



# ADVANCING CIVIC CONNECTIONS

EXPANDED REPORT

This first edition of Florida Civic Advance's — Civic Matters Series provides an overview of civic participation in Florida between 2008-23. It outlines where we've been, where we are now, and the challenges we face and the opportunities we have to make Florida's communities the most connected in the country.

The work from Florida Civic Advance in researching and composing this civic health report deserves both great appreciation, but also wide consideration by the state's government, business, and civic sectors. In an era marked by increasing distrust of our major institutions, local civic participation (from volunteering to attending municipal council meetings) remains the most effective way for Americans to improve their communities. More than just a quantitative study, *Advancing Civic Connections* offers important recommendations to boost Florida's civic health.

Pete Peterson, Dean of the School of Public Policy,  
Pepperdine University

In a time of crises and division, nothing is more important than improving our communities' civic health, the precondition for a robust democracy and a functioning society. In *Advancing Civic Connections* the Florida Civic Advance diagnoses the problem and calls for action.

Peter Levine, Tufts University

Floridians have the capacity to take on more meaningful roles in public decision-making, problem-solving, and community-building. By creating more opportunities for people to learn, talk, and act together, we can make our communities and states into better democracies, and better places to live.

Matt Leighninger, Director, Center for Democracy  
Innovation, National Civic League

[floridacivicadvance.com](http://floridacivicadvance.com)

## Advancing Florida's Civic Connections

The Florida Civic Advance, a statewide nonprofit committed to advancing civic health and participation in Florida communities, is pleased to present this first report in a series called Civic Matters.

Given the current condition of civic health in Florida and the civic environment of the country, it is more important than ever to increase opportunities for community residents to participate and connect with each other and with their local governments to create vital, inclusive, and prosperous communities.

This first report provides an overview of civic participation data in Florida between 2008-2023. It shows that Florida's low levels of civic participation have been a long-standing challenge. While it highlights the challenges we face, it also points to the opportunities we have to implement practical strategies suggested in this report.

These include investing in critical civic infrastructure including robust non-profit organizations, university civic centers, vibrant neighborhood associations, strong library systems, and accessible parks, festivals and other meeting places for residents to connect and build supportive friendships and networks. The return on this investment in civic life will be stronger, more resilient, and prosperous communities where trust and collaboration are growing, and differences can be bridged and problems solved.

Residents, local elected officials, public administrators, philanthropic organizations, business and others need to join together to reshape a positive civic future of our neighborhoods, cities, and counties.

The Florida Civic Advance Board invites you to join in the effort to make Florida's communities the most connected and engaged in the country.



*Jim Murley*

Jim Murley  
President  
Florida Civic Advance

# Introduction

Visiting America in its infancy and gathering material for his influential *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville was surprised by the involvement of the new nation's citizens in voluntary associations. "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations....If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society." Tocqueville saw the voluntary joining together of citizens to achieve an objective as key to American Democracy; as a way to address community needs without relying on centralized government authority.

This is the core of what people mean when they talk about civic engagement; neighbors joining neighbors in collaboration with elected and civic, to address hunger and homelessness, to build accessible parks and provide opportunities for recreation, and to participate on boards and commissions that advise the many layers of local government that affect the quality of life for residents. All these are part of the constellation of activities individuals engage in to make a difference in their communities and promote the common good.

To better understand how Americans, including Floridians, participate in civic life, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 created a partnership between AmeriCorps and the U.S. Census Bureau. Through the Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), we get a biennial picture of the nation's and each state's civic health, showing how people connect, volunteer, and shape their communities in a quest for the common good. The results of this survey help guide local and state civic policies, support community programs, and highlight the power of citizen participation in American democracy.

