.

This report examines test scores on the 8th grade National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in U.S. History and Civics, as well as the number of youth taking AP courses in history and government, to get a glimpse of civic education across the country. It is largely a story of stagnation, and in some cases, decline, notwithstanding the fact that many leading organizations have been sounding the alarm and creatively pushing efforts to boost such literacy.

Chart 2. Average US History Score on 8th Grade NAEP Assessment

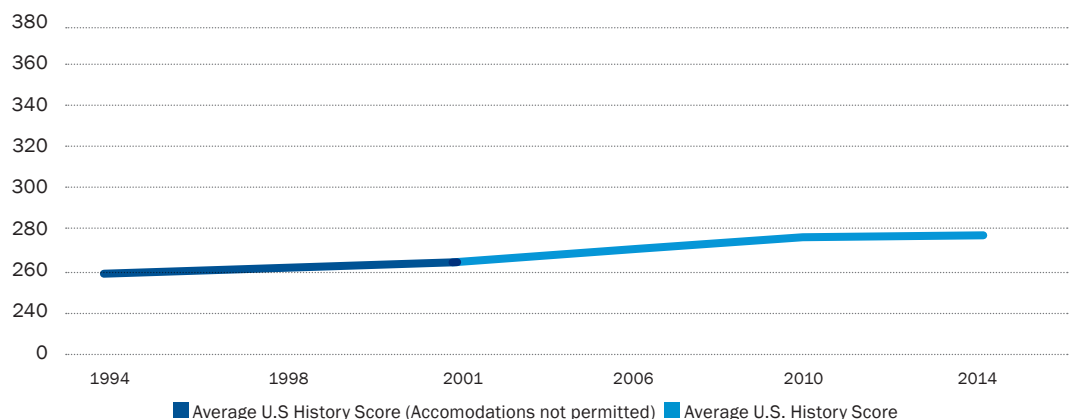
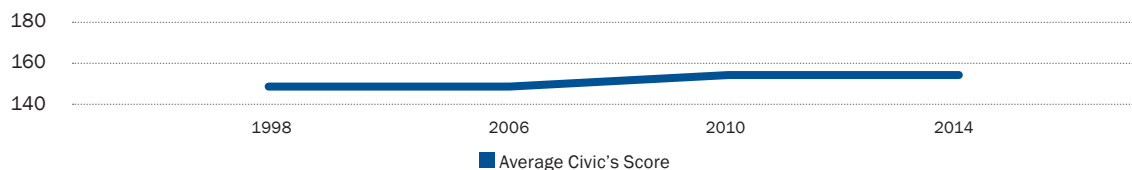
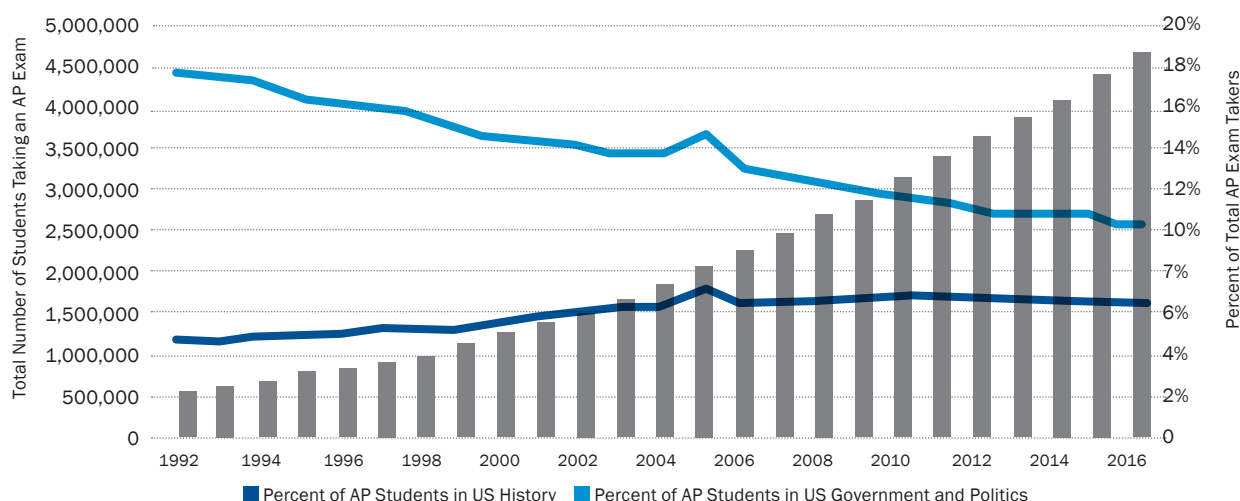


Chart 3. Average Civic Score on 8th Grade NAEP Assessment



In 2014, student performance on the 8th Grade NAEP assessment in U.S. History improved. The rise, however, was modest as scores have risen 8 points since 1994, and just one point since 2010. Similarly, 8th grade NAEP scores on the Civics assessment have been relatively stagnant since 1998, increasing by just one point. It is important to note, however, that NAEP scores may fail to paint the full picture of student's understanding of civics and history.¹²

Chart 4. AP Course- Taking (1992-2016)



Meanwhile, as the number of AP Exams taken continues to steadily climb, the proportion of students studying U.S. History is on the decline. In 1992, the U.S. History Exam comprised 18.2 percent of all AP Exams taken; yet that number decreased to 10.4 percent in 2016. Conversely, over that same period of time, the proportion of students taking AP U.S. Government & Politics has increased, albeit slightly. In 1992, U.S. Government & Politics exams made up 5.1 percent of all AP Exams. By 2016, that number had risen to 6.8 percent.¹³

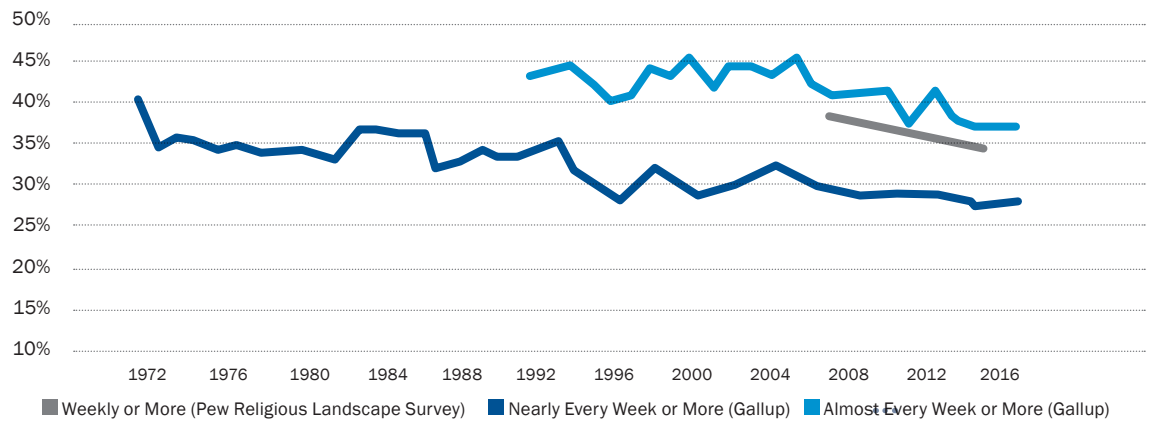
There is evidence that students are learning somewhat more about civics at the high school level. According to NCES, the number of credits in social studies/history earned by each high school graduate has risen steadily since the 1980s, from 3.16 in 1982 to a new high of 4.19 in 2009.¹⁴ There have also been gains in the popularity of AP courses that can be seen as civic education, including world history and environmental science, even as fewer students choose to study U.S. History.

It is also important to note that many under-funded schools are unable to offer AP courses, so some students do not have the choice of taking AP courses in these subjects. This also leads to the potential of a civic knowledge gap between students in better funded schools and their less fortunate peers.

What is clear from these indicators is that schools across America must do a much better job at making civics and history education a priority for students. In the absence of movement to support American history and civic education at the national level since the last major push following 9/11, some states have stepped up with innovative and ambitious efforts to boost civics and history learning. Most notably, Florida passed the Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act, which intentionally integrated civics education into the reading portion of the language arts for all grade levels and expanded civics learning during the middle grades. Other states, as well as federal education policymakers, should follow the lead of Florida and other innovative efforts like the Sandra Day O'Connor Act.

CONNECTION TO RELIGION

Chart 5. Percent of Americans Who Attend a Religious Service on a Weekly Basis



Across three different surveys, the percentage of Americans who attend religious services on a weekly basis has been decreasing since as far back as 1972. For a while, each decline in weekly religious attendance was matched by an uptick, but after 2004, there is a clear downward trend.

