2023 ARKANSAS CIVIC HEALTH INDEX™

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ENGAGE ARKANSAS

Engage Arkansas is an Arkansas initiative to inspire and advance civic engagement to help combat social inequities and strengthen local communities. As the primary coordinating entity supporting the Governor's Commission on National Service and Volunteerism, we are responsible for inspiring and sustaining civic engagement by supporting local civic services, community education, and the promotion of partner program opportunities. Our staff advocates for such solutions and purposefully partners with government agencies, municipalities, education systems, and nonprofit or faith-based sectors to help create impact, benefiting communities and families statewide.

WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE

The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute is a nonprofit organization that continues Winthrop Rockefeller's collaborative approach to creating transformational change through a combination of place, people, and process. Located on Governor Rockefeller's former cattle farm atop Petit Jean Mountain in Central Arkansas, the Institute engages participants in solving problems and creating opportunities through its method called the "Rockefeller Ethic," which prioritizes collaborative problem solving, respectful dialogue, and diversity of opinion.

CENTRAL ARKANSAS LIBRARY SYSTEM

The Central Arkansas Library System provides resources and services to help residents reach their full potential, and to inspire discovery, learning, and cultural expression. With its headquarters at the Little Rock Main Library, CALS serves a local population of 402,366 and is Arkansas's largest public library system. Its fourteen libraries are located in the City of Little Rock (Main Little Rock Library and eight branches), Pulaski County (Wrightsville, Jacksonville, Sherwood, and Maumelle, AR), and Perry County (Perryville, AR).

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS CLINTON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE

The Clinton School of Public Service at the University of Arkansas, the first in the nation to offer a Master of Public Service, gives students the knowledge and experience to further their careers in the areas of nonprofit, governmental, volunteer, or private sector service. Located on the grounds of the William J. Clinton Presidential Center & Park in downtown Little Rock, Arkansas, the school embodies President Clinton's vision of building leadership in civic engagement and enhancing people's capacity to work across disciplinary, racial, ethnic, and geographical boundaries.

ARKANSAS PEACE & JUSTICE MEMORIAL MOVEMENT

The Arkansas Peace and Justice Memorial Movement embodies a statewide collective effort to acknowledge and learn from our shared documented history of hundreds of incidents of extra-legal racial, political, and religious violence and injustices, with the goal of creating meaningful avenues for transformative peace and restorative justice through truth-seeking and reconciliation.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is a congressionally chartered organization dedicated to strengthening civic life in America. We pursue our mission through a nationwide network of partners involved in a cutting-edge civic health initiative and our cross-sector conferences. At the core of our joint efforts is the belief that every person has the ability to help their community and country thrive. ncoc.org

This report was produced in collaboration with the National Conference on Citizenship, Engage Arkansas, the Arkansas Community Foundation, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Americans for Prosperity Foundation, the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, the Central Arkansas Library System, the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service, the Arkansas Peace and Justice Memorial Movement, Investing in Black Futures, Rural Community Alliance, and Veterans Future Foundation. Partial funding was also provided by McMaster University under the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada-funded project "Participedia Phase Two: Strengthening Democracy by Mobilizing Knowledge of Democratic Innovations" (Dr. Bonny Ibhawoh, Principal Investigator).

Cover Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

The main source of information in this report is periodic supplements—on topics such as voting, civic engagement, and volunteering—to the U.S Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), which poses questions to approximately 60,000 households around the U.S. From that data, this report focuses on: 1) levels of political, civic, and social engagement among Arkansans, 2) comparisons of Arkansas with U.S. national averages, and 3) characteristics that may be associated with participation, such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, income, and education. The survey findings reported here, unless otherwise noted, are obtained from the CPS data, which cover the years 1972 through 2020, and the precise year for data is noted in each section. Other sources of numerical data in the report are J. O. Ajayi and M. Kalulu, *Access Arkansas: County and City Web Transparency* (4th ed., 2023);[1] the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement; the American National Election Studies 2020 time-series study; data on local newspaper availability from the University of North Carolina Hussman School of Journalism and Media; and data on ownership of local radio stations from the U.S. Federal Communications Commission. Moreover, the report presents qualitative results of interviews with Arkansas nonprofit leaders, civic leaders, public-engagement professionals, and residents about coalitions across sectors to address social issues, as well as political, civic, and social engagement and local civic spaces. While the report's quantitative findings are based on a scientifically valid and representative sample of residents, each estimate features a small margin of error; as a result, small differences in percentages may not be statistically significant.

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ARKANSAS CIVIC HEALTH CHECKUP

Citizen engagement is vital for the flourishing of democracy and communities. Active citizen engagement can increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies and programs, and heighten public officials' accountability, leading to better governance. Those who favor a smaller government promote energetic civic engagement as key to ensuring that the civil, religious, and business sectors of society have the capacity to deliver effective public services.[2] Further, civic health is associated with greater economic growth and improved physical health outcomes for citizens.[3]

To gauge the civic health of a state, three kinds of civic engagement can be examined: citizens' direct participation in politics through voting, political activity beyond elections, and connectedness to their families, neighbors, and communities. By registering to vote and voting in local, state, and national elections, citizens exercise control over their leaders and ultimately over policy, control that is especially valued by Arkansans, whose state motto is "Regnat populus": the people rule. Engaging with politics beyond the ballot box—such as through political conversations with family and friends, participating in informed discussions and debates on the issues, attending local government meetings, and communicating with public officials—strengthens our democracy by helping residents learn about and generate solutions to public issues. Moreover, building ties to fellow residents through neighborly conversations, memberships in local organizations, volunteering, and donating to worthy causes nurtures thriving local communities.[4] The Civic Health Index framework[5] complements other, broader models of civic engagement, such as the Active Citizen Continuum and The Points of Light *Civic Circle*.[6]

Further, this report augments the civic health index's measures with additional indicators. Among these are citizens' trust in government and one another, the extent to which nonprofit organizations build coalitions across sectors to address complex issues, the transparency of local government information on the web, the availability of newspapers and radio stations as well as other sources of public-affairs information, and physical and online spaces in local communities where residents can gather to discuss public matters.

With regard to the civic health index framework, although many sources assess one or another aspect of civic health in Arkansas, no published work appears to have evaluated all three.[7] What's more, rising political polarization in Arkansas and throughout the United States lends urgency to the creation of a broad review of the quality of civic engagement in our state. Therefore, the partner organizations have cooperated to produce this initial civic health index report for Arkansas, as a baseline from which to judge the course of civic engagement in this state in the years to come.

Please note that in the results from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey presented in this report, information for Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American residents is not included, in order to protect survey respondents' confidentiality due to small sample sizes.

Photo Credit: Engage Arkansas

KEY FINDINGS

Arkansas has the lowest voter registration and voter turnout rates in national elections of any U.S. state, and voter turnout has declined in the past two generations. Registration and turnout rates are lower for men than for women, and are particularly low among Black Arkansans, individuals with lower levels of educational attainment, and younger generations. An exception among the latter category is undergraduate students, whose registration and turnout rates rose substantially in 2020. Obstacles to voting identified by residents included lengthy lines at polling places, a lack of transportation to the polls in rural areas, and disqualification for past criminal convictions.

Arkansans who are eligible to vote report having lower levels of trust in the U.S. federal government, news media, and other people, but higher levels of trust in election officials, than the national average.

Arkansans' involvement in non-electoral politics and informal political conversation is close to national averages, except that Arkansans are somewhat less likely to attend political meetings and much less likely to donate to political organizations than U.S. citizens on average. In terms of discussing public issues with family and friends or contacting or visiting public officials, Black citizens, citizens with low incomes, and citizens with lower levels of educational attainment are less likely than white citizens, the more affluent, and those with some college education, respectively, to engage in those forms of participation.

Arkansas exceeds the national average in donations to religious and charitable organizations and in membership in community groups, but is somewhat below the national average in volunteering. The reported rate of donating was lower among men than women, and the reported rates of both donating and volunteering were lower among Black Arkansans than white Arkansans, and lower among those with smaller incomes and less education than among higher earners and those with at least some college education.

On measures of social connectedness,[8] Arkansas surpasses the national average in neighborliness and spending time with family and friends. Yet Arkansas underperforms the nation on average in neighbors' cooperating to help the local community.

Arkansas has a robust practice of collective impact through various partnerships, mostly regional, between faith-based communities, nonprofit organizations, benevolent societies, and grassroots groups, dating back to 1999, that have focused mainly on youth health outcomes, various aspects of the carceral system, public school education and voter registration. Yet a lack of emphasis on civic engagement in civics instruction in public schools coupled with inadequate financial support for cross-sector coalitions hinders the effectiveness of collective-impact organizing in the state.

With respect to information about public affairs that Arkansans need to be civically engaged, in recent years Arkansas county governments have made substantial improvements in making available fiscal, and to a lesser extent administrative and political, information on their public websites. Yet most information about local government budgets, administration, and political matters remains unavailable from a substantial share of Arkansas county and city government websites.

Arkansans also rely on newspapers and radio stations for information about state and local public issues. Regarding newspapers, the number of newspapers and their circulation are declining, and more than half of Arkansas counties have only a single newspaper, though online news outlets, Black- or Latino-owned media organizations, and public broadcasting stations remain important news sources. In terms of radio stations, a large share of Arkansas stations are controlled by out-of-state media organizations that have little incentive to provide substantive coverage of Arkansas state or local news. In interviews, Arkansas residents, ranging from young adults through senior citizens, reported relying most frequently on social media and family and friends for their news and analysis of the issues, and somewhat less often on newspaper articles.

Interviews with Arkansas residents showed regular use of physical civic spaces, and to a lesser extent online civic spaces, in local communities. Residents gave generally high ratings to the quality of those indoor spaces. Some public officials of small municipalities criticized the physical or online civic spaces in their local communities, and expressed a desire for improvements, but funding was perceived as an obstacle.

Civic leaders and engagement professionals underline strengths and successes in civic engagement in Arkansas, including the state's small size; high levels of neighborliness; rural customs of friendliness, respect, camaraderie, and employing creativity to engage residents effectively; experiences with successful public-engagement efforts in urban and suburban areas and by means of coalitions of diverse types of organizations; and effective media campaigns to reframe major public issues such as poverty. Yet the state faces formidable challenges to improving civic engagement, among them political polarization, extensive rurality, substantial poverty, distrust along racial lines, and inadequate funding for citizen-engagement efforts.

CONTEXT

Arkansas's history and economic development have yielded substantial challenges to achieving robust civic health, as well as formidable assets that can contribute to improvements in citizen engagement throughout the state.

Among the challenges to civic health in Arkansas are interrelated characteristics of poverty, rurality, a legacy of racial injustice, and a weak labor movement. Arkansas has long had among the highest rates of poverty in the U.S.[9] Some rural areas of the state are part of the Black Belt, a region spanning several southern states and characterized by persistent poverty and social and racial inequality.[10] Related to high rates of poverty in the state is its rurality. Arkansas is among the most rural states in the U.S. Rural residents, who make up two-fifths of Arkansas's population, have higher rates of poverty and ill health than urban and suburban residents, while facing difficulties of communication—exacerbated by incomplete broadband internet coverage—transportation, and coordination of actions across distances.[11] An emphasis on agriculture in the state's economic strategy contributed to a neglect of public education, particularly in rural regions of the state, until the late twentieth century.[12] Magnifying rural coordination challenges in Arkansas is the fragmentation of governance among hundreds of small municipal governments.[13] Further, Arkansas's history of racial injustice poses challenges to civic engagement. Black Arkansans' experiences of enslavement, forced displacement, and subjection to Jim Crow segregation have left deep feelings of distrust of institutions—worsened by recent voter-suppression laws that constrain access to the ballot—and cross-racial coalitions.[14] Moreover, the weakness of organized labor in Arkansas[15] has meant that few state residents have benefited from union practices of civic involvement. One outcome of these challenges is that women and people of color remain underrepresented in elected offices in the state.[16]

Nonetheless, several factors could contribute to civic health in Arkansas. For example, complementing Arkansas's strong system of higher education, the state's K-12 public education system has markedly improved since the mid-twentieth century, and includes standards for high-school civics instruction. Yet those standards omit training in practices of public engagement and deliberative discussion.[17] Revising those standards to include this training could be difficult because such training may be perceived as biased or partisan. Another asset is Arkansas's excellent health and hospital system, although incomplete access to that system has contributed to pronounced inequalities in health outcomes, especially among lower-income, Black, and rural residents.[18] Like poverty, ill health limits the capacity of residents and their caregivers to be civically engaged. Arkansas also boasts a vital nonprofit sector. That sector suffers from fragmentation, however, and often a lack of coordination among organizations with similar goals. Finally, Arkansas's long-established statewide ballot-initiative process enables citizens to write and enact their own laws, such as increases to the minimum wage.[19] In recent years, however, attempts have been made to impede the ballot-initiative process, such as a successful 2023 measure that expanded from 15 to 50 the number of counties from which signatures must be obtained for initiative and referendum measures, and a failed 2022 effort to require a supermajority to approve a measure. [20]

Photo Credit: Engage Arkansas

Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

Photo Credit: Arkansas Peace and Justice Memorial Movement

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Voter Registration and Turnout

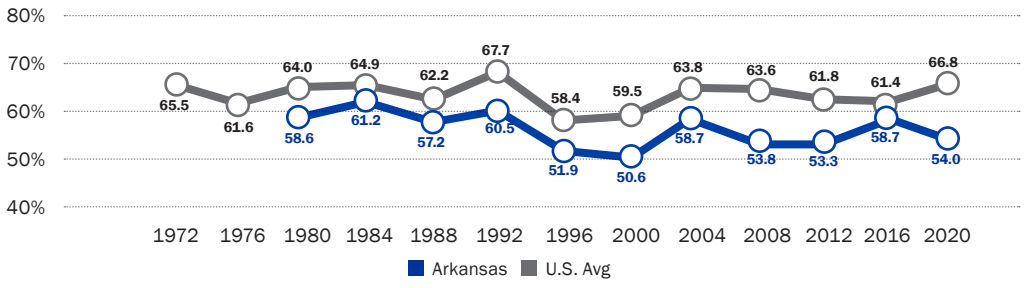
Regarding the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Arkansas ranked 51st in political participation, the lowest of all states plus the District of Columbia, with 62% of eligible citizens registered to vote and 54% voting.[21] This is well below the U.S. national average of 72.7% of citizens being registered to vote and 66.8% voting.