**Advancing Civic Connections honestly presents the data and recognizes the opportunities for improving civic engagement in Florida. The extent to which Floridians are engaging with their neighbors (talking, spending time, doing favors) has ticked up slightly in recent years - this could be evidence of strengthening social capital at the community level, and may be an asset for organizations involved in civic engagement work to build upon. I think it is important that the report identifies elements of civic infrastructure, including both spaces and organizations that can be used for and generate opportunities for engagement.**

Joseph K. Hoereth, PhD, Director, Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement, College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, University of Illinois at Chicago

**Considering the tumultuous environment in the country right now, it is critical to recognize citizens as doers and actors, not just members of a public that needs to be better served, not just for the people, but with the people. When people see themselves recognized as actors working with the government, two things can happen. One, citizens can recognize their power and obligation to be doers. And two, the government can reap the benefits of what only citizens can do.**

David Mathews, former CEO and President of the Kettering Foundation

**The sustainability of a viable democracy requires active civic engagement. It is important that this civic engagement start in our communities through programs that recognize and encourage citizen participation at all levels. This report confirms that a community's strong Civic Health leads to less crime, better institutions of education, prosperous economic growth in that community and a stronger democracy.**

Dennis Ross, former Congressman and State Legislator, FCA Board Member

# Florida's Civic Health: A Look at Our Past & Present

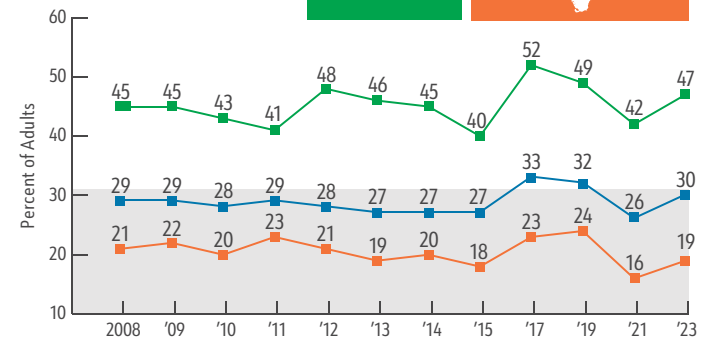
The first clear picture of Florida's civic health was taken in 2008 using four measures developed by the U. S. Census Bureau and AmeriCorps. These included how many people in the state and its communities volunteered, whether people financially supported charitable causes, whether residents attended local public meetings, and how often people worked together to address issues in their community.

When that 2008 snapshot was taken, researchers concluded that Florida's civic culture was among the weakest in the United States. Looking at all four measures, our state, the fourth largest in the nation, ranked 47th. What progress have we made in the intervening years? Figures 1-4 show the answer, and sadly, it's not much.

## Volunteering

Florida has over three million volunteers who make a real difference in their communities across the state. AmeriCorps' Volunteer Florida works hard to recruit volunteers and support their efforts. But the truth is, more Floridians need to step up. In 2008, 21.1 percent of us volunteered. In 2023, after a drop to 15.6 percent during the Covid pandemic, the state's volunteering rate was still about 2 percent lower than in 2008. Throughout this time, Florida's rate has been about 10 percentage points lower than the national average and half or less of the rate in the most engaged states. In fact, Florida ranked 49th in the nation. (Figure 1)

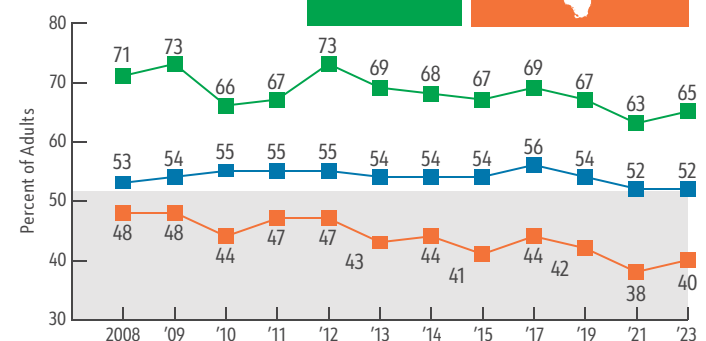
Figure 1 / 2008-2023  
Volunteered



## Making Charitable Donations

Compared to other states in the U.S., Floridians have not been especially generous over the past few years. Fewer than half of us have donated at least \$25 to a charitable cause each year since 2008. That is significantly below the national average and only about two thirds of the rate of the most charitable states. Like Volunteering, Florida ranks 49th in the nation for donating to charity. (Figure 2)