Chart 6. Percent of Americans Who Never Attend Religious Services

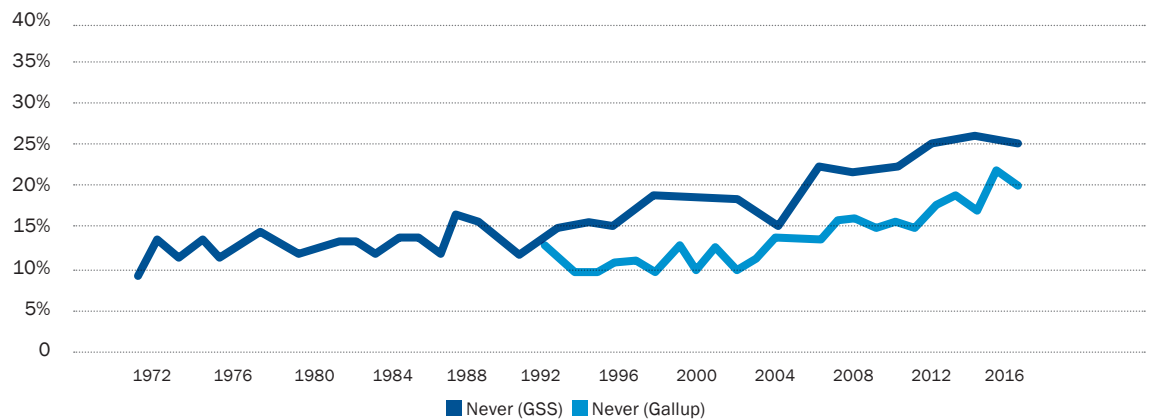
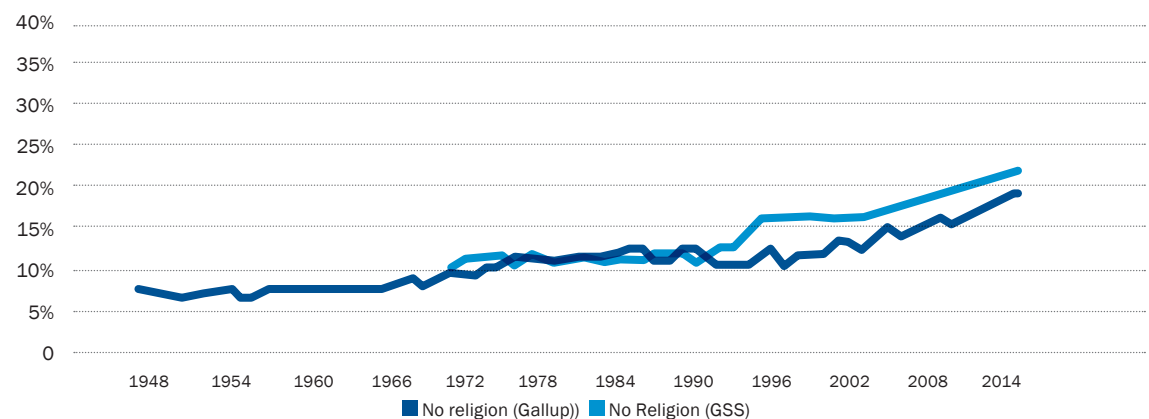


Chart 7. More Americans Respond “No Religion” to Questions on Religious Preference than Ever Before



Relatedly, the number of citizens who never attend a religious service has risen consistently since 1972, according to long-term polls by both Gallup and the General Social Survey. These trends make it clear that religious participation and affiliation in the United States are on the steady decline.

This comes as more research becomes available on the positive effects of religious life on communities. A recent study by the Partners for Sacred Places found that the average historic sacred place in an urban environment generates more than \$1.7 million annually in economic impact. Congregations boost local economies in many important ways, both directly and indirectly. Some have formal education programs, ranging anywhere from day-cares that have the added benefit of allowing parents to work, to elementary or middle school. Many support local small businesses by providing patronage for them to sustain themselves, while others act as invisible safety nets providing free or inexpensive community services. These sacred places also often bring tourists from out of town, who in turn spend money at local businesses and restaurants.¹⁵

In addition, past research has indicated a strong connection between religious affiliation and attendance at religious services, and other indicators of civic health. In particular, regular churchgoers are much more likely than others to attend club meetings, or belong to sports groups, professional and academic societies, school service groups, youth groups, service clubs, and political clubs, among other groups.¹⁶ Religious involvement has also been found to be a powerful predictor of volunteering and philanthropy, even when excluding contributions to religious causes.¹⁷

This research makes clear the positive benefits that religion and religious spaces have on communities at large, making the decline in religion among the public even more troubling.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF NEWS CONSUMPTION AND CONFIDENCE

Chart 9. Staying Informed

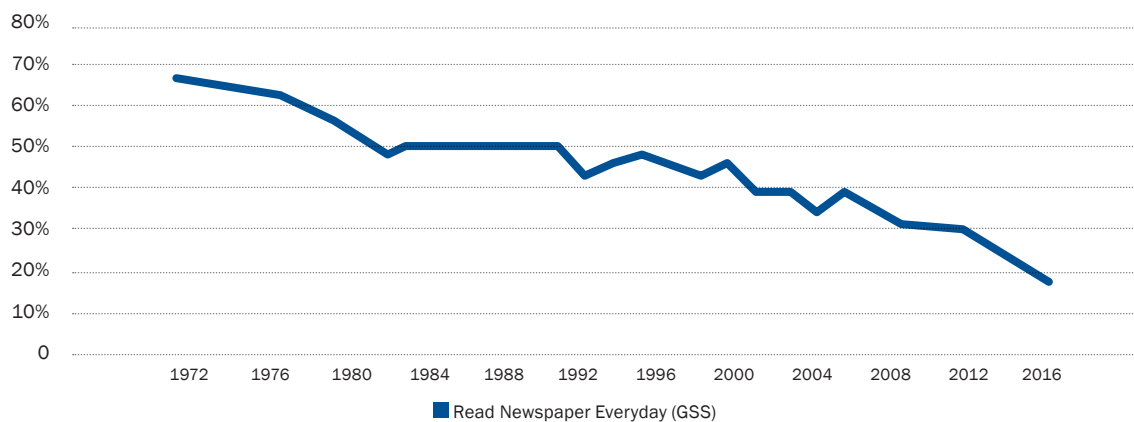
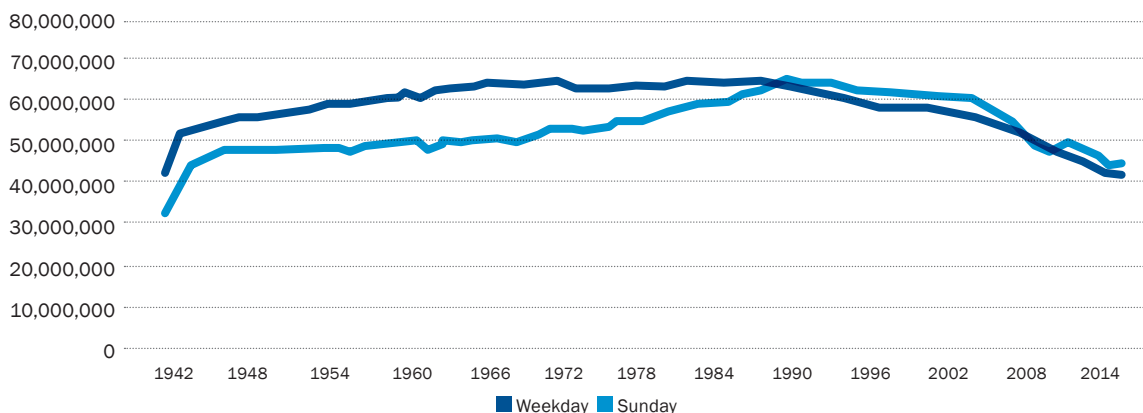


Chart 10. Total Circulation for Daily Newspapers (Pew)

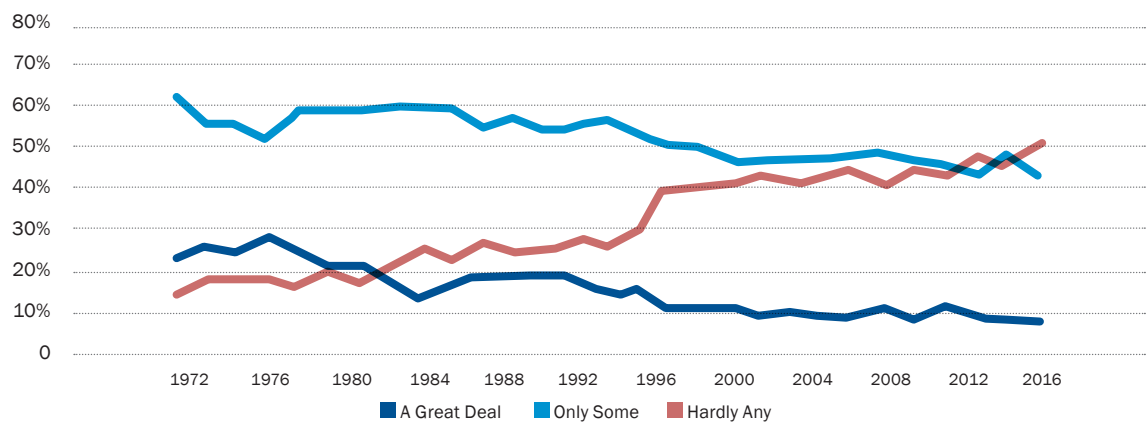


According to two different indicators, the number of Americans who read the newspaper has been decreasing since the 1970's. This trend carries significant weight, as reading the newspaper is closely tied to other indicators of civic engagement.

Today, Americans are much more likely to get their news from TV, online, and even radio sources than print newspaper. A 2016 study by Pew found that 57 percent of U.S. adults often get their news from TV, compared to 38 percent from online sources, 25 percent from radio, and 20 percent from print newspapers. Young people were even more likely to get their news from online sources, as 49 percent of 30-49 year-olds and 50 percent of 18-29 year-olds get their news online. The emergence of online news is even more clear when looking at the demographics of those who get their news from television, as 72 percent of 50-64 year-olds and 85 percent of adults over age 65 get news from TV, compared to 45 percent of 30-49 year olds and just 27 percent of 18-29 year-olds.¹⁸ Online news readership will be an important trend to monitor, as research has indicated that print newsreaders have significantly higher levels of civic responsibility – measured as a respondents' feeling of personal responsibility to help those in need and to work to resolve issues facing their community – than online news viewers.¹⁹

As the landscape of news consumption has shifted since the 1970's, Americans' trust in the press and media at large has plummeted. In 2016, for the first time since the GSS began asking about Americans' confidence in the press in the 1970s, more Americans have hardly any confidence in the press (49.8%) than those who have a great deal of confidence and those who have only some confidence (49.5%).