Arkansas has consistently ranked below the national average in voter turnout, with 2016 having the smallest gap with less than three percentage points of difference. However, the gap increased in 2020 conveying the greatest disparity of more than 12 percentage points between Arkansas and the U.S. Additionally, with respect to voter turnout in local elections, 44.7% of Arkansans reported that they voted in the last local election in 2021, compared to a nationwide average of 55.3%.[22]

44.7%

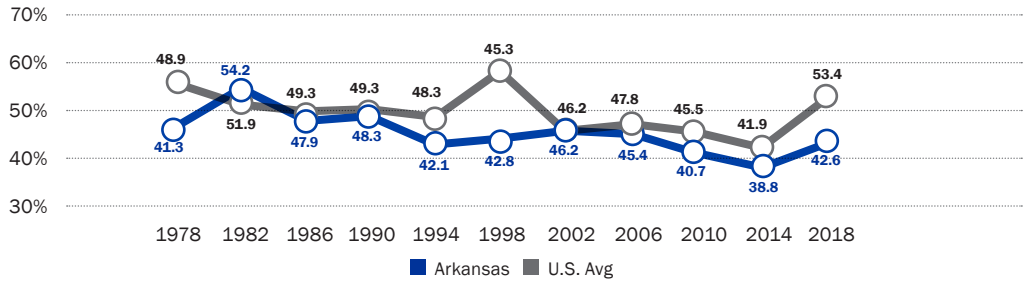
of Arkansans reported that they voted in the last local election in 2021, compared to a nationwide average of 55.3%.

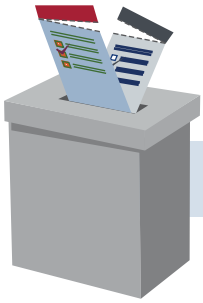
Chart 1. Arkansas Voter Turnout During Presidential Election Years 1972 - 2020



Arkansas displays fewer differences with the national voter turnout for midterm elections, however. In 1982, Arkansas surpassed the national voter turnout with 54.2%. However, the gap widened in 2018 with more than 10 percentage points of difference between Arkansas and the national voter turnout.

Chart 2. Arkansas Voter Turnout During Midterm Election Years 1978 - 2018



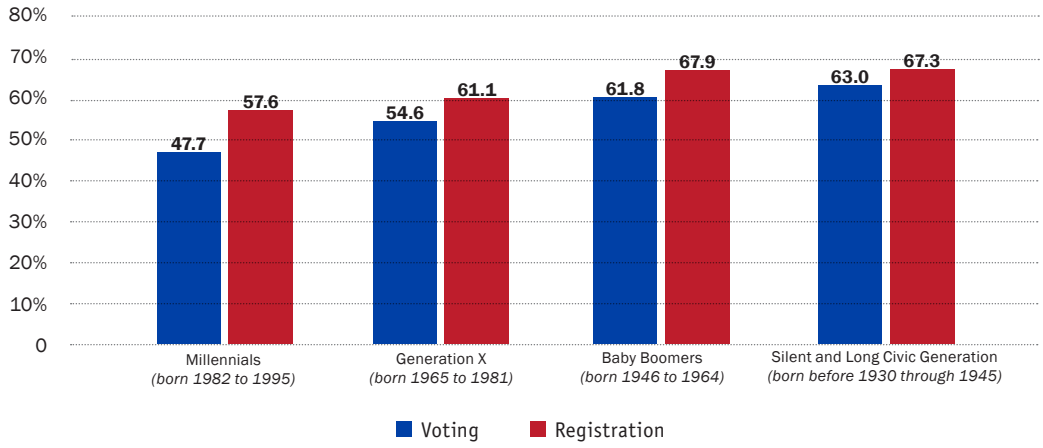


Voted in Last Local Election in 2020

Arkansas 44.7% **U.S. Average** 55.3%

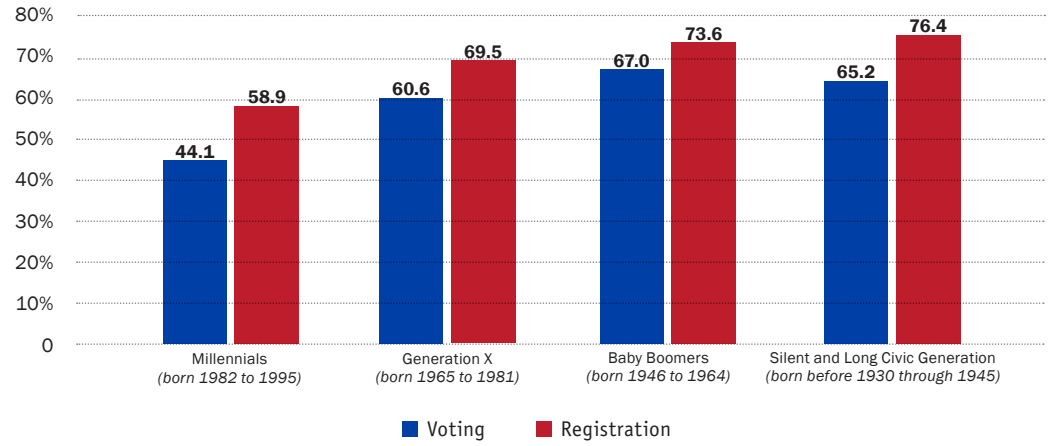
In Arkansas, there is a large gap among generational groups when it comes to voting, with older Arkansans being registered to vote at much higher levels than younger Arkansans. Only 47.7% of Millennials voted in the 2020 election, while 63% of the Silent and Long Civic Generation (consisting of the "Long Civic Generation" born before 1930 and the "Silent Generation" born from 1930 through 1945) voted. The voting turnout rate of older Arkansans is close to the national voting turnout rate.

Chart 3. Arkansas Voting During the 2020 Presidential Election Year by Age



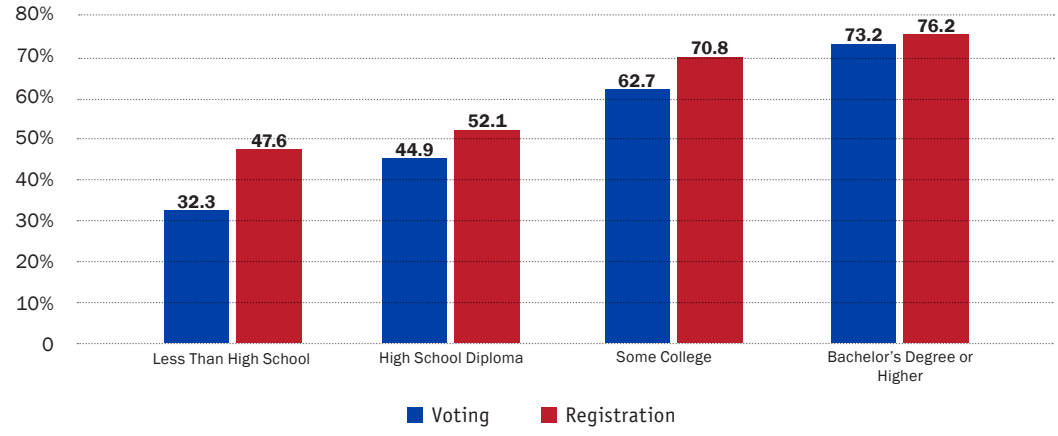
In 2020, more Millennials voted than in 2016 with 47.7% of Millennials voting in 2020. However, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent and Long Civic Generation had a decrease in voting in 2020 compared to 2016. Generation X had the largest decrease in voting by six percentage points. For all age groups, registration rates were higher in 2016 than in 2020.

Chart 4. Arkansas Voting During the 2016 Presidential Election Year by Age



The figure below depicts the strong correlation between educational attainment and voter registration and turnout in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Only 32.3% of Arkansans aged 25 years or older with no high school diploma voted, while 73.2% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher turned out to vote.

Chart 5. Arkansas Voting During the 2020 Presidential Election by Education Level



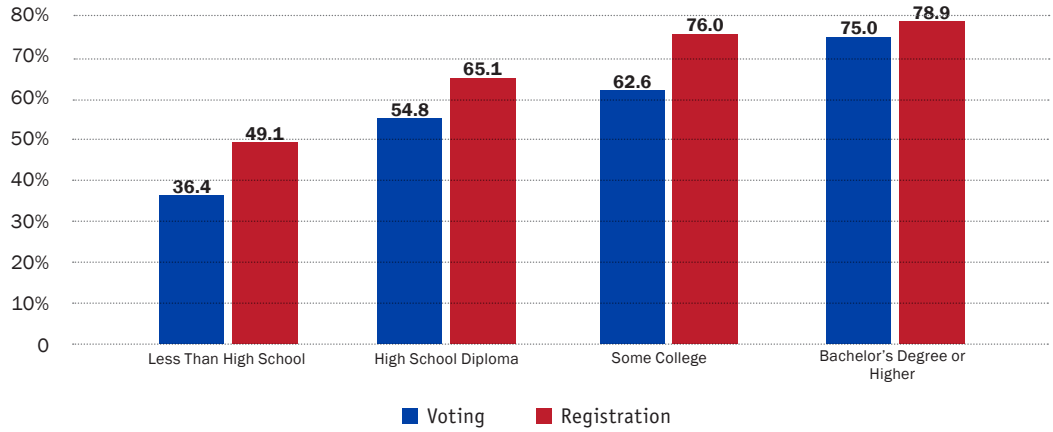
Note. This chart reflects those 25 years and older

Arkansas' voting rates in most education categories decreased in 2020 compared to 2016. However, the voting rates for Arkansas residents with some college education stayed approximately the same. Registration rates decreased in all education categories. Those with a High School Diploma had the largest decrease in voting by approximately 10 percentage points and the most significant decrease in registration rates by 13 percentage points.

73.2%

of Arkansans with a Bachelor's degree or higher reported that they voted in the last local election in 2021, compared to 32.3% with no high school diploma.

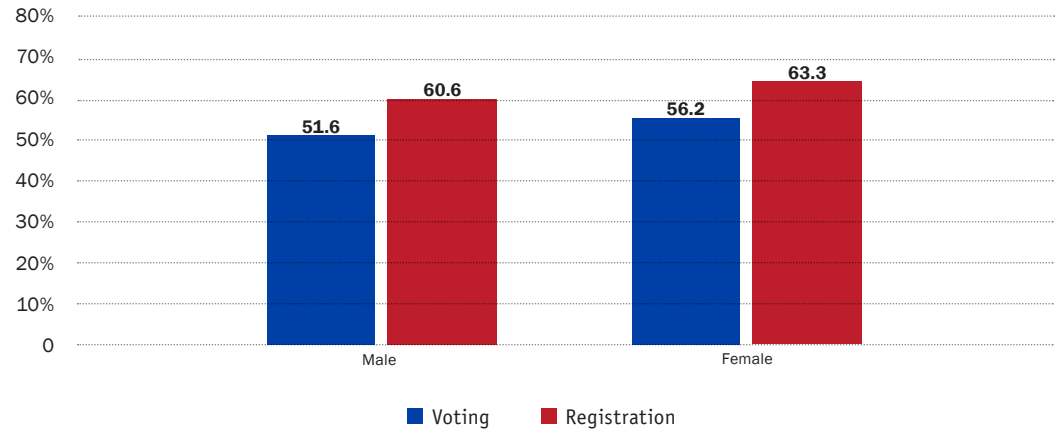
Chart 6. Arkansas Voting During the 2016 Presidential Election by Education Level



Note. This chart reflects those 25 years and older[23]

The chart below indicates that female Arkansans were more likely to be registered to vote (63.3%) and participate in voting (56.2%) in 2020, compared to male Arkansans (60.6% and 51.6%, respectively).

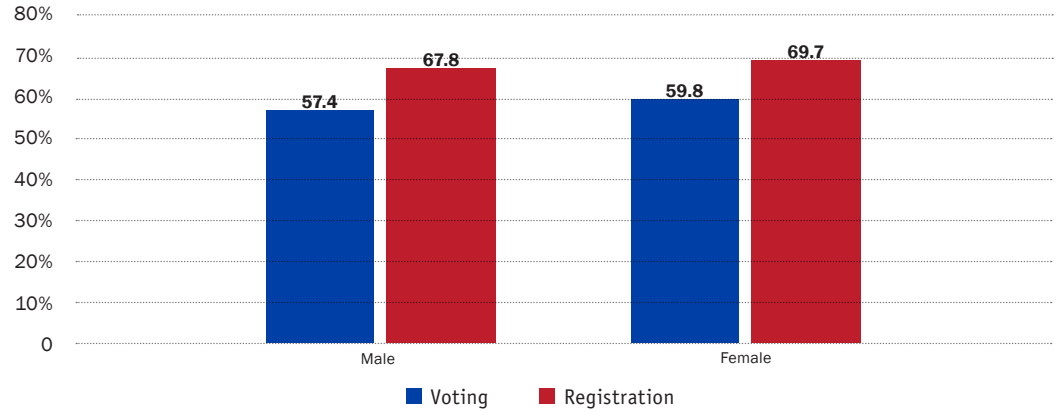
Chart 7. Arkansas Voting During the 2020 Presidential Election by Gender



Voting and registration rates decreased for males and females between 2016 and 2020. Males had the largest decreases in voting by 5.8 percentage points and registration by 7.2 percentage points. Moreover, the gap between male and female voting rates widened in 2020 compared to 2016.