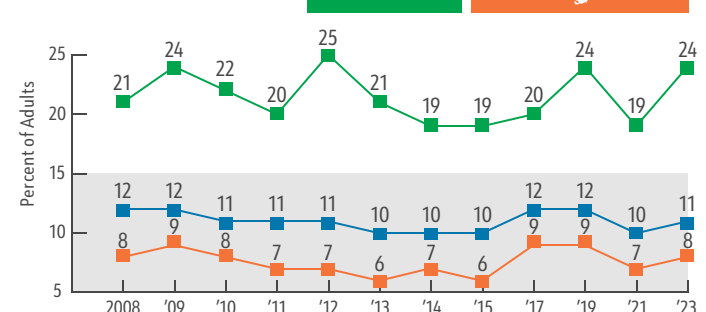
Figure 2 / 2008-2023  
Charitable Giving  
Donated \$25+



## Attending Public Meetings

Across the country and in Florida, not many people are eager to spend the time and energy needed to attend city or county council, planning, or even neighborhood association meetings. Nationally, only about two in every ten people attend at least one meeting a year. In Florida, that number is even lower, with only about one in every 14 people showing up. In the states where people are most involved, many of which have a history of communities coming together to discuss public issues, one in every five people attend these meetings. (Figure 3)

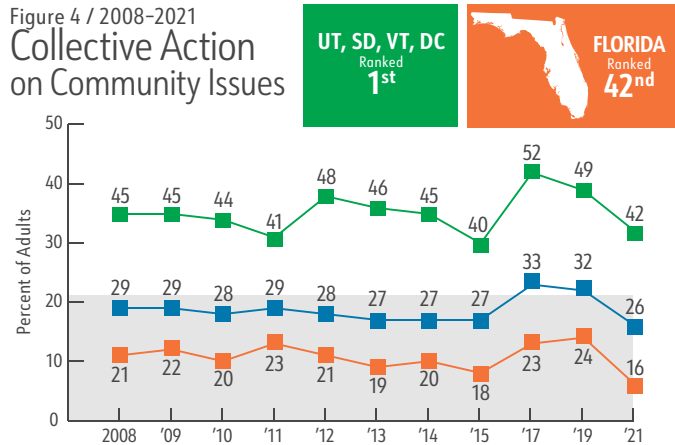
Figure 3 / 2008-2023  
Attending Public Meetings





# Working Together on Community Challenges

Early American society impressed the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville because people readily joined together to improve their communities. He would likely be surprised by today's stark contrast. With demanding jobs, families with two working parents, and long commutes, far fewer of us connect with our neighbors to get things done. In Florida, the numbers are particularly low. From 2008 to 2015, only about 6% of Floridians worked with others on community projects. This was significantly lower than in more engaged states. (Figure 4)



The chart above suggests an apparent disconnect between the extent of people working together during the period 2008-2015 compared to 2017-2023. The latter period shows a significantly higher rate of citizen participation. Unfortunately, this difference is not the result of a great awakening of citizens' desire to work together on community problems. Rather it is the result of a change in the question used to measure participation. This change makes it difficult to directly compare pre- and post-2015 results. Before 2015, interviewees were asked if they had joined together to "fix a problem or improve a condition" in their community. Starting in 2017, the question was broadened to ask if they had joined together to do "something positive" for the community. The second question is simply easier to answer "yes," which led to higher numbers. While Florida's ranking improved after the change, it's unclear if this truly reflects a greater willingness of Floridians to tackle tough community issues together.

Civically engaged communities are stronger communities — whether that's volunteering, voting or simply showing up for a neighbor. At the Miami Foundation, we've seen first-hand the rising generosity through our annual local giving day. Last year, we witnessed 50,000 Miamians raise over 39 million dollars for thousands of local nonprofit organizations during Give Miami Day. In just the last five years, that's been a 125% increase in donors and 190% increase in dollars raised. Mobilizing donors is just one way we're working to bring people together and get them engaged for the health and long-term benefit of our community. In a dynamic county like ours, that is 50% foreign-born, we know that fostering belonging and civic action demands a unique and collaborative approach.