Chart 11. Americans Confidence in the Press, 1973-2016 (GSS)



Gallup also has long-term data on trust in the media that shows similar trends. This data shows Americans confidence in mass media has fallen from 68 percent in 1972 to just 32 percent in 2016. These trends held true when asked about all types of news sources, as confidence was down in newspapers, television news, and online news.

Chart 12. Americans Confidence in Mass Media (Gallup)

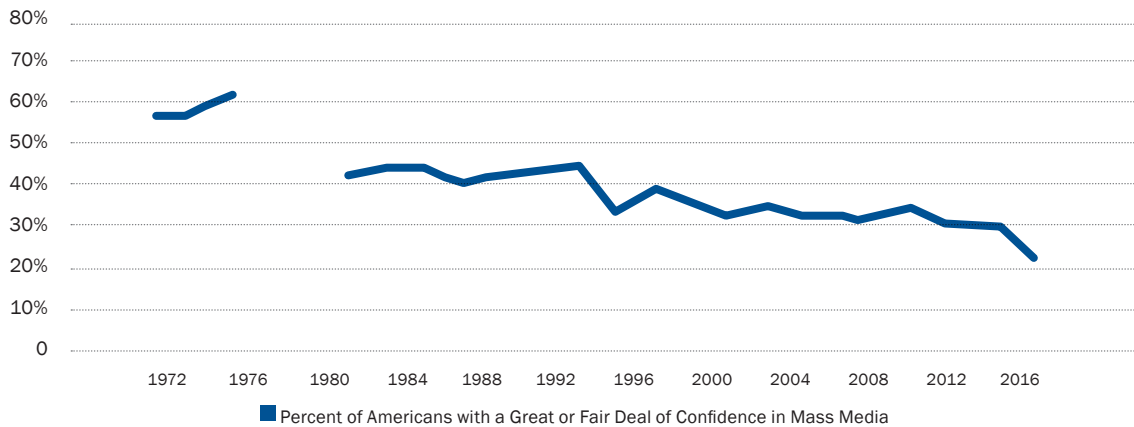
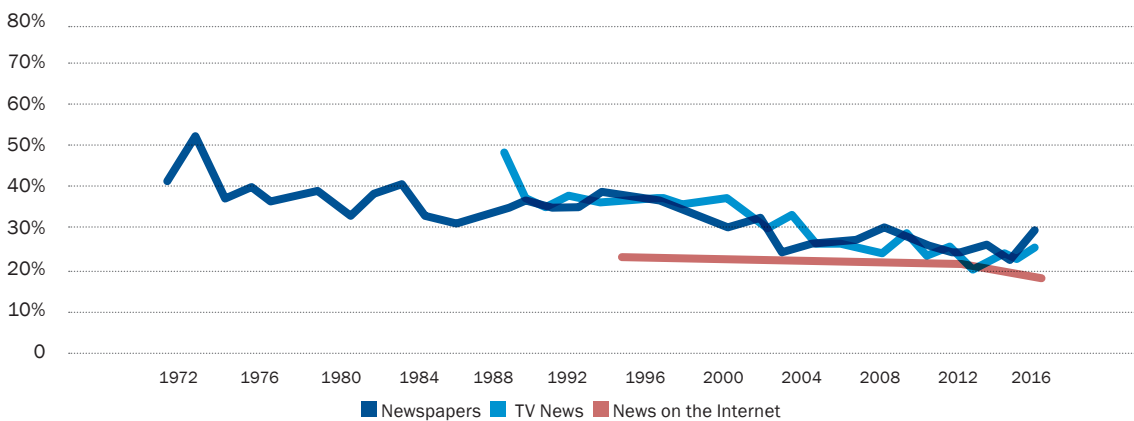


Chart 13. Confidence in News by Source (Gallup)



As these trends illustrate a troubling lack of trust in journalism, the 2016 election brought disturbing developments that undermine the very institutions of American democracy. Media reports of everything from public participation in the Inauguration to reports about an investigation prompting the creation of a Special Counsel have resulted in attacks that such reports are “fake news,” while the general population’s trust in the news declined across all media formats. A recent survey by Pew Research Center indicated that 88 percent of Americans believed made-up news has caused at least some confusion, while 64 percent believe it caused a great deal of confusion. In addition, 32 percent of U.S. adults reported often seeing completely made-up stories online, while 51 percent often came across stories that were not fully accurate.²⁰

Democracies depend on an informed citizenry and a trusted media that provides facts, analysis, and points of view for consideration. Decaying trust in news and journalism at large, combined with the emergence of online news and fake news stories shared on the web, weakens American norms and creates the possibility that citizens may begin to disagree on basic facts – or worse, believe things are entirely false that are actually true.

TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

"We need people to see civic leaders as heroes of their communities. Or if not heroes, at least central figures. And we need individuals to want to be part of processes and debates."

-Edna Ishayik, Civic Nation

Americans' trust and confidence in government has continued to dwindle since the 1970s, and the decline in trust in the U.S. Congress and the Executive Branch has been quite dramatic. The U.S. Supreme Court had the highest confidence ranking, but with only 25.7 percent of Americans having confidence in the High Court. Meanwhile, confidence in the Executive Branch and Congress lingered at remarkable lows of only 13 and 6 percent, respectively. Lacking such trust in our elected leaders undermines our shared ability to address public problems.

Chart 14. Confidence in Government by Branch (GSS)

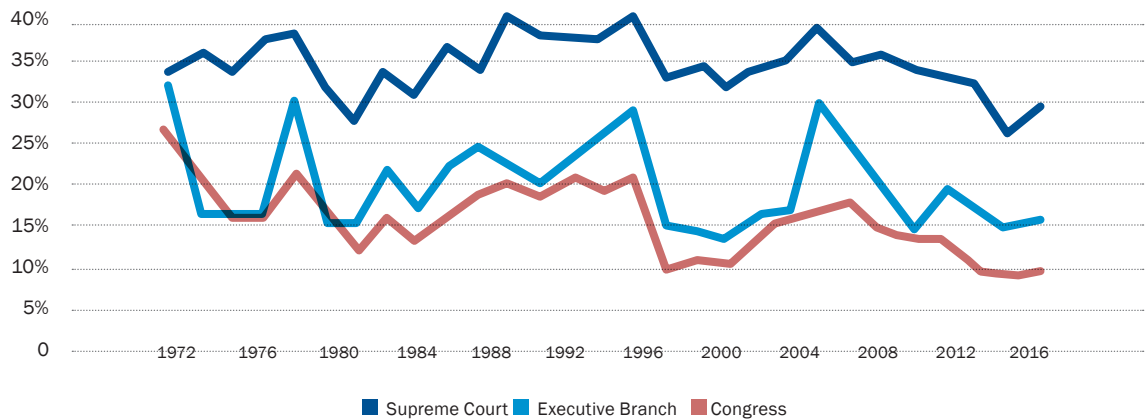
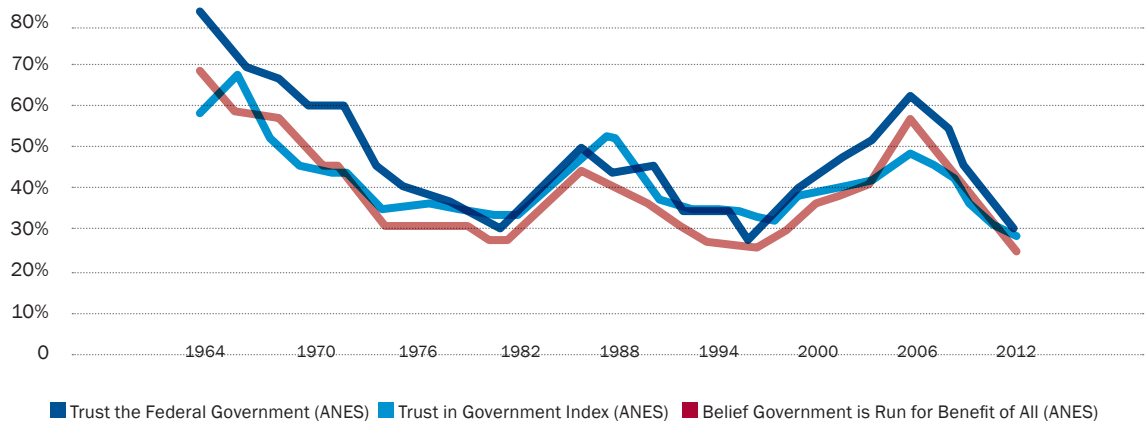
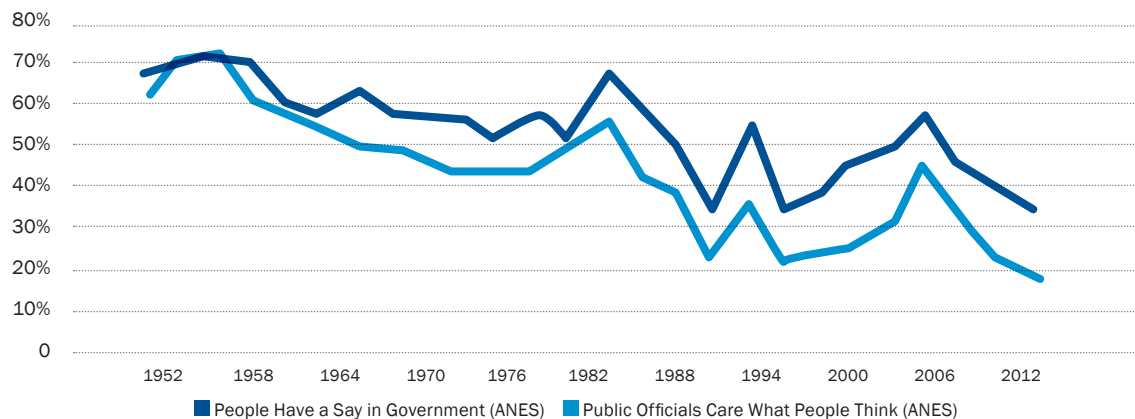


Chart 15. Americans Trust in Government, 1964-2012



Similarly, less than one in four Americans trust the federal government and believe the government is run for the benefit of all, raising concerns around the ability of government to do its part in helping to provide equality of opportunity. These trends have tracked together and have been steadily decreasing since 2002. ANES also combines several indicators to create the trust in government index, which reached its lowest point in 2012 since being developed in 1964.