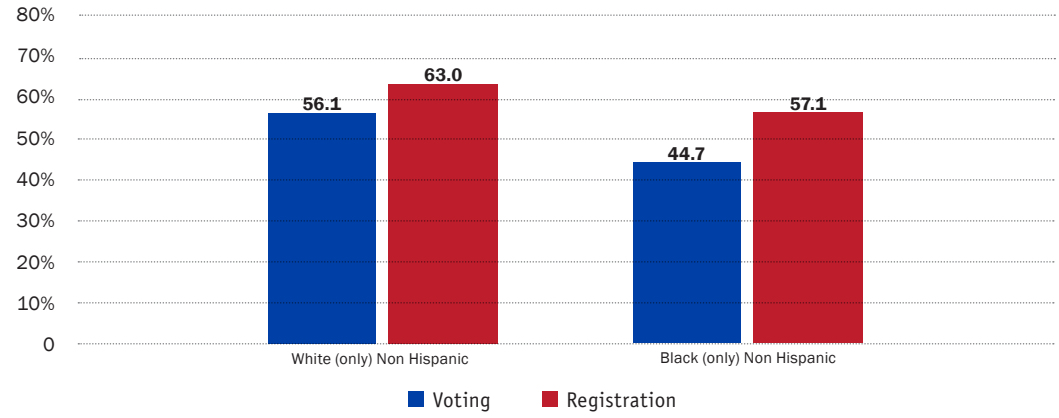
Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

Chart 8. Arkansas Voting During the 2016 Presidential Election by Gender



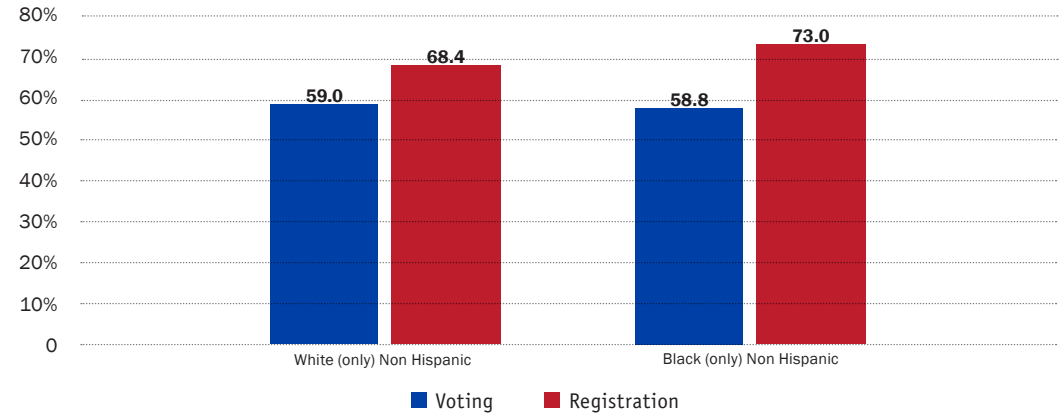
As can be seen below, both voter registration and turnout rates for Black Arkansans (57.1% and 44.7%) were much lower than the rates for their white counterparts (63% and 56.1%) in 2020.

Chart 9. Arkansas Voting During the 2020 Presidential Election by Race



In 2020, voting and registration rates decreased for white and Black residents compared to 2016. Black Arkansans had a significant decrease in voting and registration by 14.1 and 15.9 percentage points respectively. Additionally, the voting gap between white and Black Arkansans increased significantly in 2020.

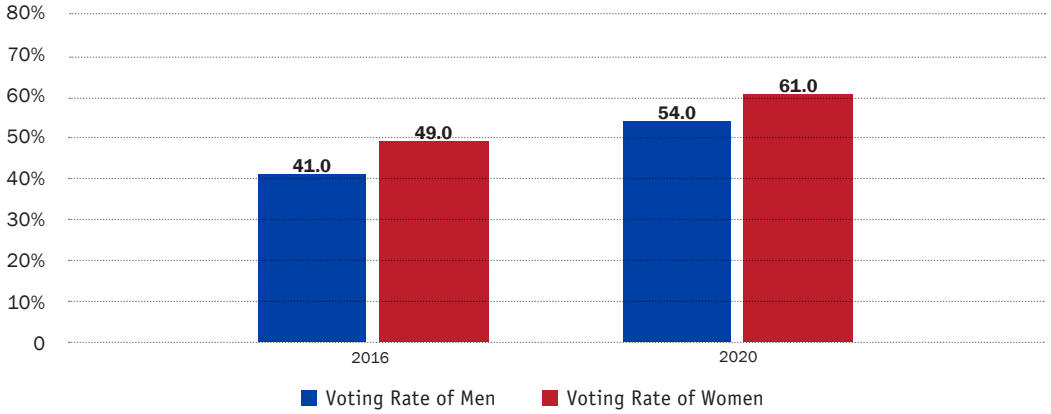
Chart 10. Arkansas Voting During the 2016 Presidential Election by Race

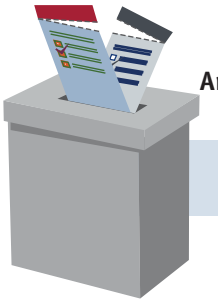


Campus Voter Registration and Turnout

According to data on student voting patterns at 12 Arkansas colleges and universities from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, student voting rates in Arkansas increased by 16 percentage points between 2016 and 2020, with 57% of students voting in 2020. In 2020, 61% of women voted compared to 54% of men. However, the student voting gender gap decreased by one percentage point from 2016.

Chart 11. Arkansas Student Voting Rate by Gender in 2016 and 2020



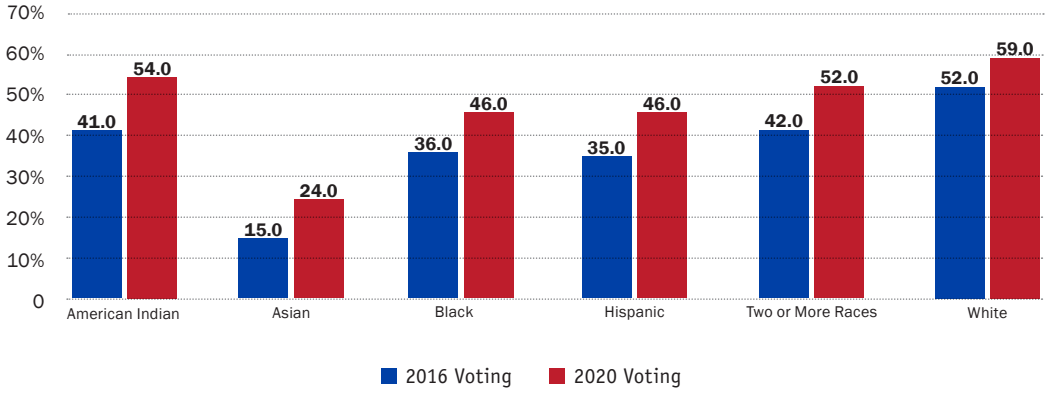


Arkansas Student Voting Rate (Age 18-21) in 2016 and 2020

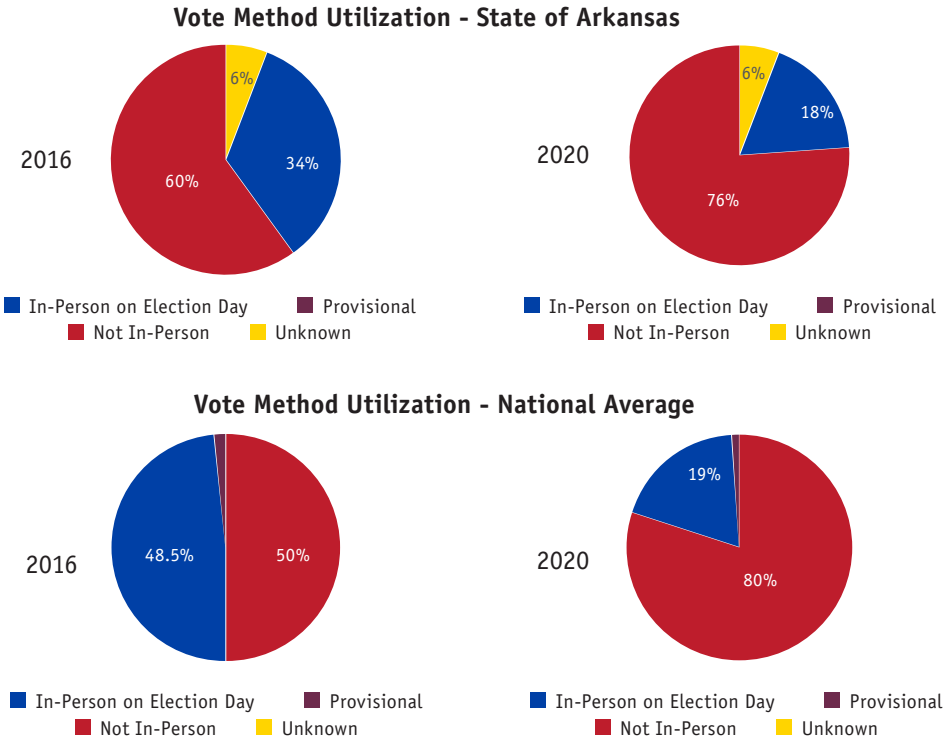
2016	41%	2020	57%

American Indian students[24] in Arkansas had the greatest increase in voting participation, by 13 percentage points between 2016 and 2020. Asian students had the lowest voting turnout, with 24% voting in 2020. White students had the highest voting turnout with 59% voting, followed by American Indians (54%) and Two or More Races (52%) in 2020.

Chart 12. Arkansas Student Voting Rate by Race and Ethnicity in 2016 and 2020



Although in 2016 the rate of in-person voting on election day among Arkansas students fell below the national average, that gap closed almost completely in 2020 under the circumstances of voting during the pandemic, as shown in the following figure.



Interview Responses on Voting

In interviews,[25] Arkansas residents described their reasons for voting and what voting meant to them. Most said they believed their votes could influence election outcomes; "my one vote could make a change," said one resident. Several residents asserted that voting enabled their voice to be heard. A number of residents said norms motivated them to vote, whether norms set by parents or a sense of "civic responsibility," in the words of one resident. Three residents declared that voting entitled them to complain about the government. For two residents, voting was an expression of their right to choose their leaders. Moreover, for two other residents, voting meant freedom: as one of these residents put it, "that we're free to choose who we want to lead us."

Of difficulties with voting, the most common one described by residents was long lines and wait times at the polls. One resident told of "people that had to leave the line to vote to get back to work because the line to vote was too long. Very long." Further, two residents of rural communities identified a lack of transportation to polling places as a barrier to voting. Other voting difficulties mentioned by residents were disqualification for past criminal convictions, having ballots rejected for failure to use the required "writing utensil," and voter intimidation in the form of threats expressed by other community members.

When asked why some Arkansans do not vote, five residents spoke of feeling that one's voice or vote did not matter. "They don't feel that their voices are being heard," said one resident. Other reasons for not voting described by interview participants were dissatisfaction with candidates, distrust of government, a lack of sufficient education or information to make an informed vote, expectations that the voting process would be difficult, characterizing oneself as "just not political," and apathy or free riding.

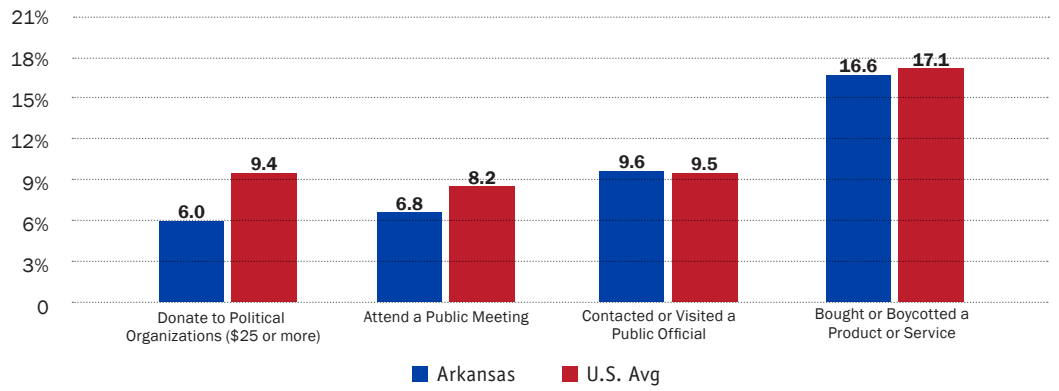
When asked what they would change about voting or voter registration, participants proposed several reforms. Two residents of rural communities recommended improved transportation to the polls in order to increase voter turnout. Other suggestions included providing "more accessible voting locations," making "election day a holiday," expanding access to voting by mail and early voting, removing impediments to voting based on one's "background or criminal history," and enabling automatic voter registration when obtaining a driver's license for purposes of saving citizens' time.

Photo Credit: Arkansas Peace and Justice Memorial Movement

Other Forms of Political Participation

The graph below illustrates the most common forms of non-voting political participation among Arkansans. The most frequent type of political participation is buying or boycotting a product or service, with 16.6% of Arkansans buying or boycotting compared to the national rate of 17.1%. Arkansans contacted or visited a public official at nearly the same rate as the U.S. average.