Rebecca Fishman Lipsey, President & CEO, The Miami Foundation

Civic engagement among Florida's residents has been at or near the lowest in the nation for at least 15 years. The health of our civil society depends critically on the informed participation of citizens; and virtually all that participation takes place where we live, work and play. For the non-profit sector, this is not just a statistic — it's a call to action. Nonprofits rely on engaged communities to drive volunteerism, charitable giving, and collaboration. Without strong civic participation, the sector's ability to serve, advocate, and innovate is significantly diminished.

Sabeen Perwaiz, President & CEO  
Florida Nonprofit Alliance

Florida Civic Advance has provided enough information for us to personally reflect upon our individual role to encourage volunteerism and a sense of community in our homes, businesses, and within our own community's reach.

Lila Jaber, Lila Jaber Associates,  
former FCA Board Member

# New Measurement for Civic Health: 2017-2023

In 2017, AmeriCorps and the Census Bureau not only changed the wording of the question about working with others to fix community problems, they also expanded the number of questions to improve the way community involvement is measured. They categorized all the civic engagement questions as falling into one of four areas: participation through organizations, participation through political involvement and, to better understand people-to-people networks that can facilitate civic activity, engagement with neighbors and connections with friends and family around social issues. We will maintain this framework in the remainder of this Brief.

So far, the picture of civic participation in Florida shown by the CPS data has been quite negative. By examining these newly measured areas of engagement, we may be able to learn more about civic life in Florida.

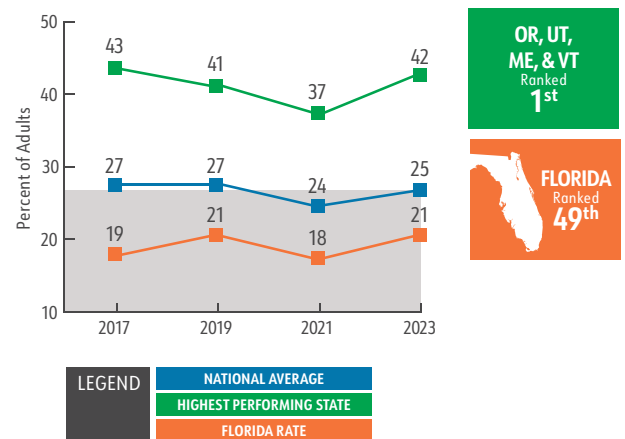
## Civic Engagement Through Organizations

Two aspects of organizational engagement in the community have already been examined in our exploration of changes between 2008 and 2023: rates of volunteering and rates of donating to charitable causes. We found that Florida's participation in these two areas has consistently been among the lowest in the Nation.

In Figure 5, the last aspect of organizational engagement is shown: the extent to which Florida's residents join community organizations — such as Jaycees, Lions Clubs, Rotary, Masonic Lodges, church groups, or nonprofits as part of community efforts to advance the common good. Unfortunately, once again, Floridians demonstrate low rates of organizational involvement. Ranked 49th in the country in group participation for the 2017-2023 period, the state is significantly lower than the national average and generally about half of the rates in places like Oregon, Utah, Maine and Vermont.

Figure 5 / 2017-2023

### Joined Groups or Associations



The Advancing Civic Connections findings underscore the critical need to reinvigorate civic participation across all communities — particularly among youth, communities of color, and working families who are too often left behind in civic life. At the YMCA, we believe civic engagement is foundational to a healthy, inclusive democracy. The report's emphasis on trusted institutions, inclusive leadership, and youth investment aligns deeply with our mission and work. I was particularly encouraged by the recognition of local success stories — many of which mirror the Y's community-based approach. This report is a clarion call to strengthen civic infrastructure and expand opportunities for all people to shape the future of their communities. I look forward to working with local Ys and partners in Florida and beyond to turn these insights into action, empowering the next generation of changemakers and building a more civically vibrant nation.