Chart 16. Percent of Americans Who Believe:

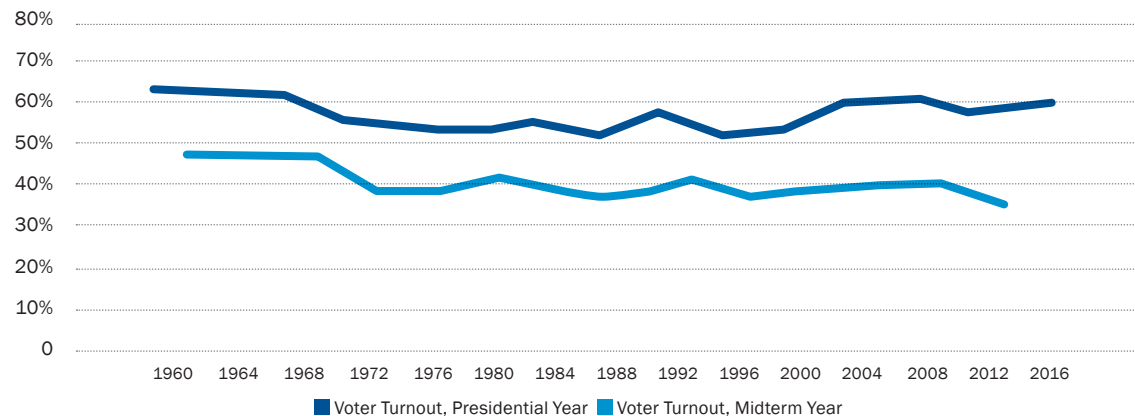


Meanwhile, fewer Americans believe they can influence government or that public officials care about what they think. More than one in three people believe everyday Americans do not have a say in government, challenging the ideal of a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Moreover, just 18 percent believe that the government actually cares what the public thinks.

As citizens lose faith that their role in democracy matters, it is possible participation may decline even more.

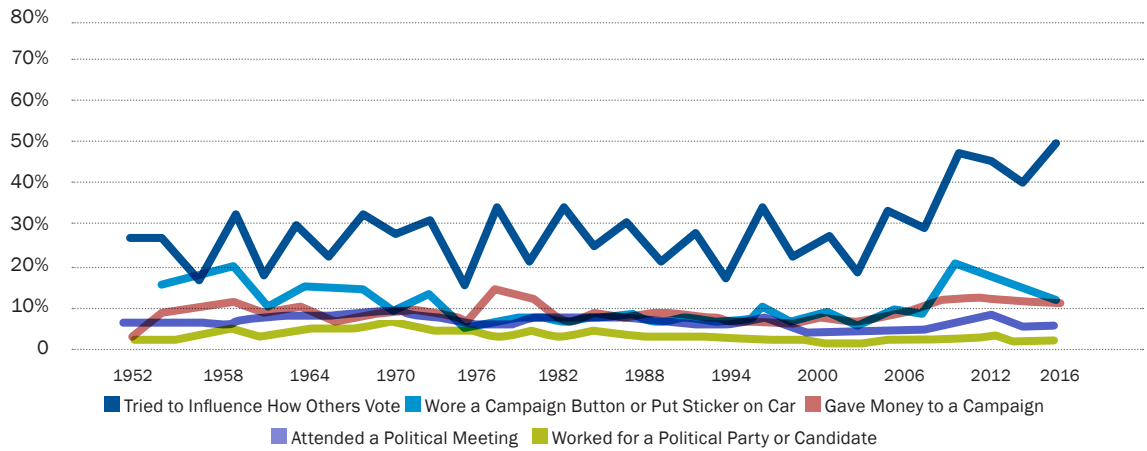
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT

Chart 17. Turnout by Voting-Eligible Population, 1960-2016



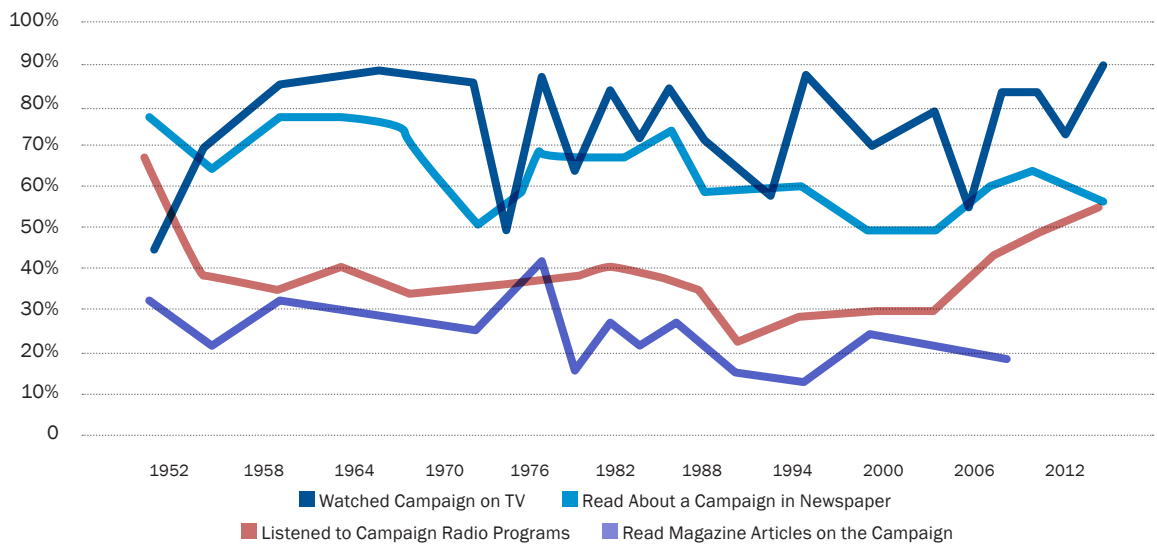
In 2016, turnout for eligible voters rebounded slightly, up from 58.6 percent in 2012 to 60.2 percent in 2016. This is still down from 1960, when 63.8 percent of the voting-age population cast a ballot for president. Even more discouraging, less than four in ten Americans turned out to vote in the 2014 mid-term elections, the lowest turnout since the 1940s.²¹

Chart 18. Political Participation in the U.S., 1952-2016 (ANES)



In 2016, political participation was up from 2012 across nearly every indicator, including donating money to campaigns, attending political meetings, and trying to influence others how to vote, which reached its highest mark since ANES began asking the question in 1952.

Chart 19. Percent of Americans that Participated in a Civic Activity in Past Month (Gallup)

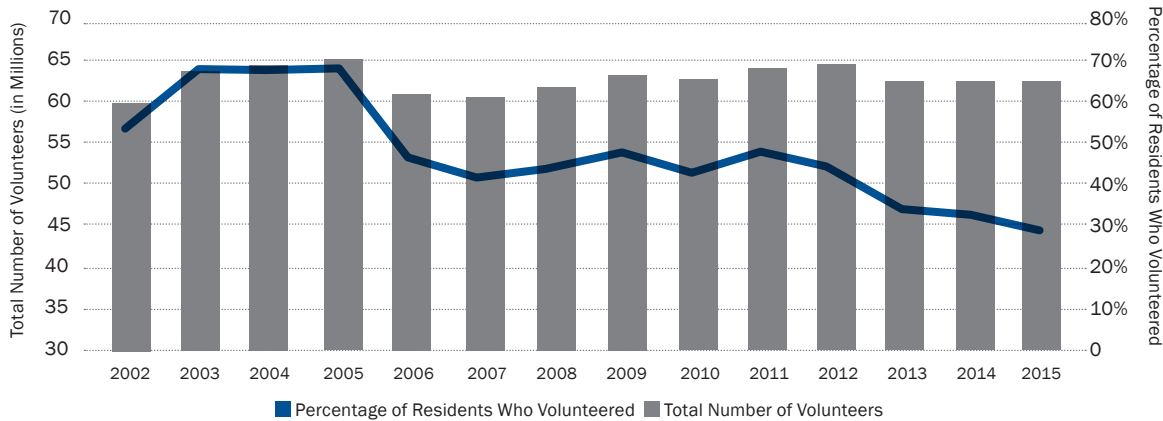


Most Americans continue to engage with political campaigns by watching TV, and over 90 percent of people tuned into the campaign on TV in 2016, a 15 percentage point jump from 2012. In general, the number of people reading about campaigns in magazine articles or newspapers has been increasing since the 1990s, although fewer people read magazine articles in 2004 than 2000 and the percent of Americans who read about the 2016 campaign in a newspaper was lower than that in 2012.

PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES & GROUPS

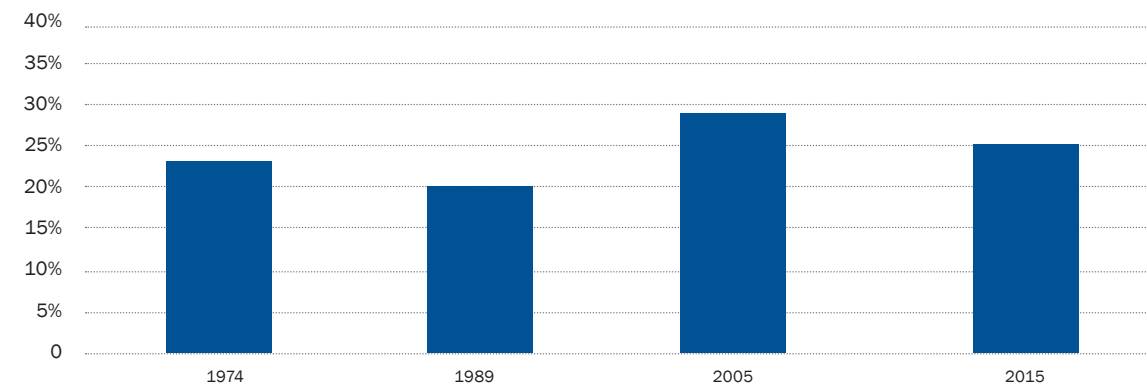
Since Benjamin Franklin established the first volunteer firehouse in America in 1736, volunteering and participation in community groups have been rich traditions of American life. Today, however, such trends in civic activities are down.

Chart 20. Volunteer Rates in the United States 2002-2015 (CPS)



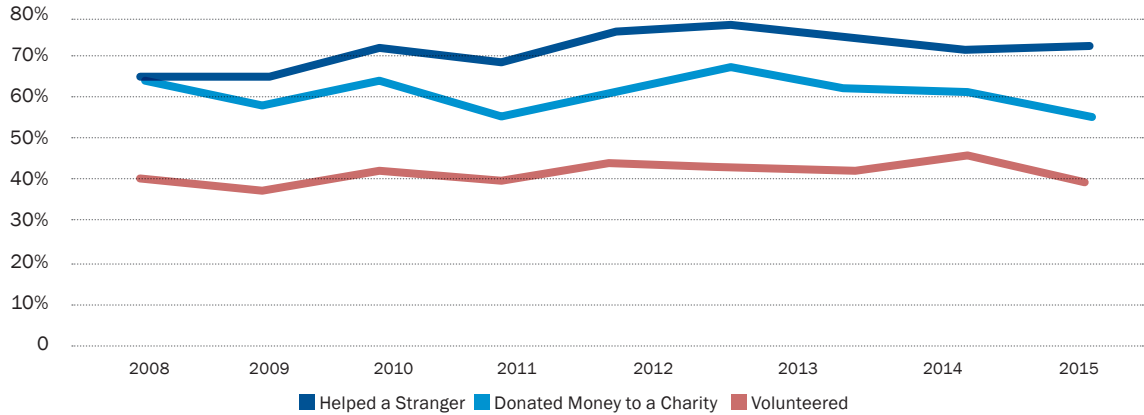
Following the tragedy of the September 11th terrorist attacks, Americans emerged to help their neighbors and nation in countless ways. In turn, President George W. Bush had a major White House initiative on volunteering and civic engagement and began to annually measure rates of volunteering in the United States and increase opportunities for national service through AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, Peace Corps, and a new Citizens Corps for disaster preparedness and response. Volunteering in America seemed to be on an upswing, increasing from 27.4 percent or 59 million Americans regularly volunteering in 2002 to 28.8 percent or 65 million Americans volunteering in 2003, where it held steady for three years. Since 2005, however, volunteering rates have dwindled, reaching a low of 24.9 percent in 2015, according to the Current Population Survey (CPS)'s Volunteering in the United States Supplement. In turn, after a doubling of AmeriCorps and increasing Peace Corps to the highest levels in more than three decades, national service opportunities have been remained steady and the current Administration has proposed to cut national service programs altogether.

Chart 21. Volunteering Rates in the United States for Select Years (US Census Bureau)



While volunteering may be down since 2005, there is still reason to be encouraged about the long-term trend in volunteering rates in the United States. Prior to the CPS Volunteering in the United States Supplement, the Census Bureau had collected volunteering data in 1974 and 1989. Data for these years showed rates of volunteering in the United States at 23.6 and 20.4 percent, respectively, indicating that volunteering has actually increased by over four percentage points since the late 1980's. After 9/11 and for four straight years, volunteering grew to nearly 30 percent of the U.S. adult population, so we know progress can be made and sustained to engage more Americans in volunteering.

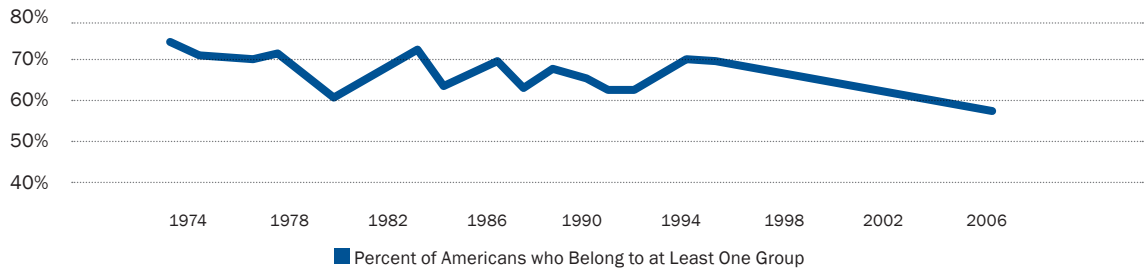
Chart 22. Percent of Americans that Participated in a Civic Activity in Past Month (Gallup)



The Gallup Social Survey has recent data on American's civic activities, asking respondents if they participated in a series of activities in the past month. Among the three activities are donated money to charity, helped a stranger, and volunteered. Since 2008, volunteering has been stagnating or declining, while donating money to charity decreased by 9 percentage points.

Encouragingly, more Americans appear to be going out of their way to help strangers, increasing from 65 percent in 2008 to 73 percent in 2016. A previous report we issued showed that lower-income Americans were most likely to provide shelter, food, or what little means they had to help those in need.²²

Chart 23. Connection to Civic Groups (ANES)



As Putnam well documented at the turn of the century in *Bowling Alone*, Americans' participation in community groups, such as Rotary Clubs, bowling leagues, and civic organizations has been on a steady decline since the second half of the 20th century. While GSS has not asked respondents about their group membership since 2004, the trend is clear, as 65 percent of Americans belonged to at least one group in 2004, compared to over 78 percent in 1974. Some find this trend very disturbing, given that Americans have always been a nation of joiners. Others wonder if new means of connection, principally through advances in technology, including online technologies that are designed to bring people together offline as well, are new equivalents for our civic connections.

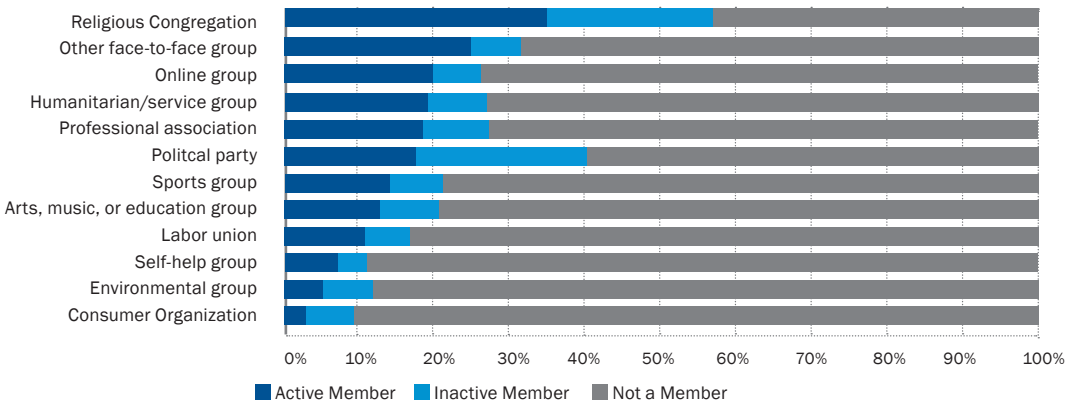
New findings from the USC Understanding America Study, reported here for the first time, shed additional light on Americans current group membership and participation. Just 28% of Americans say that they belong to any group whose leaders are both accountable and inclusive. This percentage does not vary dramatically among demographic groups, although Latinos, people without college backgrounds, and people under age 30 lag behind the national average on this measure by 6 to 7 percentage points.

Belonging to groups is known to have benefits for health and well-being, prosperity, security, and political participation – but not all groups are equally valuable. We presume that it is better to belong to a group that allows members to participate actively and personally – as opposed, for example, to a group that merely collects membership dues. It is also better if a group has leaders who are accountable (they usually do what they promise) and inclusive (they strive to hold the group together).

The USC survey asked a representative sample of 4,000 Americans whether they belonged to any of several types of groups. If they did belong to a group, they were asked whether they participated actively. Then, for the group in which they participated the most actively, they were asked whether they considered its leaders accountable and inclusive.

The groups that have the largest and most active memberships are religious congregations. In second place are “other” face-to-face groups, i.e., those not listed specifically in the survey. Their popularity suggests the heterogeneity of today’s associations. Online groups come in third with about 19 percent of the population actively participating. Political parties and labor unions, two pillars of 20th century civil society, draw few members today.