Chart 13. Arkansas Other Forms of Political Participation



Arkansans who have a higher income are more likely to contact or visit a public official. Of Arkansans earning $75,000 or more, 16.1% contacted or visited a public official compared to 5.3% of Arkansans earning less than $35,000 or earning $50,000 to $74,999.

Contacting or Visiting a Public Official by Income Level

Less than $35,000	5.3%
$35,000 to $49,999	13.0%
$50,000 to $74,999	5.3%
$75,000 or more	16.1%

The rate of contacting or visiting a public official was higher among white Arkansans (10.7%) than their Black counterparts (4.5%). Also, male Arkansas residents (10.3%) are slightly more likely to contact or visit public officials compared to females (8.9%).

Contacting or Visiting a Public Official by Gender and Race

White (only) Non Hispanic	10.7%
Black (only) Non Hispanic	4.5%
Male	10.3%
Female	8.9%

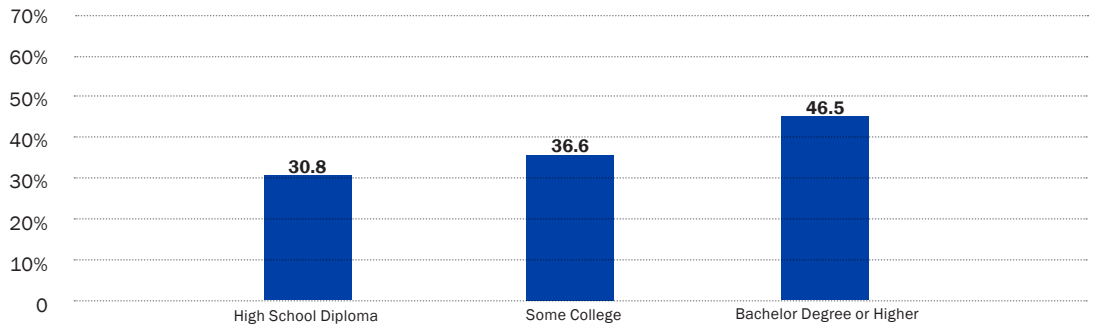
Discussing Politics

Arkansas ranks 32nd in the share of residents who frequently discuss political, societal, or local issues with family or friends. In Arkansas, 35.2% of residents frequently discuss these issues, which almost exactly matches the national average of 35.1%.[26]

DISCUSSING POLITICS	State	National	2021 Rank[27]
Discuss political, societal or local issues with family or friends - Frequently	35.2%	35.1%	32nd
Discuss political, societal or local issues with neighbors - Frequently	6.3%	7.9%	44th

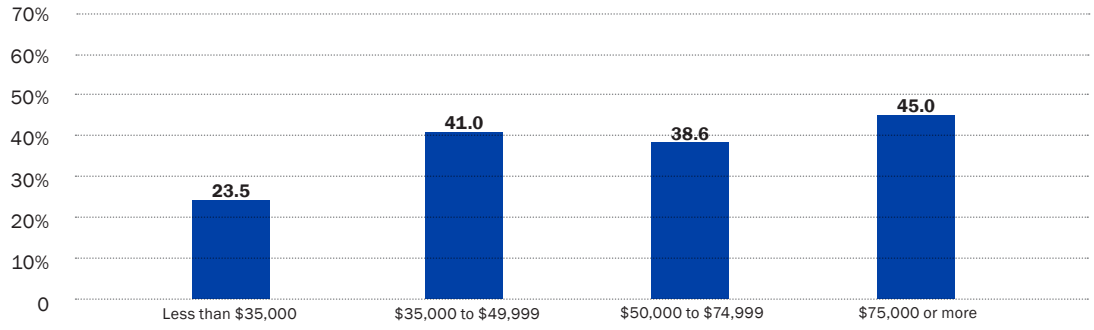
Arkansans 25 years old and older who have attained a higher level of education are more likely to frequently discuss political, societal, or local issues with family or friends: 46.5% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher have discussed political issues, compared to only 30.8% of those with a high school diploma.

Chart 14. Frequently Discuss Political, Societal, or Local Issues with Family or Friends by Education Level



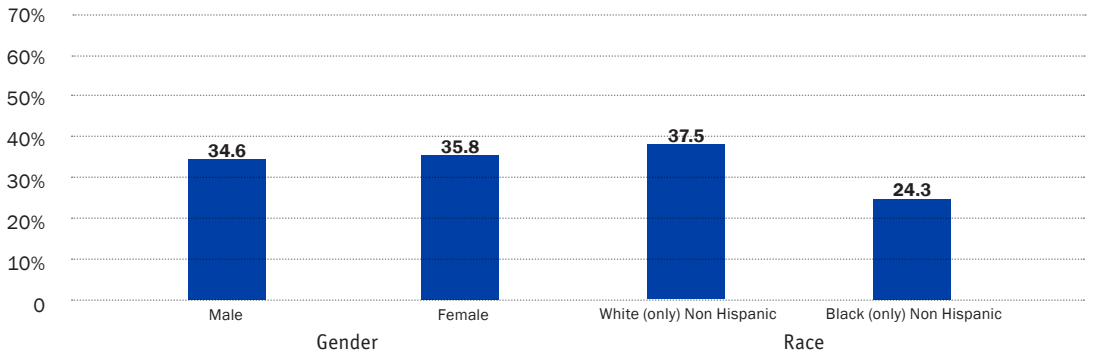
Arkansans with less income and education tend to discuss politics with less frequency. Only 23.5% of those earning less than $35,000 annually profess frequently discussing politics, while 45% of those making more than $75,000 per year report talking about politics.

Chart 15. Frequently Discuss Political, Societal, or Local Issues with Family or Friends by Income Level



The figure below depicts that white Arkansas residents (37.5%) are much more likely to frequently discuss political, societal, or local issues with family or friends, compared to their Black counterparts (24.3%). Additionally, 35.8% of female Arkansans report frequently discussing politics, while 34.6% of their male counterparts do so.

Chart 16. Frequently Discuss Political, Societal, or Local Issues with Family or Friends by Gender and Race



Interview Responses Regarding Political Talk with Family, Friends, and Neighbors

Arkansas residents identified a number of factors that influenced how often they talked about politics with family or friends. Most frequently mentioned was the context, such as a political campaign or a current issue being widely discussed at the state or local level. Three residents mentioned family norms or the "civic-minded" identity of their family as welcoming political talk, while two other residents identified people's personal stake in issues as encouraging political conversation. Three residents highlighted conflict avoidance as a motivation for refraining from political talk with friends and family. In addition, one resident referred to people's willingness discuss controversial issues, and for one resident, the diversity of political views in their family spurred political discussion.

Interview participants also described factors that discouraged them from talking about politics with their neighbors. Five residents mentioned a desire to avoid conflict, and four cited a lack of personal closeness. For other residents, community norms, a "social divide," physical distances between homes, time constraints, and neighbors' lack of awareness of public affairs influenced decisions to avoid political discussion. One resident perceived that younger neighbors tend to "like talking about politics" more than older neighbors.

Three interview participants referred to partisan polarization as an influence on whether, how, and how often they talked about politics with family, friends, or neighbors. Two residents said that they limited their political talk to family members and friends who shared the same political viewpoint, "more like-minded people" as one of these residents put it. The latter resident added that political discussions with those of different views "is difficult now" and that this difficulty differed from past experiences: "that's a very new thing." Another resident reported avoiding political discussions with neighbors due to heightened conflict across political differences, because "people hold their political views as a part of their identity now … so when you have conversations, it feels threatening to them."

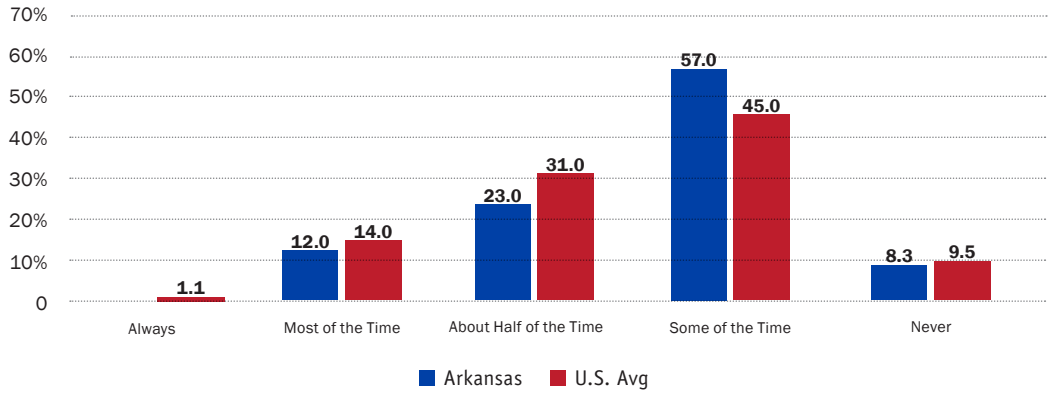
TRUST

Data on trust comes from the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Study, which conducted 8,280 pre-election and 7,449 post-election interviews of U.S. eligible voters between August and December 2020.

Trust in the Federal Government

Arkansans surveyed expressed lower levels of trust in the federal government than did U.S. voters on average. Just over a third (35%) of Arkansas eligible voters reported trusting the federal government in Washington at least half of the time, compared to a national average of 46%. On this measure of trust, Arkansas ranks 49th out of all the states and the District of Columbia.

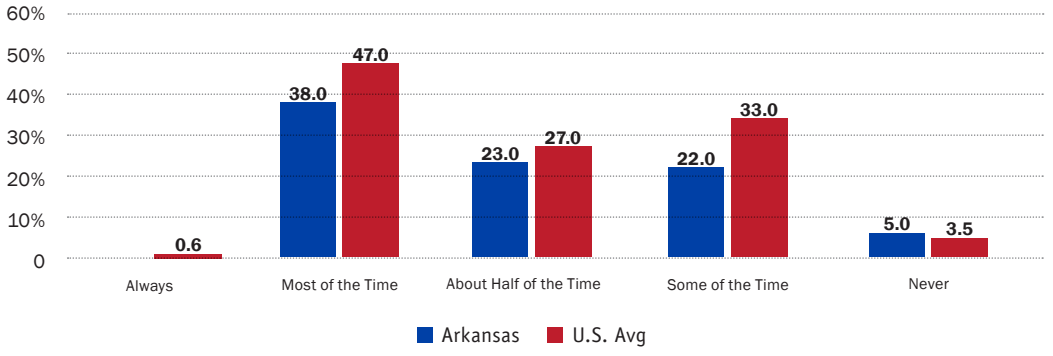
Chart 17. How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?



Trust in Other People

In Arkansas, voters' trust in other people is also below the national average. Just over three-fifths (61%) of eligible Arkansas voters said they trust other people at least half of the time, whereas nationally, the figure was almost three-fourths of eligible voters (74.6%). Arkansas ranks 48th of the 50 states and the District of Columbia on trust in other people.

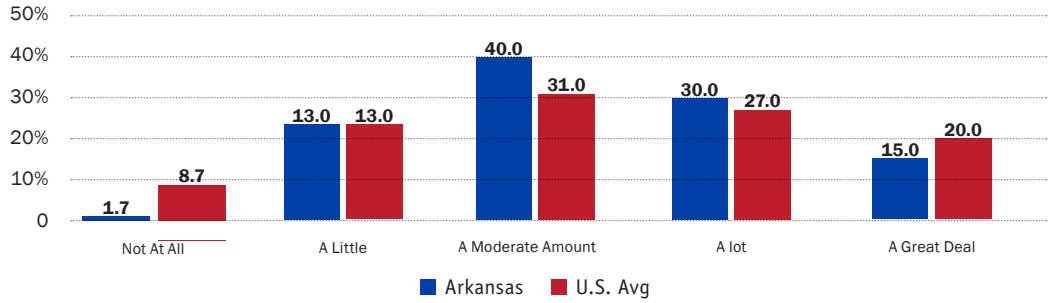
Chart 18. Generally speaking, how often can you trust other people?



Trust in the Officials Who Oversee Elections

Nonetheless, Arkansans trust the officials who oversee elections at a rate above the national average. Eighty-five percent of Arkansas eligible voters trust the officials who oversee elections at least a moderate amount, compared to 78% of U.S. eligible voters on average. Arkansas ranks 30th in the nation in trusting officials who oversee elections.

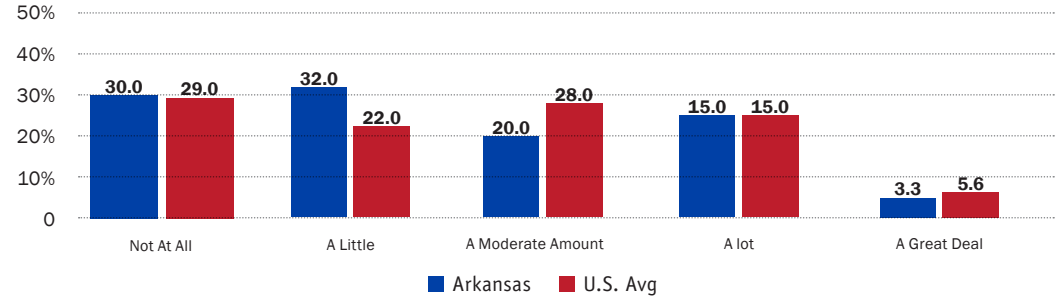
Chart 19. How much do you trust the officials who oversee elections where you live?



Trust in the News Media

More than three-fifths (62%) of Arkansas eligible voters have little to no trust that the news media reports news fully, accurately, and fairly, exemplifying lower confidence in media than the national average of 51%. Just under a third of Arkansans reported having little trust in the news media and 30% said they had no trust, whereas one-fifth reported having a moderate amount and 18% a lot or a great deal of trust in the news media.[28] Arkansas is ranked 38th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia on trust and confidence in the new media.

Chart 20. In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the news media when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?



Public Policy Decisions and Trust

In Arkansas, almost two-fifths (39%) of eligible voters trust both ordinary people and experts the same regarding public policy decisions, followed by 35% who trust experts more. The share of Arkansas eligible voters who report trusting ordinary people more (25%) on policy choices exceeds the national average of 17%.

Chart 21. When it comes to public policy decisions, whom do you tend to trust more: ordinary people, experts, or trust both the same?

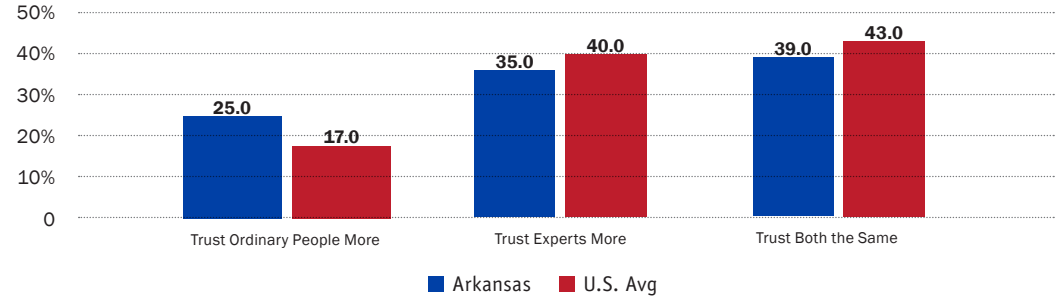


Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

CIVIC INVOLVEMENT & SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Donating

In Arkansas, the most prevalent type of civic involvement is donating. Arkansas ranks higher than other states, 23rd nationally, in donations, with 52% of Arkansans reporting giving at least $25 annually to a charitable or religious organization.[29]

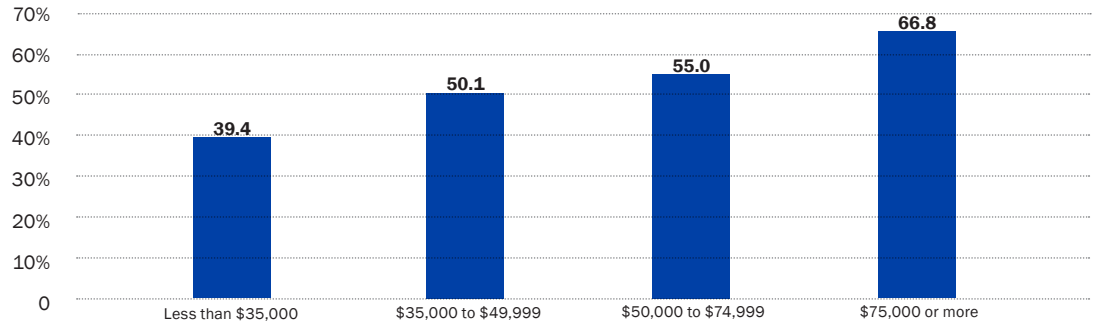
DONATING IN ARKANSAS	State	National	2021 Rank[30]
Donations to Charitable or Religious Organization ($25 or more)	52.4%	48.1%	23rd

Arkansans aged 25 years or older with higher education are more likely to donate to charitable or religious organizations. Of those in this age group, Arkansans with a high school diploma donate at a 44.4% rate, whereas Arkansans with a bachelor's degree or higher donate at a 73.0% rate.

DONATING IN ARKANSAS BY EDUCATION LEVEL	High School Diploma	Some College	Bachelor Degree or Higher
Donations to Charitable or Religious Organization ($25 or more)	44.4%	59.0%	73.0%

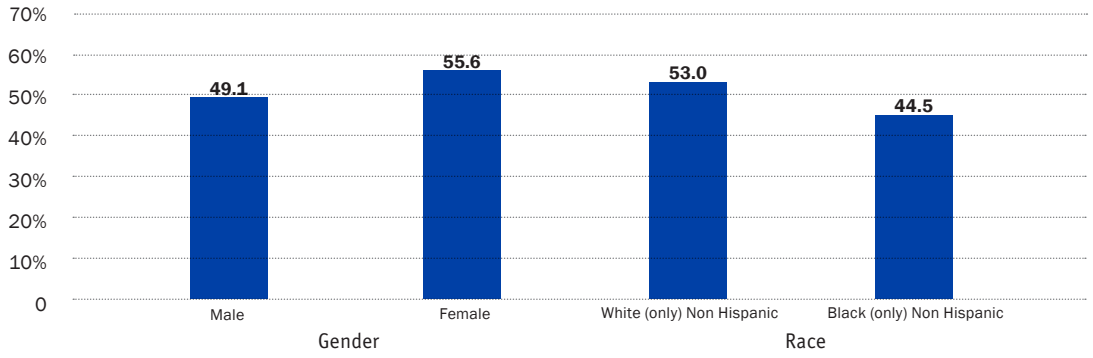
Arkansans who have a higher income are more likely to donate. Of those with incomes of $75,000 or more, 66.8% donated compared to 39.4% of those earning less than $35,000.

Chart 22. Donating by Income Level in Arkansas



Female Arkansans (55.6%) are more likely to donate compared to male Arkansans (49.1%). Additionally, 53% of white Arkansas residents donated whereas 44.5% of Black Arkansas residents did so.

Chart 23. Donating by Gender and Race in Arkansas



Volunteering

In Arkansas, 20.9% of residents reported volunteering in 2021, below the national average of 23.2%.[31] Arkansas ranked 42nd nationally in volunteering.

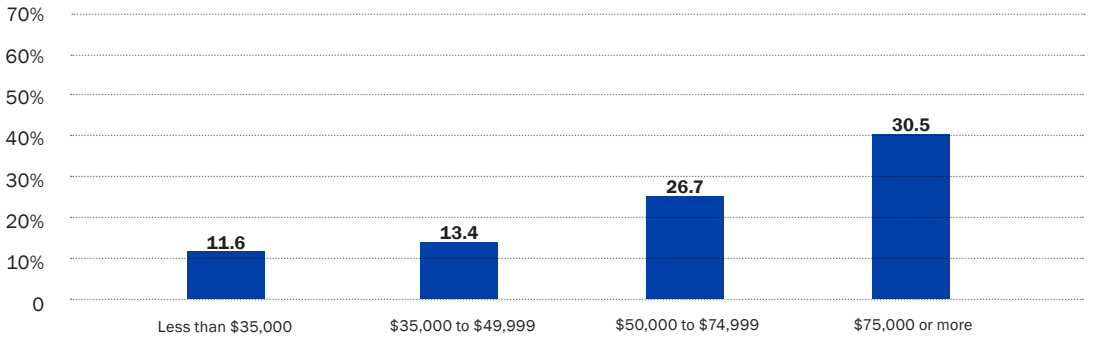
VOLUNTEERING IN ARKANSAS	State	National	2021 Rank[32]
Volunteering Rate	20.9%	23.2%	42nd

As with donations, Arkansans 25 years old or older with higher education and higher incomes tend to volunteer more: 35.0% of those in this age group with a bachelor's degree or higher volunteered compared to 10.5% of those with a high school diploma.

VOLUNTEERING IN ARKANSAS BY EDUCATION LEVEL	High School Diploma	Some College	Bachelor Degree or Higher
Volunteering Rate	10.5%	22.5%	35.0%

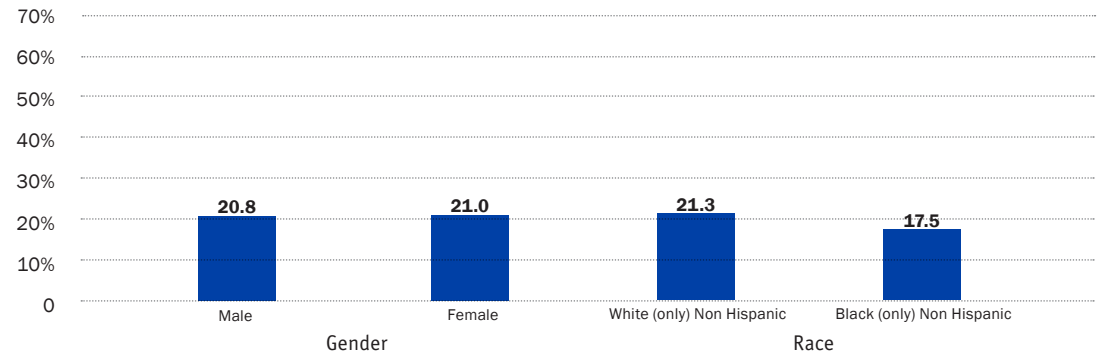
Of Arkansans earning less than $35,000 per year, 11.6% volunteered, compared to 30.5% of Arkansans earning $75,000 or more.

Chart 24. Volunteering by Income Level in Arkansas



Further, 21.3% of white Arkansans volunteered, whereas Black Arkansans did so at a 17.5% rate. Additionally, there was no meaningful difference between males and females with regard to volunteering.

Chart 25. Volunteering by Gender and Race in Arkansas



Interview Responses on Volunteering

Respecting factors that influence how often they volunteer in the community, residents most often cited a sense of responsibility, characterized either as a "need to do their part" or as "part of my civic obligation." For one resident, this feeling of responsibility arose from having been helped in the past by the organization for which they now volunteered. Multiple residents also mentioned a desire to be helpful, either to community members being served or to members of the organization being assisted by volunteers. Additional factors described by participants were that volunteering "connects me to other people" and satisfied participants' desires to "give back to my community," "share my knowledge," and "teach the kids … the importance of being involved in your community." One participant volunteered because they supported the values and mission of the organization, as well as because of the opportunity to volunteer with a family member. Finally, one factor was the effects of civics instruction, in which a mandatory volunteering requirement for an academic course developed into a rewarding habit; as one resident characterized this motivation: "At first it was a class requirement, but then after that I kept doing it a little bit more, just because I feel good volunteering." Regarding impediments to volunteering, one participant referred to difficulty finding information about volunteering opportunities in their local community.

Citizen Committees and Volunteer Programs

Survey responses from current or former mayors of small towns in Arkansas regarding the citizen committees and volunteer programs available in their communities identified the state's official cleanup and recycling program, Keep Arkansas Beautiful, and food pantries as most widely available, followed by senior-center volunteer programs.

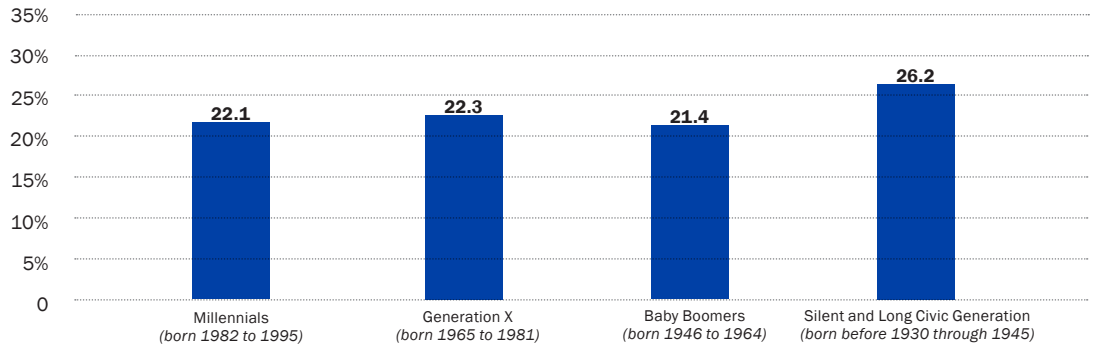
Group Involvement

Arkansas surpassed the national average in membership in community groups, and ranked 34th in group participation nationally, with 23.1% of Arkansans participating in at least one group.[33]

GROUP INVOLVEMENT IN ARKANSAS	State	National	Rank 2021[34]
Belong to any group	23.1%	17.1%	34th

Generally, group involvement grows as age, education, income, and employment increase: 26.2% of the Silent and Long Civic Generation are members of groups, whereas only 22.1% of Millennials are part of groups.

Chart 26. Group Involvement by Age in Arkansas

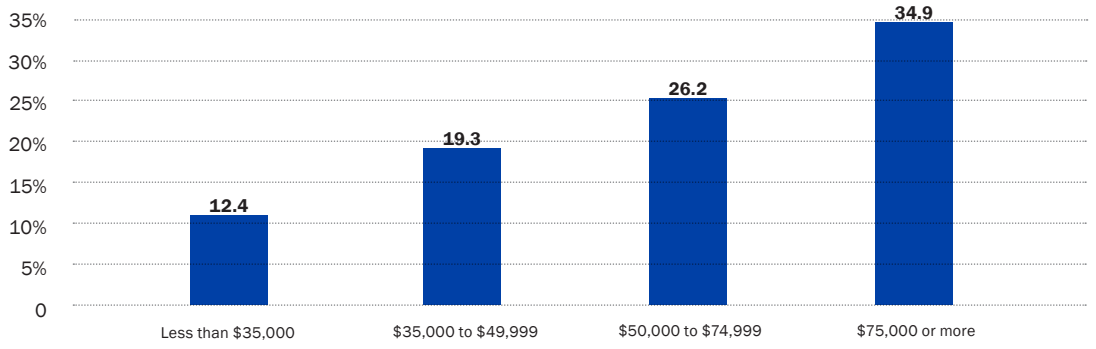


In Arkansas, group involvement increases as education increases. Of Arkansans aged 25 years or older, those with a bachelor's degree or higher are members of a group at a rate of 37.2%, while only 11.8% of those with a high school diploma are members of a group

GROUP INVOLVEMENT BY EDUCATION LEVEL	High School Diploma	Some College	Bachelor Degree or Higher
Belong to any group	11.8%	26.5%	37.2%

Group membership also increases as income rises. Only 12.4% of Arkansans earning less than $35,000 are members of a group, whereas 34.9% of those earning $75,000 or more are involved in a group.