Chart 24. Membership in Groups, 2017 (USC Understanding America Study)



Most Americans (83.4 percent) report being in at least one group, but fewer (60 percent) participate actively in at least one group. Forty-two percent are active in a group but say that its leaders fail to be accountable or inclusive (or both). This is the most typical circumstance, more common than not belonging to any groups at all (17 percent), belonging but not participating (13 percent) or belonging to a group with good leadership (28 percent).

Chart 25. Americans’ Membership/Participation Levels in Groups (USC Understanding America Study)

No memberships at all	17%
Membership without participation	13%
Active participation in groups without good leadership	42%
Participation in groups with good leadership	28%

Most commonly, the problem with bad leadership is lack of accountability rather than failure to be inclusive. Of the 28 percent who belong to a group with a good leader, nearly half (46 percent) say that this group is a religious congregation. Another 15 percent say that it is an “other” in-person group, i.e., a group of a type not listed on the survey. Only 7 percent of the people who belong to a group that has accountable and inclusive leaders say that the group is online.

Chart 25. Americans' Membership/Participation Levels in Groups (USC Understanding America Study)

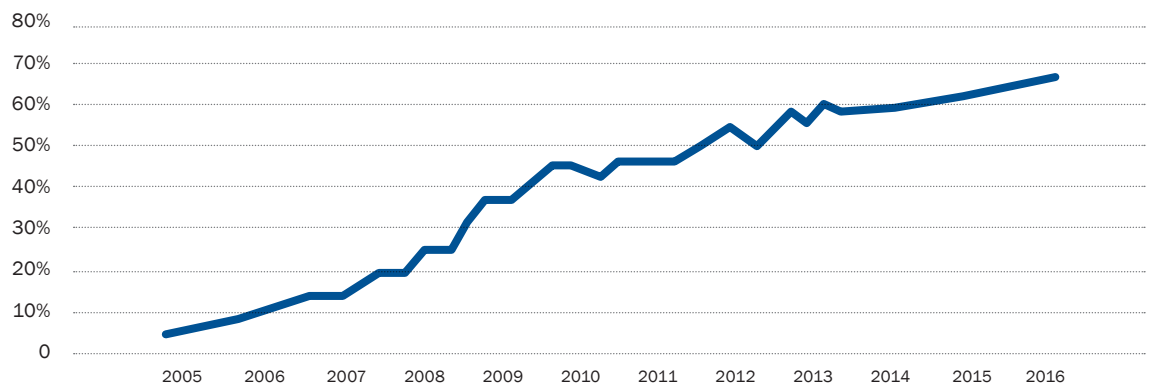
Religious congregations	46%
Other face-to-face group	15%
Sports group	8%
Humanitarian/service group	7%
Online group	7%
Arts, music, or education group	5%
Professional association	4%
Self-help group	3%
Labor union	2%
Political party	1%
Consumer organization	1%
Environmental group	1%

THE ROLE OF INTERNET IN CIVIC LIFE

"I think we need to recognize digital spaces as real and tangible places of [civic] engagement."

-Janet Tran, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute

Chart 26. Percent of American Adults Who Use at least One Social Media Platform (Pew)



The Internet has exploded onto the American scene, creating a vast new variety of ways for Americans and leaders, including most recently the 45th President, to communicate and connect with one another. Change.org and other websites have allowed citizens to mobilize petitions in an effort to create social change while crowdfunding apps like Kickstarter or GoFundMe provide opportunities for people to raise money for civic endeavors or people in need. In addition, websites such as YouTube and social media apps like Twitter, Facebook, and Periscope have hosted the announcements of candidates for president or live streamed political debates, allowing Americans without televisions to participate. Social media apps have also been used as an organizing tool for grassroots protests or movements. Notably, Facebook was widely used during the Arab Spring – the pro-democracy revolutionary wave that swept across North Africa and the Middle East in 2010-2011.

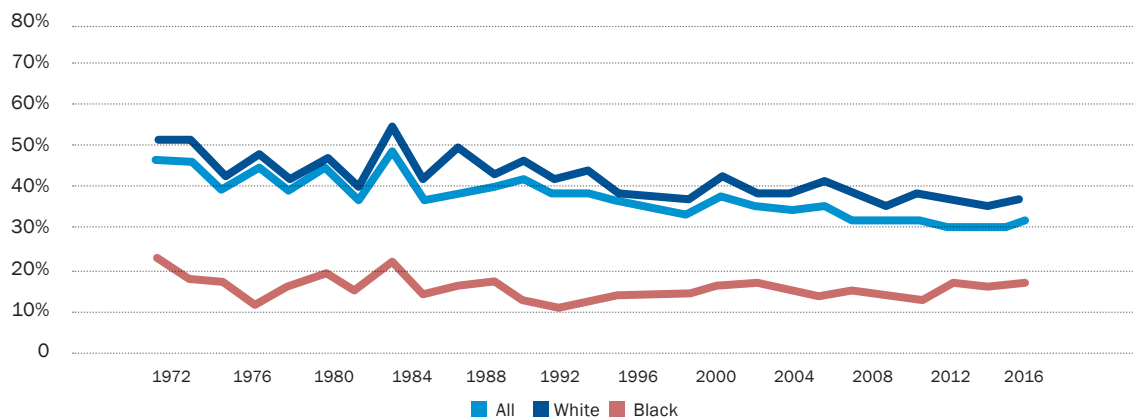
In past reports, we have analyzed the civic habits of what we have called the “Netizens” – those Americans who are both online and engaged in a range of civic activities. The 2007 Civic Health Index™ found that 41 million people use the Internet for three or more civic purposes. These netizens are also much more likely than others to attend public meetings on community affairs, attend a club meeting, or take part in a protest or demonstration. Netizens were also more likely to engage in “citizen-centered” work.²³

Yet, while the Internet offers great potential for Americans of diverse backgrounds to connect with one another and engage digitally, some are skeptical that the Internet is a positive influence on citizens and community engagement today. A 2014 study found that online contact “promotes a public that is more isolated, less tolerant, and more susceptible to anomie” than the traditional relationships it would replace.²⁴ Others have found little evidence to believe that the Internet will create new communities that remedy the decline in civic engagement.²⁵

These concerns make clear that while the Internet has the ability to bring people together in online communities and net-engagement, it must be used and developed in an intentional manner to allow online civic engagement to thrive.

AMERICANS TRUST IN ONE ANOTHER

Chart 27. Percent of Americans Who Believe Other People Can Be Trusted (GSS)

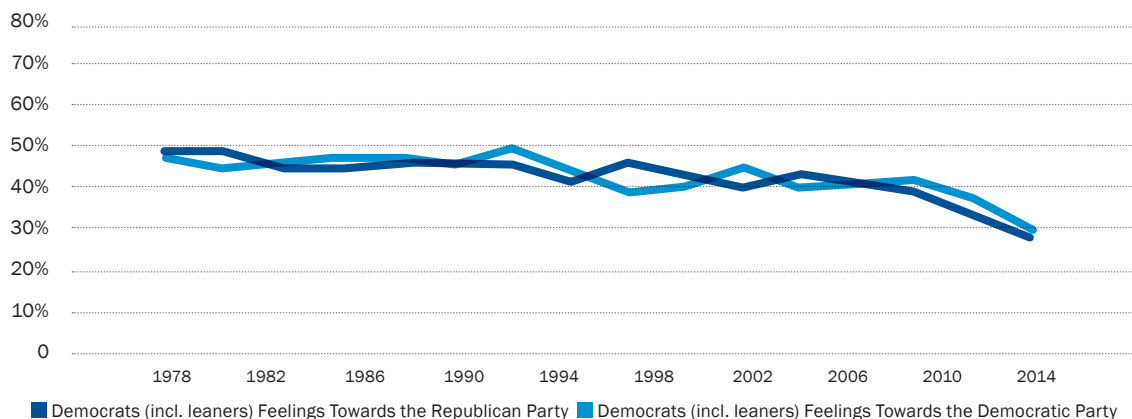


While there have been ups and downs since 1972 – including an interesting trend in which trust among Americans tended to rebound in presidential election years – the overall trend has been significantly negative. Americans’ belief that others can be trusted fell from 45.8 percent in 1972 to just 31.3 percent in 2016, according to the GSS.²⁶ What may be more troubling is the large gap that has emerged between how Black and White Americans view their fellow citizens. In 2016, 36.1 percent of White respondents said they believed others could be trusted, compared to just 17.4 percent of Black respondents, leaving an 18.7 percentage point trust gap.

In addition to declining trust in one another, studies show that the rising partisanship pervasive throughout the American citizenry has also led people across political aisles to view one another more skeptically, at best, and with hostility, at worst.

In 2014, Pew released a major study entitled *Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life*, which laid bare the growing enmity between Republicans and Democrats. Members of each party have always had an unfavorable view of the other. In 1994, 57 percent of Democrats had an unfavorable attitude about the Republican Party, while 68 percent of Republicans had an unfavorable view of their partisan counterparts, but just 16 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of Republicans had very unfavorable views of the other. By 2014, both of those numbers had more than doubled, with 38 percent of Democrats and Democratic leaners holding an unfavorable view of Republicans, and 43 percent of Republican and Republican leaners feeling very unfavorably toward the Democratic Party.²⁷ This trend can be traced back to the 1970’s, as ANES has asked respondents to rank each party on a “feelings thermometer” from 0 to 100, with a higher score symbolizing feeling more positively towards that party. Unsurprisingly, feelings of members of both the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as party leaners, toward the opposing party have grown colder over the past decade.