Chart 27. Group Involvement by Income Level in Arkansas

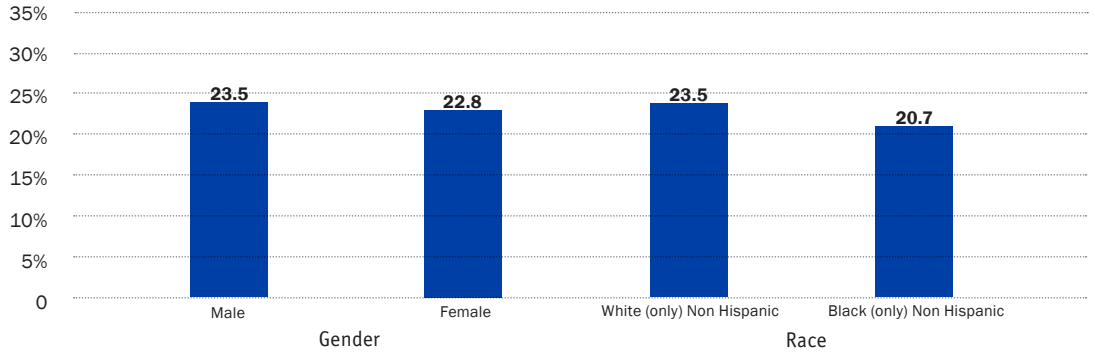


Of employed Arkansans, 26.6% are members of a group, while only 18.9% of unemployed Arkansans are involved in a group.

GROUP INVOLVEMENT BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS	Employed	Unemployed or not in the labor force
Belong to any group	26.6%	18.9%

The rate of group membership is slightly higher among white Arkansas residents (23.5%) than Black residents (20.7%). Additionally, males (23.5%) are slightly more likely to be members of a group compared to females (22.8%).

Chart 28. Group Involvement by Gender and Race in Arkansas



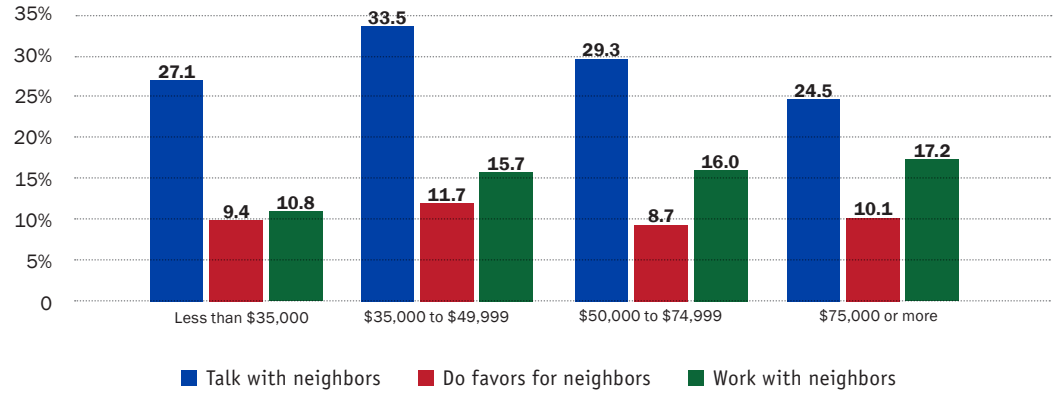
Social Connectedness[35]

Arkansas is one of the friendliest states, ranking 9th nationally, with 82.6% of Arkansans frequently hearing from or spending time with family and friends.[36] Nearly one out of ten (9.7%) of Arkansans—very close to the national average—frequently did favors for their neighbors. However, fewer Arkansans (14.4%) than the national average worked with neighbors to do something positive for their community—placing Arkansas 47th of 50 states and the District of Columbia.[37] In addition, 27.4% of Arkansans frequently talked or spent time with neighbors, which is slightly higher than the 26.9% U.S. national average.[38]

INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS	State	National	Rank 2021[39]
Frequently hear from or spend time with family/friends	82.6%	79.3%	9th
Frequently talk with or spend time with neighbors	27.4%	26.9%	30th
Do favors for neighbors frequently	9.7%	10.0%	28th
Work with neighbors to do something positive for neighborhood or community	14.4%	18.0%	47th

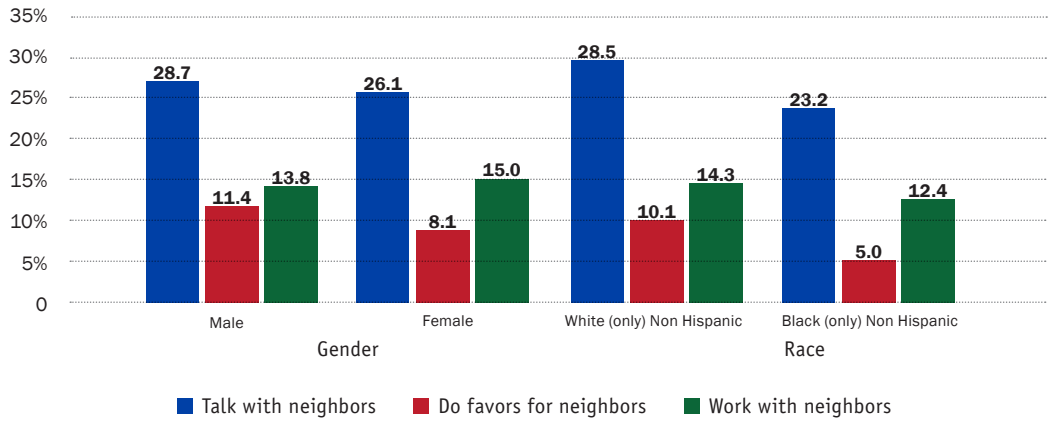
Those earning $35,000 to $49,999 per year talked with their neighbors the most, at a rate of 33.5%, while only 24.5% of those earning $75,000 or more frequently conversed with their neighbors. Of those earning $35,000 to $49,999, 11.7% did favors for neighbors compared to 8.7% of those earning $50,000 to $74,999. We see a positive correlation between working with neighbors and income. Those earning less than $35,000 worked with their neighbors the least, whereas those earning $75,000 or more worked with their neighbors the most.

Chart 29. Talk, Do Favors, or Work with Neighbors by Income Level



Men are slightly more likely than women to talk with their neighbors and do favors for their neighbors, while women are slightly more likely to work with their neighbors compared to their male counterparts. White Arkansas residents are more likely than Black Arkansas residents to converse with their neighbors, do favors for neighbors, and work with neighbors.

Chart 30. Talk, Do Favors, or Work with Neighbors by Gender and Race



Interview Responses on Working with Neighbors to Do Something Positive for the Community

Asked what influences how often people in the local community work with neighbors to do something for the neighborhood or community, residents mentioned numerous factors. Multiple residents referred to a decline in close social ties among neighbors; in the words of one resident, "People just want to mind their own business now ... The community is not the community it used to be." Some residents said that people today are more likely to act collectively with members of organizations they belong to, than with neighbors. Other factors included geographical distance between households, social norms, racial divides, legal disincentives, time constraints, a "lack of communication" or "planning," and fear that others may benefit unduly or "get more than" the cooperating neighbors as a result of the neighbors' collaboration.

Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Though the concept of "collective impact"—meaning the use of cross-sector coalitions to address complex social issues—was first documented in the Stanford Social Innovation Review in 2011,[40] its practice in Arkansas dates to 1999 when the Arkansas Public Policy Panel convened dozens of nonprofit organizations throughout the state to form the Citizens First Congress. The idea of "collective impact" got even more statewide attention in 2015 when then-Governor Asa Hutchinson hosted a summit of state agencies, faith-based communities, nonprofit organizations, and community groups to discuss the importance of collective impact, which led to the formation of Restore Hope Arkansas and its 100 Families initiative.

Today, there exist in the state dozens of various regional partnerships between faith-based communities, nonprofit organizations, benevolent societies, and grassroots groups that work together sharing resources to promote collective impact. In recent years, there have been three examples of statewide collective impact that combined organizational partnerships with non-aligned individual citizens to advance electoral justice and participatory direct democracy: the Arkansas Election Defense Ad-Hoc Task Force (2020), Arkansans for a Unified Natural State (AFUNS) (2021), and Citizens for Arkansas Public Education and Students (CAPES) (2023).

The research team interviewed 25 leaders of faith-based communities, nonprofit organizations, benevolent societies, and grassroots groups in Arkansas that participate in these types of partnerships regarding their views on the strengths and challenges concerning civic interconnectedness and political engagement in the state and particular collective impact approaches that have proved effective in the state.

The leaders are nearly unanimous in their view that the greatest barriers to sustained civic engagement and collective impact in Arkansas include: (1) the lack of effective state civics education standards that support the adolescent development of a mindset of civic interconnectedness and political engagement; (2) the inequitable allocation and distribution of resources that support civic engagement activities, such as adequate healthcare access; and (3) the increasing enactment of legislation that constrains the likely electoral participation of marginalized urban and rural communities across Arkansas, particularly in the registration of likely liberal voters among younger Arkansans in college and the vast population of impoverished Arkansans being held for years in pre-trial detention, usually for non-violent crimes and technical violations.

Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

CIVIC INFORMATION ACCESS

Web Transparency

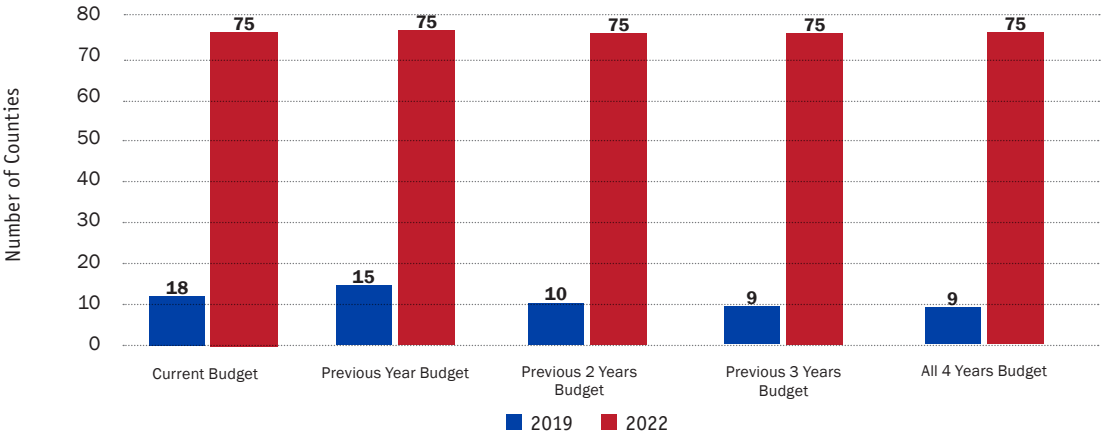
Web transparency is crucial for public access to government information in Arkansas. The Arkansas Center for Research in Economics (ACRE) conducts research on local government web transparency and publishes the *Access Arkansas: Web Transparency Report*.[41] The report evaluates online information published by county and city governments, ranking them based on fiscal, administrative, and political web transparency. Fiscal transparency reveals how tax dollars are spent; administrative transparency refers to the openness of government activities and processes including responding to public records requests, issuing permits, contracts and job appointments; and political transparency discloses information about openness of elected bodies such as quorum courts. The significance of this information to Arkansas voters is profound. To illustrate, having knowledge about the time and venues of public meetings empowers citizens to actively participate in the political process. Additionally, being able to access fiscal information about their local entities provides voters with the necessary resources to make well-informed choices, enabling them to assess how effectively elected officials are managing taxpayer funds. In essence, web transparency serves as a bridge, connecting citizens to the inner workings of their government and fostering an informed and engaged electorate. Previous editions of the *Access Arkansas* report focused solely on evaluating the transparency of Arkansas's 75 counties. However, the current edition takes it a step further by including an evaluation of 112 first-class cities for the first time. The study reveals noticeable progress in county-level transparency compared to initial editions. Nevertheless, the following table clearly illustrates that there is still ample room for improvement in overall transparency.

Average Percentage of Published Information in Arkansas Counties, 2018-2022

COMPONENT	2018	2019	2020	2022	Improvement
Fiscal Transparency	7.2%	16.4%	36.9%	52.7%	45.5%
Administrative Transparency	6.2%	12.2%	15.1%	20.1%	13.9%
Political Transparency	28.0%	36.6%	43.1%	44.0%	16.0%

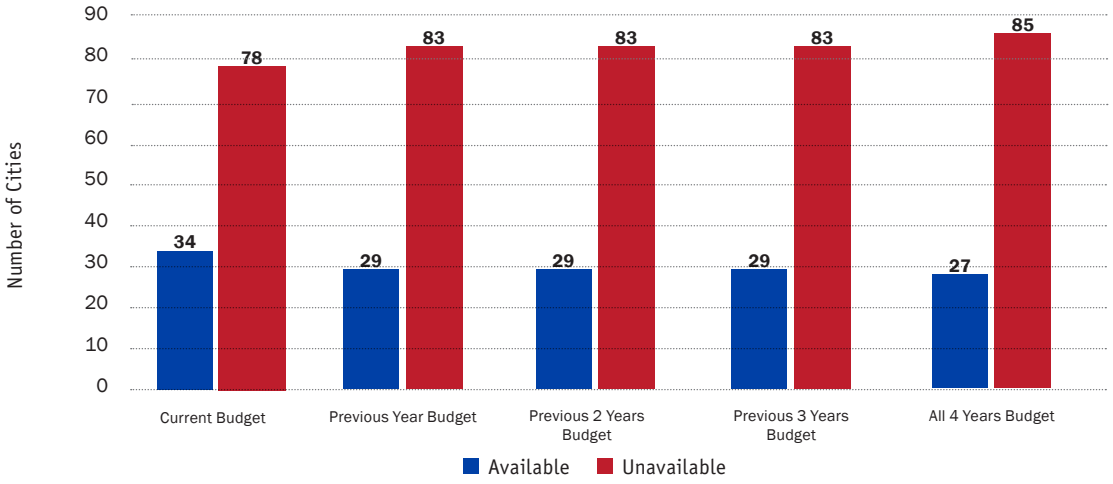
Based on the data presented in the table above, the analysis from the inaugural Access Arkansas report in 2018 highlights that only 7% of fiscal information, 6.2% of administrative information, and 28% of political information were published. In 2022, there was a significant increase in the publication of fiscal information, reaching 52.7%. Notably, there is a discernible trend across all categories, however: Arkansas counties performed better in fiscal transparency in 2022 compared to the other two types of transparency (administrative and political). A contributing factor to this was that in 2019, the Arkansas legislature passed Act 564, requiring that, beginning in January 2020, counties must publish their financial information on web platforms, including Facebook. Also, an artransparency.gov website was established to assist counties with complying with the law, even if they do not have their own website. As a result, fiscal transparency improved. See the following figure.

Chart 31. Online Publication of County Budgets Before Act 564 in 2019 and After Act 564 in 2022



Cities, unfortunately, do not have a similar mandate to Act 564. Below is the bar chart showing the current data for fiscal transparency of Arkansas cities of first class. The blue bars signify the number of cities that currently publish their budgets online while the orange bar signifies cities that don't.

Chart 32. Fiscal Transparency of Cities of First Class: Online Budget Publication



In political transparency, a significant number of counties and cities in Arkansas fail to publish essential information that the Report tracks. This includes crucial details like contact information of elected officials, meeting notices, and access to meetings, which are vital for encouraging public participation and increasing scrutiny in the policymaking process. Specifically, out of the 75 counties, only 33 make their meeting time and place information available online, and among the 112 first-class cities, only 51 publish at least 50% of the relevant public information on their websites.

When it comes to administrative transparency, the situation is even weaker. One significant area of deficiency is in the publication of procurement information, such as bids and bid winners for government contracts, which is not made available online by a substantial number of counties (35 out of 75) and first-class cities (also 35 out of 112).

This data from the *Access Arkansas* report clearly highlights the areas where improvements are needed to enhance transparency in fiscal, political, and administrative aspects of government functioning in Arkansas. The significance of web transparency lies in its ability to offer all residents equal and continuous access to government information. With the decline in newspaper readership nationwide—and in Arkansas, as shown in the next section—relying solely on newspapers for government information restricts transparency and leaves many people uninformed and unengaged.

Newspapers

According to the University of North Carolina's Hussman School of Journalism and Media,[42] as of 2019, each Arkansas county had at least one regularly published newspaper. Forty-seven Arkansas counties had just one newspaper, however, 18 counties had two newspapers, one county (Van Buren) had three, and three counties (Izard, Benton, and Washington) had four.

The number of published newspapers and newspaper circulation in Arkansas have declined in recent years. From 2004 to 2019, the total number of newspapers published in Arkansas dropped 22%, from 130 to 102, while total newspaper circulation fell 31%, from 970,000 to 670,000.

Accompanying newspapers in providing public-affairs information to state residents are seven online news outlets, a total of five ethnic outlets (among them four Spanish-language outlets in Pulaski and Washington Counties and a Black-owned radio outlet in Phillips County), and two public broadcasting stations.

Radio Stations

Radio is another important means by which Arkansans obtain information about politics and public affairs. According to the U.S. Federal Communications Commission,[43] as of July 2023, Arkansas had 74 licensed AM radio stations and 234 licensed FM radio stations, or 308 licensed stations in total.

The civic information that Arkansans receive from these radio outlets may be affected by concentration of ownership and the multi-state or national focus of those owners. Of the licensed AM stations in Arkansas, seven licensees control 21 stations—more than one-fourth of the total—and 16 licensees control 39 stations, just over half the total. Regarding FM stations in the state, three licensees control 16% of stations, and nine licensees control just under one-third of the total number of stations. Moreover, among licensees that control either AM or FM stations or both, the top four licensees control 16% of stations, the top nine licensees control 29% of stations, and the top 16 licensees control 42% of stations. Among the licensees that control the most radio stations in the state, several are multi-state or nationwide media organizations, most of whose content is not specific to Arkansas, and whose news programming provides little substantive coverage of Arkansas state or local public affairs.

Interview Responses Regarding News Sources

Asked about their sources of information for politics and public issues, residents most often mentioned family or friends or social media; followed by newspapers; internet sites other than social media, such as the Associated Press's website, state news blogs, and online forums devoted to local issues; local news stations; public radio; political podcasts; and local government meetings. Residents listed a number of factors that they used to judge news sources, most often accuracy and trust. For some residents trust and accuracy were related—as for the resident who asserted, "I believe it's accurate and I trust my sources"—but for one young-adult resident, trust seemed more closely associated with relevance; he said, "with friends and family, what they bring up is what they think I would be interested in or would affect me personally, so I'd say I'm pretty well-informed from those sources." Other criteria mentioned by residents were timeliness, the level of detail, providing clear explanations in accessible language, offering a diversity of perspectives, and presenting a manageable quantity of information.

Photo Credit: The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

CIVIC SPACES

Civic spaces—physical or online sites in which community members can gather to discuss, learn about, participate in or organize regarding public issues—are integral elements of civic health, because they make possible many of the constructive interactions among citizens and civic leaders that constitute civic engagement.[44] Information about civic spaces in Arkansas communities was gathered through a survey of mayors and other public officials, and interviews with Arkansas residents.[45]

Regarding physical civic spaces, those mentioned most often as existing in local communities were public libraries, parks, and sidewalks, followed by local government spaces such as city halls or quorum courts, school district board rooms, public squares, public auditoriums, community centers, coffee shops, state government facilities, and amphitheaters. All but one of the interviewed residents who responded when asked to rate physical civic spaces in their communities—in terms of accessibility and the quality of indoor space with respect to temperature, lighting, air quality, and noise—gave high marks to the spaces they frequented. Public officials assessed their communities' civic spaces in terms of how well those spaces met 12 civic needs of residents, ranging from discussing public issues with others and hearing knowledgeable people talk about public issues to organizing with others to take action and protesting or demonstrating about public issues. Preliminary survey results indicate that outdoor and indoor civic spaces meet different civic needs of residents, and that communities need a range of both indoor and outdoor physical civic spaces to meet the full range of residents' civic needs. Further, for small towns seeking to create new physical civic spaces, lack of funding is the most frequently cited obstacle.

Residents and public officials also evaluated online civic spaces, both those designed for public engagement such as online discussion forums on local government or local nonprofit websites, and general-purpose spaces such as Facebook and Instagram that citizens use to discuss public issues. Online discussion or comment boards on local government sites were the most frequently mentioned type of the former category of online civic space, followed by local-government virtual meeting spaces and online discussion forums hosted by local nonprofit organizations. In interviews, residents who used these online spaces generally praised their ease of use, and most residents recommended no changes to their technological systems, although one resident called for posts on their local site to be organized by issue. Of general-purpose online civic spaces, those most frequently mentioned by public officials as sites used by their residents were Facebook and Instagram, followed by TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Nextdoor, and Zoom. In interviews, most residents reported not using general purpose social media sites as civic spaces, i.e., to discuss public affairs. Two residents criticized such sites for incivility, another sought better organization of posts by issue, and still another urged Facebook to create a designated space for political discussion. Among public officials, those whose local governments provided both online discussion boards and virtual meeting spaces reported that the online civic spaces in their communities met residents' civic needs to a greater extent than those whose local government provided only online discussion boards.

Photo Credit: Arkansas Peace and Justice Memorial Movement

CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE SCAN

To gain broader insights on the quality of civic engagement in Arkansas, the research team interviewed civic leaders and public-engagement professionals regarding their views on the strengths and challenges concerning civic engagement in the state as well as particular engagement approaches that have proven effective in Arkansas.[46]

In interviews, civic leaders and public engagement professionals identified a number of strengths of civic engagement in Arkansas, including the state's small size—"the whole state's a small town," as one civic leader put it—which facilitates interaction, relationship-building, and citizens' access to public officials; high rates of neighborliness (as shown earlier in this report); online access to state legislative information; successful patterns of organizing in coalitions—which "amplify [residents'] voice in order to get it heard"—in urban and suburban communities; many leaders' skill at maintaining constructive relationships; and rural customs such as respect for others, friendliness, camaraderie—as one professional put it, "we're Arkansans, we're all in this together"—and employing creativity to engage residents of rural areas.

Interview participants also highlighted major challenges to civic engagement in Arkansas. Among these were political polarization causing citizens to be "afraid to talk about issues across political divides," in the words of one civic leader; longstanding racial divisions, arising from unredressed enslavement and Jim Crow segregation which have yielded distrust of institutions and of cross-racial coalitions, as well as reluctance by white Arkansans to acknowledge the sources of racial inequality. Other challenges identified were rurality with its obstacles of distance, communication, coordination, and the fragmentation of local governance among hundreds of very small municipalities; large numbers of impoverished or nearly impoverished residents with little capacity for engagement; a lack of investment and resources in public engagement, particularly from out-of-state sources; and newer residents' prioritizing economic pursuits over civic involvement. Civic leaders and engagement professionals spoke of a lack of notice regarding local government meetings, as well as citizens' alienation from institutions, manifested in the belief that one's vote no longer matters and an aversion to conventional politics—as one civic leader characterized it, "they don't want even anything to do with it." Many citizens "lack awareness of how to engage," said one civic leader, or do not grasp the potential, mutually beneficial outcomes of engagement. Moreover, a dearth of past successes in creating change through citizen participation has led to skepticism about the value of public engagement, which, as one civic leader put it, "becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy."

What's more, these interviews underscored effective types of civic engagement in Arkansas. Among these have been community health efforts, organizing within communities of color, grassroots campaigns concerning education, coalitional organizing in cities and suburbs on local or "hyperlocal" issues, public programs that discuss economic-development issues in plain language, and public-interest litigation. Also successful have been efforts to promote civil discussion of public issues, and messaging campaigns aimed at getting "folks thinking and talking about" issues such as poverty "in a … different way," in one civic leader's words. Some characteristics of these successful engagement efforts included involving multiple types of organizations—especially smaller nonprofits with established anchor institutions—in coalitions, focusing engagement efforts on local or neighborhood-level concerns, effective storytelling that humanizes residents in need, a willingness to compromise on policies to broaden support from important stakeholders, using discussion procedures designed to promote empathy and perspective-taking, and proper framing of issues and policies using terms that are accessible and acceptable to a wide array of constituents.

ANALYSIS

To analyze the results presented in this report, we first compare Arkansas's performance on quantitative civic health measures with the performances of top-ranked states or districts, and then consider factors in those jurisdictions that may contribute to their high-ranking results. Next, we explore ways in which this report's findings can be used to encourage Arkansas residents to increase their degree of civic engagement.

With respect to comparing Arkansas to top-ranked jurisdictions, the following table describes factors that may contribute to those states' or districts' excelling on seven key civic-health measures.

VARIABLE	Top-Ranked State or District on That Variable vs. Arkansas	Factors in Top-Ranked State or District That May Contribute to Positive Result on That Variable
Voter Registration and Turnout	Oregon (82.7% and 70%) vs. Arkansas (62.2% and 43.9%)[47]	Convenient voting procedures: vote-by-mail system (civic tradition of filling in ballots while sitting at the dining room table); contentious ballot issues or races (a ballot legalizing recreational marijuana had 40,000 more votes than the race for governor)[48]
Trust in the Federal Government	Rhode Island (63.2%) vs. Arkansas (35%)	Small geographic area and small population; high rates of engagement with government suggesting a culture of regular interaction with government, including high levels of voter turnout and registration–enabled by automatic voter registration–attendance at public meetings, contacting public officials, visiting the state capital and state library, and using the state archives' website[49]
Discussing Politics	Washington, DC (62.3%) vs. Arkansas (35.2%)	Proximity to the federal government; many people working in the political arena; many scientists and experts in diverse fields from diverse areas of the world; one of the most educated cities in the U.S.; one of the highest median household incomes in the nation[50]
Donating	Minnesota (61.8) vs. Arkansas (52.4%)	A relatively high percentage of residents who identify as Christian and relatively high religious giving rate; easy access to charities; culture of giving; Minnesota Keystone Program honors companies that donate at least 2% of their pre-tax earnings to charitable organizations; Minnesota's Give to the Max Day is a grassroots fundraiser that raised $34 million for schools and nonprofits in 2022; culture of generosity is part of civic engagement and high-voter turnout[51]
Volunteering	Utah (40.7%) vs. Arkansas (20.9%)	Religious culture; a sense of community; neighborliness and volunteer service-oriented culture; gubernatorial/state-level support and promotional efforts[52]
Group Involvement	Maine (38.7%) vs. Arkansas (23.1%)	Culture of community; rural population and small-town friendliness; a culture of helping people[53]
Social Connectedness	Washington, DC (88.2%) vs. Arkansas (82.6%)[54]	Amenities (history and culture with free access to many monuments and museums, the Library of Congress, parks, public transportation, bike friendly); culture of community; culturally diverse[55]

For example, Oregon excels at voter registration and voter turnout. Some factors that may contribute to that performance are laws and procedures designed to make voting as convenient as possible, such as making voting by mail the primary means of casting a ballot. These are policies that could feasibly be implemented in Arkansas in the future.