Chart 28. Average Feeling Towards the Opposite Party, 1978-2012 (ANES)



These differences have infiltrated personal life as well. The most liberal and conservative Americans are more likely to oppose a family member marrying someone from the other side of the political aisle, with 31 percent of mostly to consistently liberal respondents saying they would be unhappy if a member of their family married a Republican versus 45 percent of mostly/consistently conservatives being unhappy in the same scenario.

Moreover, many partisans try to remain in their own “bubbles,” sticking with what more and more social observers are calling their tribes. For fully half of consistent conservatives, it is important for them to live some place where most people share their political views, compared to 35 percent of consistent liberals. In addition, 63 percent of consistent conservatives and 49 percent of consistent liberals say most of their close friends share their political views.

Discouragingly, partisans who are more politically involved actually have a greater sense of antipathy towards members of the opposing party, which means that simply increasing Americans political engagement will not help bring citizens together in shared purpose or understanding that all are in this together. What it will more likely take is Americans being willing to step outside of their echo-chambers to actually share these experiences with people from their country who think, feel, and look differently from themselves.

The idea of Americans becoming more secure and entrenched in their own bubbles becomes all the more troubling when examined with other trends of citizens self sorting along geographic and socio-economic lines. In Bill Bishop's 2008 book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans is Tearing Us Apart*, he found evidence that Americans are increasingly sorting themselves into areas with other like-minded citizens.²⁸ Meanwhile, more Americans have become segregated based on their income, with affluent Americans increasingly likely to live among other wealthy families, as poor and lower-income citizens become more likely to live among those in the same income bracket, or worse, isolated in areas of concentrated poverty.²⁹ Although racial segregation has declined slowly in recent decades, there is evidence that historical patterns remain,³⁰ as recent studies show continued trends of racial segregation and even re-segregation in schools, particularly in the South.³¹

All these trends make it less likely for Americans of different racial, socioeconomic, ideological, and political backgrounds to come in contact, much less have a conversation or share any type of experience with one another. Rather, Americans are more likely to only know and spend time with people who look, think, and earn just like themselves, which in turn makes it harder for Americans to understand their fellow citizens.

THE RISE IN AMERICAN ISOLATION

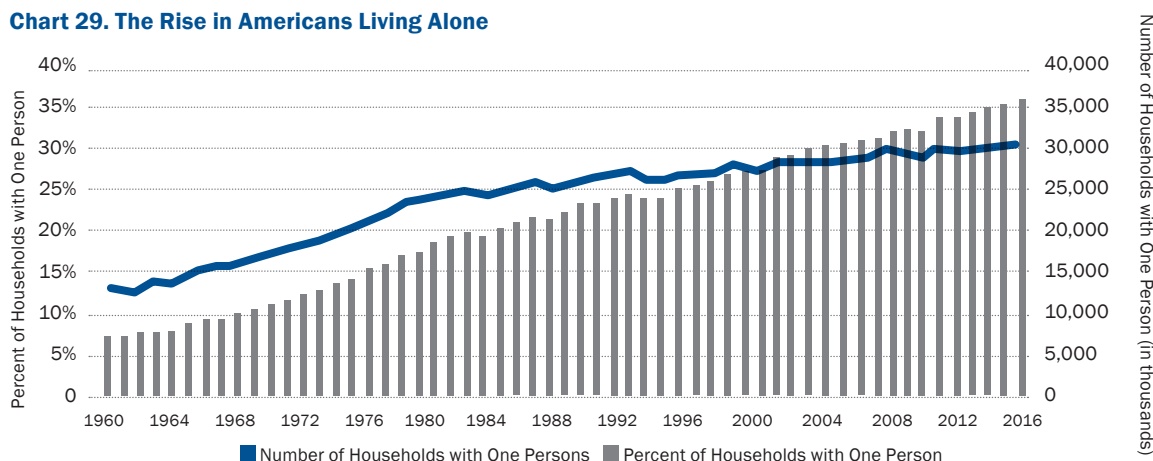
As Americans decreasingly engage in community and civic activities, intuitively they interact less with their fellow citizens. This contributes to the possibility that Americans today are becoming increasingly isolated and lonely individuals.

Unfortunately, there is not long-term trend data available on the percent of Americans who feel lonely. A 2010 survey of adults 45 and up by AARP found that a little over a third of the survey's respondents were lonely, as measured by the UCLA loneliness scale.³² A perceived lack of social support and shrinking network of friends were most closely associated with loneliness. Respondents were split on the internet's role, as respondents who were lonely believed the internet made it easier to share personal information than those who were not lonely, yet those who were lonely were more likely to think the internet might be contributing to loneliness than those who were not lonely.

In addition, respondents who were not involved in volunteer work or community organizations were more likely to be lonely than those who did involve themselves with such activities. Over 40 percent of respondents who had not volunteered in the past year reported being lonely, compared to 28 percent of those who had volunteered. Similarly, 39 percent of respondents who did not belong to a local community organization, club, or group were lonely, while just 26 percent of respondents who did belong to such a group were lonely. These numbers indicate the positive benefits engaging with other citizens through service or community organizations may have on a person's social life.

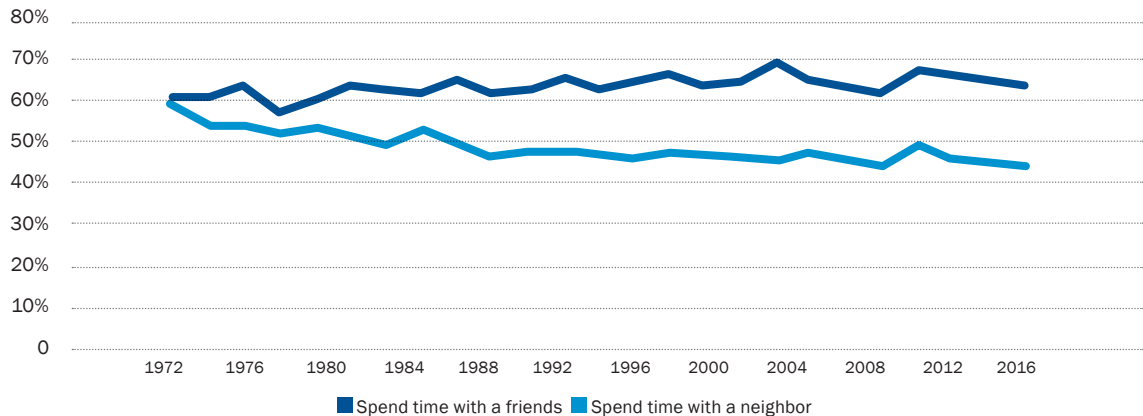
More recently, GSS asked respondents in 2016 how often they felt lonely in the past week. Nearly 35 percent acknowledged feeling lonely at least some of the time.³³ The only other year loneliness data is available from the GSS is 1996, when surveyors asked how often the respondent felt lonely in the past week. In that iteration, 43 percent of respondents said they felt lonely at least one day in the past week. While this may indicate that loneliness is on the decline, it is difficult to assess this trend without more data, especially considering the change in how the question was asked (the 2016 version only allowed a respondent to answer "none or almost none of the time," which makes it impossible to totally isolate people who have never felt lonely.)

Chart 29. The Rise in Americans Living Alone



Another factor contributing to the potential rise in loneliness among Americans is the sharp increase in the percent of people living alone. Since 1960, the percent of households with one person has increased by a staggering 114.5 percent, reaching 28.1 percent in 2016.³⁴

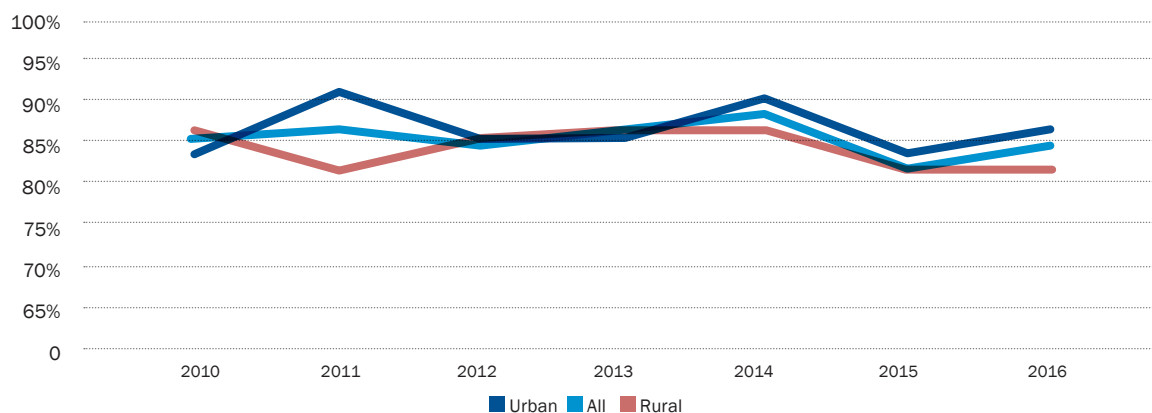
Chart 30. Connections to Friends and Neighbors



Meanwhile, as Americans connect less to civic groups, spend less time with neighbors, and live alone more often, they are also increasingly disengaged from the workplace. A recent Gallup study found that 43 percent of employees worked remotely in some capacity in 2016, up from 39 percent in 2012. Moreover, those who work remotely are doing it more often, as the percent of employees spending at least 80 percent of their work hours away from the office increased by 7 percentage points between 2012 and 2016.³⁵ In addition, a recent report from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that 94 percent of net new employment from 2005 and 2015 came from alternative work arrangements, which include everything for jobs in the “gig economy” (driving for Uber, delivering for Postmates, etc.) to freelance and other off-balance-sheet work arrangements, further emphasizing Americans decreased connection to a workplace or office environment.³⁶

Other recent Gallup data indicate that over the past six years, Americans have become slightly less satisfied with opportunities to make friends where they live. There was also a clear gap between how respondents in urban and rural areas feel, with those living in rural areas less satisfied with the opportunity to make friends in their area.