In Rhode Island, substantial trust in the federal government seems related to multiple factors. First, the state's small population and geographic footprint make public officials and governmental facilities highly accessible to citizens. The second is residents' high levels of interaction with national, state, and local governments as well as procedures and social norms that promote this engagement. Automatic voter registration enables strong voting registration and turnout, even in local elections. Rhode Island's social norms also seem accepting of frequent interactions with government, as seen in substantial rates of attendance at public meetings, contacts with public officials, and usage of government institutions, like libraries and archives, that offer benefits to citizens at low or no cost. Arkansas shares with Rhode Island the benefits of smallness and the approachability of many public officials, and could emulate Rhode Island by easing electoral participation and encouraging other forms of interaction with government.

Washington, DC surpasses the states in political discussion and social connectedness. Possibly encouraging those levels of performance are the District's highly educated and high-earning workforce, as well as amenities that ease social gatherings, such as large numbers of accessible indoor and outdoor physical civic spaces and public transportation, and a culturally diverse setting that promotes community activities and identities. Although larger Arkansas cities seek to emulate many of these characteristics, this report suggests that residents and leaders in some smaller Arkansas municipalities desire to implement selected elements of the District's culture in ways that could enhance civic health.

With respect to group involvement, Maine's contributing factors resemble many of Arkansas's assets that have the potential to foster civic health. Closer examination of Maine's approach to encouraging group involvement is warranted, to learn which facets could be fruitfully translated to Arkansas's setting.

Regarding charitable giving, Minnesota seems to shine in part because of intentionality: the state's organically generated culture of philanthropy is supported by complementary policies and programs, implemented by governments, nonprofit organizations, and the business sector, that increase residents' incentives to give generously. Utah's outperformance in volunteering seems related to similar factors: a naturally arising cultural pattern of helpfulness and community service is intentionally supported by employers, the state, and families. Arkansas could adopt a similarly intentional approach if state leaders were to agree on a particular element of civic health to encourage.

Arkansas's results on the main indicators of civic health suggest strength in many aspects of social connectedness and neighborliness, which could be analogized to the "Member" stage of the *Active Citizen Continuum*.[56] The Natural State's shortcomings on indicators concerning volunteering, working with neighbors to help the community, political donations, and voter registration and voter turnout suggest that the challenge is to assist citizens in progressing further down the Active Citizen Continuum through volunteering to more involved phases of citizenship. The Continuum indicates that "ongoing education" in civic engagement—perhaps through activities like Civic Saturdays or in-service civic-educational opportunities focused on the practice of public involvement—may be an important factor on that journey toward greater civic participation. Further, the examples of Minnesota and Utah, discussed above, point to intentional leadership as a potential catalyst. Such leadership could organize support for citizens' greater community involvement by designing incentives and institutional flexibility, realized through the cooperation of governments, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and faith communities. For example, to encourage volunteerism among the less well-off and the less well-educated, state leaders could cooperate to encourage employers to provide employees with paid leave to engage in community service. Similar incentives and flexibility could be implemented to urge employees to register to vote and vote. Combining continuing civic-educational experiences with material incentives and institutional flexibility could offer citizens both internal resources and external opportunities to journey from the "Member" stage further down the continuum of active citizenship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Advocate for nonpartisan electoral reforms to make it easier to register to vote and to cast a ballot—especially among BIPOC Arkansans, students, elderly and disabled Arkansans, immigrant Arkansans who speak English as a second language, and Arkansans without a college degree or who lack adequate transportation—such as:

    - Allowing online and same-day voter registration;
    - Enabling automatic registration when obtaining a driver's license;
    - Allowing 16-year-olds to pre-register to vote;
    - Expanding no-excuse absentee voting or vote by mail;
    - Lengthening the early voting period;
    - Shortening the gap between early voting and election day;
    - Keeping voting locations consistent on all voting days;
    - Reducing wait times and shortening lines to vote, by providing more polling locations, with more voting machines and personnel at each location;
    - Organizing volunteer carpools in rural communities to take citizens to the polls; and
    - Observing the civic holidays of National Voter Registration Day and National Voter Education Week.

2. Oppose efforts to change laws or the state constitution to impede citizens from engaging in direct democracy through citizen-initiated ballot measures.

3. Increase opportunities for residents throughout the state to engage in civil discussions on public issues, by partnering with organizations that promote public debate, dialogue, and deliberation.

4. Support truth-and-reconciliation and racial-healing efforts with respect to historical injustices suffered by Black Arkansans, and promote civil interracial dialogue through partnerships with organizations such as the Equal Justice Initiative and Coming To The Table, in order to achieve racial justice and build trust across racial lines.

5. Encourage employers to offer paid time off for community service to boost volunteerism among employees with lower incomes and lower levels of educational attainment.

6. Expand teenaged Arkansans' access to effective formal and informal social studies instruction in state school curricula, including service-learning and extra-curricular activities; revise Arkansas's public high-school civics standards to require training in the practice of civic engagement and deliberative discussion; ensure that school civics courses provide civic engagement role-playing opportunities and that Arkansas Black History courses are offered; and use best practices to increase funding for cross-sectoral coalitions to address complex public issues.

7. Design and conduct a campaign to encourage county and city governments to publish more fiscal, administrative, and political information on their websites. Extend the application of the state's fiscal transparency statute, Act 564's web publication requirements to first-class cities and other local governments. Additionally, design and conduct a campaign to encourage residents to engage in civil discussions and the demand for government transparency by partnering with organizations that promote its debate, dialogue, and deliberation.

8. Encourage the Arkansas General Assembly to enact a new statute requiring local governments to regularly publish up-to-date information about local-government meetings, as well as other administrative and political information, on their websites, or a centralized website such as that of the Arkansas Municipal League or the Association of Arkansas Counties.

9. Encourage philanthropic support for nonprofit news organizations focused on coverage of Arkansas state and local public affairs, particularly in counties with a single newspaper, and especially in border counties that receive news coverage from surrounding states.

10. Prepare new rural civic-engagement initiatives that can be implemented as the quality of rural broadband internet service improves, as is expected in the coming years.

CONCLUSION

This initial civic health assessment for Arkansas reveals mixed results. In terms of strengths, Arkansas displays high rates of friendliness, neighborliness, group membership, and charitable giving. Further, Arkansans are accustomed to using creativity to overcome challenges of engagement in rural areas, and have witnessed some successes with citizen collaboration to address public issues in cities and suburbs. Nonetheless, Arkansas exhibits the lowest levels of voter registration and voter turnout in the nation and faces sizeable structural challenges to revitalizing public engagement in the state. This report's findings and recommendations suggest a number of promising paths for addressing those weaknesses and overcoming barriers to improved civic health for all of Arkansas.

TECHNICAL NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, findings presented in this report are based on the National Conference on Citizenship's (NCoC) analysis of the U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS) data. Any and all errors are NCoC's own. Volunteering and Civic Engagement estimates are from CPS September Volunteering/ Civic Engagement Supplement from 2021 and voting estimates from 2020 November Voting and Registration Supplement.

Using a probability-selected sample of about 150,000 occupied households, the CPS collects monthly data on employment and demographic characteristics of the nation. Depending on the CPS supplement, the single-year Arkansas CPS sample size used for this report ranges from 189 to 908 (volunteering/ civic engagement supplement) and to 1,516 (voting supplement) residents from across Arkansas. This sample is then weighted to representative population demographics for the district. Estimates for the volunteering and civic engagement indicators (e.g., volunteering, working with neighbors, making donations) are based on U.S. residents ages 16 and older. Voting and registration statistics are based on U.S. citizens who are 18 and older (eligible voters). When we examined the relationship between educational attainment and engagement, estimates are based on adults ages 25 and older, based on the assumption younger people may be completing their education.

Because multiple sources of data with varying sample sizes are used, the report is not able to compute one margin of error for Arkansas across all indicators. Any analysis that breaks down the sample into smaller groups (e.g., gender, education) will have smaller samples and therefore the margin of error will increase. Furthermore, national rankings, while useful in benchmarking, may be small in range, with one to two percentage points separating the state/district ranked first from the state/district ranked last. It is also important to note that our margin of error estimates are approximate, as CPS sampling is highly complex and accurate estimation of error rates involves many parameters that are not publicly available.

ENDNOTES

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21 Of eligible citizens in the Little Rock-North Little Rock, AR Combined Statistical Area, 61.7% were registered to vote and 55.1% voted in 2021.

22 The local voting data come from the 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS), Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) Supplement. Also, 43.9% of eligible citizens in the Little Rock-North Little Rock, AR Combined Statistical Area voted in the local election in 2020.

23 Although results for age groups and levels of educational attainment from the Current Population Survey exclude individuals 18 to 24 years old, individuals aged 16 or 18 to 24 years are included in the other results from the Current Population Survey, as well as in campus voting results, results concerning trust, and results from two resident interviews. For more details, please see the Technical Note at the end of this report.

24 The phrase "American Indian" is used by the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, which is the source of these data. On the use of that phrase to refer to Native Americans, see M. Yellow Bird, "What We Want to Be Called: Indigenous Peoples' Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Identity Labels," American Indian Quarterly, 23(2), 1–21 (1999).

25 In this and subsequent sections describing Arkansas residents' comments in interviews, results come from semi-structured interviews with 14 Arkansas residents, including three residents from the northwest, three from the northeast, one from the southeast, two from the western and five from the central region of Arkansas. These residents—of whom 11 identified as women and three as men—ranged in age from 22 to 76 years. Eight of these residents identified as white, five as Black, and one as Hispanic and biracial. Participants were recruited by means of targeted network recruitment, snowball sampling, and social media posts. Each interview was conducted by phone or Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Each participant received a $50 gift card as an incentive.

26 In Little Rock, this rate is higher with 41.4% of residents frequently discussing political, societal, or local issues with family or friends.

27 Rank is among 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

28 For residents' comments on trust in news media, see "Interview Responses Regarding News Sources" in the section on "Civic Information Access" below.

29 Little Rock residents donate at a higher rate than overall Arkansas residents, with 62.1% of Little Rock residents donating to a charitable or religious organization.

30 Rank is among 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

31 Of Little Rock residents, 23.6% frequently volunteered compared to only 20.9% of Arkansas residents.

32 Rank is among 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

33 On average, Little Rock residents had greater membership in community groups than Arkansas and nationally, with 27.8% of Little Rock residents being part of a group.

34 Rank is among 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

35 For purposes of this study, "social connectedness" means hearing from or spending time with family or friends; talking or spending time with neighbors; doing favors for neighbors; and working with neighbors to do something positive for the neighborhood or community.

36 Of Little Rock residents, 80.5% frequently heard from or spent time with family and friends, which is slightly lower than the Arkansas rate.

37 Among Little Rock residents, 10.7% did favors for their neighbors, which is slightly higher than the state rate. However, only 12.3% of Little Rock residents worked with neighbors to do something positive for their community, which is lower than the Arkansas rate.

38 Only 24.2% of Little Rock residents spent time with their neighbors compared to 27.4% of Arkansans.

39 Rank is among 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

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CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

State and Local Partnerships

NCoC began America's Civic Health Index in 2006 to measure the level of civic engagement and health of our democracy. In 2009, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act directed NCoC to expand this civic health assessment in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service and the US Census Bureau.

NCoC now works with partners in more than 35 states and cities to use civic data to lead and inspire a public dialogue about the future of citizenship in America and to drive sustainable civic strategies.

STATES

Alabama
University of Alabama
David Mathews Center for Civic Life
Auburn University

Arizona
Center for the Future of Arizona

California
California Forward
Center for Civic Education
Center for Individual and Institutional Renewal
Davenport Institute

Colorado
Metropolitan State University of Denver
The Civic Canopy
Denver Metro Chamber Leadership
Campus Compact of Mountain West
History Colorado
Institute on Common Good

Connecticut
Everyday Democracy

District of Columbia
ServeDC

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

Georgia
Georgia Family Connection Partnership
Georgia Municipal Association

Illinois
McCormick Foundation

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

Kansas
Kansas Health Foundation

Kentucky
Commonwealth of Kentucky, Secretary of State's Office
Institute for Citizenship & Social Responsibility, Western Kentucky University
Kentucky Advocates for Civic Education
McConnell Center, University of Louisville

Maryland
Mannakee Circle Group
Center for Civic Education
Common Cause-Maryland
Maryland Civic Literacy Commission

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

Minnesota
Center for Democracy and Citizenship

Missouri
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Park University
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University of Missouri Kansas City
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Nebraskans for Civic Reform

New Hampshire
Carsey Institute
Campus Compact of New Hampshire
University System of New Hampshire
New Hampshire College & University Council

New York
Siena College Research Institute
New York State Commission on National and Community Service

North Carolina
Institute for Emerging Issues

Ohio
Miami University Hamilton Center for Civic Engagement

Oklahoma
University of Central Oklahoma
Oklahoma Campus Compact

Pennsylvania
Center for Democratic Deliberation
National Constitution Center

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

South Carolina
University of South Carolina Upstate

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

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

ISSUE SPECIFIC

Latinos Civic Health Index
Carnegie Corporation

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

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

CITIES

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Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta

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

Chicago
McCormick Foundation

Kansas City & Saint Louis
Missouri State University
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Washington University

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Florida Joint Center for Citizenship
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Chairman, Board of Advisors, National Conference on Citizenship
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Research and Evaluation Director, National Conference on Citizenship

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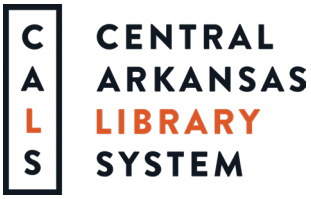
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