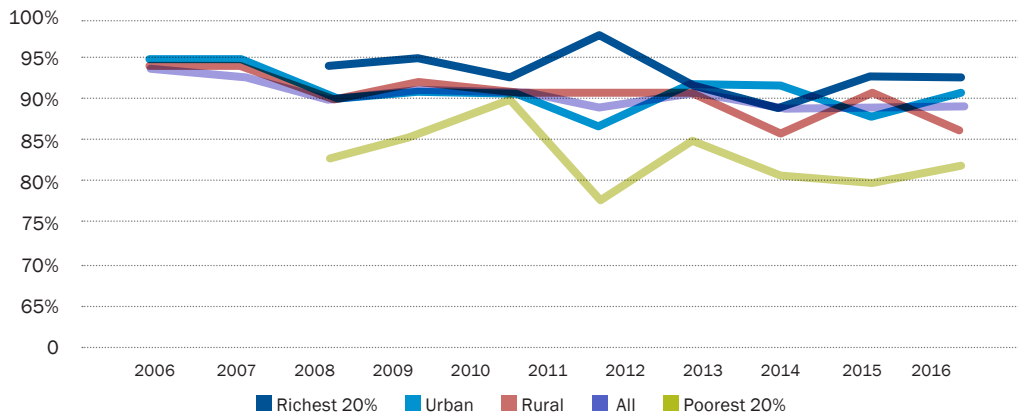
Chart 31. Percent Who Are Satisfied with the Opportunity to Make Friends in City/Area they Live (Gallup)



The potential rise in loneliness and isolation is not only disturbing for the nation’s civic health, but it also poses troubling ramifications for physical wellbeing. Loneliness and isolation have been linked to a number of negative risk factors, such as an increased risk for early mortality.³⁷

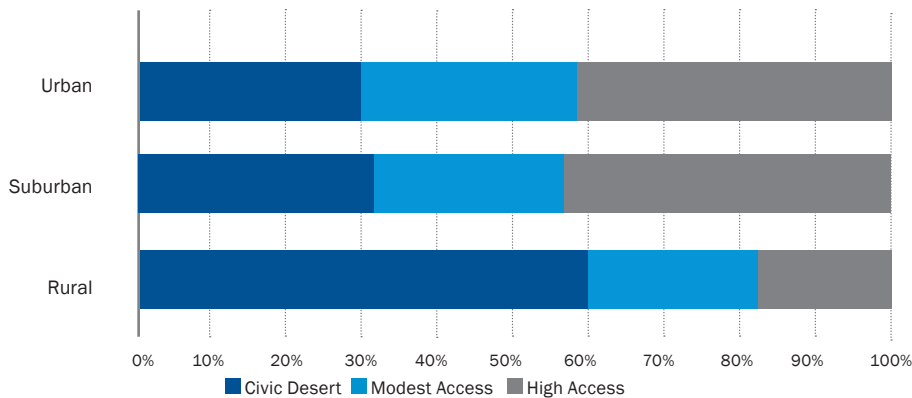
Moreover, data seem to indicate that personal networks have become less reliable since 2006. Gallup asked respondents if they had relatives or friends they can count on. While there was a slight decrease across all demographics, the data once again illustrated an urban-rural divide, with urbanites more likely to believe they can count on their personal networks. The same was true for those from the top quintile of the income distribution compared to those from the bottom.

Chart 32. Relatives or Friends to Count On (Gallup)



Perhaps most disturbing, however, is the emergence of what social scientists at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education (CIRCLE) coined “civic deserts” – or areas devoid of opportunities for civic and political engagement, such as youth programming, culture and arts organizations, and religious congregations.³⁸ A recent study by CIRCLE found that nearly 60 percent of youth in rural areas lived in such locations. Civic deserts were not, however, limited to rural areas, as almost 30 percent of urban youth and 32 percent of suburban youth also lived in areas with a dearth of civic engagement opportunities.

Chart 33. Access to Resources by Locale



As less Americans engage in civic participation in specific physical places, such as through work, community organizations, and volunteering, it will be important to find other ways to communicate and interact with others in order to maintain a sense of community and fight civic and social isolation.



PATHS TO CIVIC RENEWAL

Photo credit: Matt Mabe, from 2016 Veterans Civic Health Index

PATHS TO CIVIC RENEWAL

1) INCREASE ACCESS TO AND THE QUALITY OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND CIVICS EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES.

Students who receive effective civics classes are more likely to be engaged citizens throughout their entire lives. Moreover, improved civic learning can address many of our democratic shortfalls. Informed and engaged citizens would increase the accountability of elected officials and improve public discourse by asking the tough questions of public leaders and demanding more from the media. After over a decade of school reforms that have largely ignored civics and history education, now is the time to put these subjects at the forefront of classrooms throughout the country. We make the following recommendations at the local, state and national levels:

- Every state should adopt rigorous state standards of learning for American History and Civics Education, drawing on the College, Career and Civic Life Framework (C3) for effective standards.³⁹ They should develop and implement meaningful assessments in American history and civics to demonstrate growth in the knowledge of students in such subjects. Coursework should include addressing “problems in democracy” that engage students in lively discussions exploring the relevance of historical events and principles to modern problems.
- Increase access to service learning courses linked to classroom learning and community service activities in schools that can also help foster a culture of lifelong volunteering, community engagement, and public service in our nation’s youth.
- Federal policymakers should restore support for the Teaching American History grant program and funding for civic learning innovation; ensure that all schools meet the requirement to read and discuss the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence during Constitution Day or Citizenship Week with their students, and provide the necessary resources for robust Constitution Day or Citizenship week lessons; make the tools and resources of the Library of Congress (“American Memory”), National Archives (“Our Documents”), National Endowment for the Humanities (Summer Seminars and Institutes for teachers), and Museum of American History more widely available to teachers for use in their classrooms and build better teacher awareness of these resources; and increase the frequency of the National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam in American History and Civics and provide disaggregated or state level data of the results.
- Establish a federal award program recognizing civic learning achievement for students and schools modeled on the “Blue Ribbon Schools” program to increase attention paid to American history and civic learning at the school level.

2) EXPAND NATIONAL SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES.

National service has been linked to a host of positive benefits and outcomes for youth and adults alike, including increased participation in other civic activities. National service also brings people from different races, ethnicities, income levels and geographies together to solve public problems. In addition, research has indicated service to be a cost effective boon to local economies.⁴⁰ Right now, the supply of national service opportunities is not keeping up with the demand, as there are many more applications submitted for AmeriCorps positions than there are available opportunities.⁴¹ Concrete action to expand national service opportunities include:

- Fully implementing the bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act and growing national service opportunities to 250,000 positions a year and leveraging those national service members to increase the number of volunteers who work to solve public problems;
- Expanding international service opportunities like the Peace Corps and Volunteers for Prosperity to provide 15,000 opportunities to serve abroad each year;
- Creating by executive order national service opportunities through federal and state agencies to solve public problems at lower cost to government; and
- Building a talent pipeline and incentives through national service by engaging higher education institutions in creating national service opportunities and awarding course credit for such service and engaging employers in efforts to ensure national service translates into credentials or other recognition that helps service members obtain employment.

3) UNLEASH THE POWER OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AS WELL AS THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA BOOM TO INCREASE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

As more Americans interact with one another online, it is essential that the Internet be intentionally used and developed in a way that allows for strong civic and community engagements. It is also important to ensure that the Internet be accessible for all citizens regardless of geographic location or income-level.

- Online platforms like Meetup, which facilitates the creation and discovery of local groups and organizations, should be leveraged to increase access and connection to community groups, as well as social gatherings to help fight the rise in American isolationism, especially in rural communities.
- Crowd funding websites and apps should be promoted as ways for Americans to connect and support local, state, national, and international causes through donations.
- The federal government should also promote policies that ensure universal access to broadband network services and create mechanisms to ensure affordability to low-income Americans.⁴²
- Policymakers should partner with web developers and consider ways to utilize the Internet to empower citizens to institute social change and engage Americans in their communities and country.

In addition to concrete paths to improving civics and history education in the classroom, expanding access and opportunities for national service programs, and using the power of technology to improve civic health, **all young people should be oriented to the study of civic health, its implications, and to their individual and collective responsibility to improve the civic health of their community.** This responsibility was imbued in the founding documents of our nation, as the Framers saw the “pursuit of happiness” laid out in the Declaration of Independence as a cooperative endeavor, one that required a citizenry engaged in their government and the health of their communities.

CONCLUSION

America’s civic health drives so much that we the people care about – the prosperity and happiness of individuals and families, the strength and cohesion of communities, the opportunities provided by a robust economy, and the freedom and self-rule enabled by our democracy. Alarmingly, many of the trends in this report point to dwindling levels of civic engagement and community participation that, if continued, will lead to the spread of civic desserts, where lack of opportunity for civic engagement are the norm. Yet, hope spots still exist in emerging technologies and new generations of leaders answering the call to help their fellow Americans Now, in the face of renewed threats to our experiment in democracy, as well as the fraying of cities and communities, is the time to band together and forge a path to a civic renewal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ENDNOTES

- 1 General Social Survey data analyzed by Peter Levine: see "The hollowing out of US democracy," January 12, 2017 at <http://peterlevine.ws/?p=17944>. Chart created by Peter Levine.
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