Suzanne McCormick, President, CEO, YMCA of the USA

# Engaging With Neighbors

## Social Networks

Given earlier findings in this Brief, connectivity with neighbors is a notable bright spot in the state’s civic engagement. From a quarter to a third of adults report that they frequently spend time and talk with their neighbors, placing Florida near the national average and ranking it 26th in the nation. (Figure 6)

Social networks are a crucial element of community integration and strongly influence local political participation. Strong connections among neighbors, whether through participation in local faith-based or secular groups, or simply knowing one another, foster a sense of shared responsibility and make collective action easier. Such connections enable residents to mobilize resources, share information, and collaborate on projects that address community needs, ultimately contributing to a more vibrant and engaged community.

Although most Americans do not typically discuss public issues with their neighbors, Florida is close to the national average (ranking 19th), but significantly below highly engaged areas like the District of Columbia, Utah, and Vermont. (Figure 7)

Figure 6 / 2017-2023  
Frequently Talked & Spent Time with Neighbors

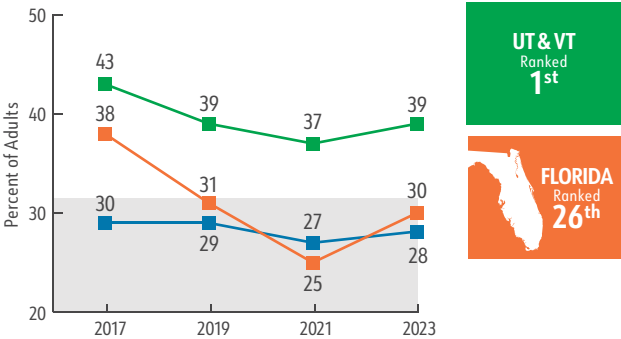


Figure 7 / 2017-2023  
Frequently Discussed Public Issues with Neighbors

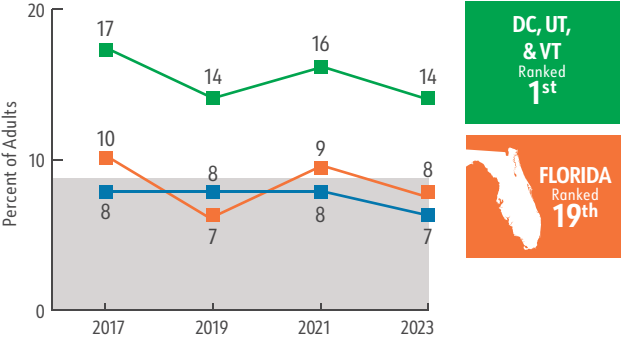
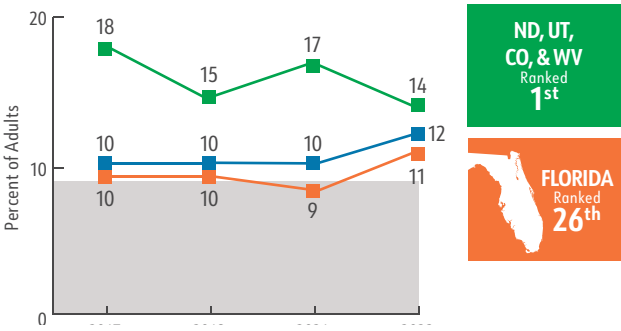


Figure 8 / 2017-2023  
Frequently Exchanged Favors with Neighbors



Similarly, frequent exchanges of favors with neighbors, such as childcare, shopping, and yard work, are not common among most Americans. However, Florida demonstrates surprising strength in building and maintaining these networks, generally performing around the national average and ranking 26th. (Figure 8)

Since networks are a critical component of civic engagement, Florida residents’ moderately strong connectivity with their neighbors may provide a starting point for strengthening civic participation throughout the state. By encouraging the development of neighborhood associations and supporting neighborhood activities like block parties, community gardens, neighborhood watch programs and skill sharing programs, communities – and their local governments – can lay the foundation for neighborhood pride and strong community connections. In turn, those connections can translate into civic actions that benefit the entire community.

# Engaging with Friends, Family & Issues

## Social Networks

Family and friends are the bedrock of Floridians' social networks. Although one might hope for more – the state ranks 48th – from 70 to 80 percent of adults reported that they frequently talked and spent time with family and friends. Between 2017 and 2023, the only dip was in the Covid era, which affected relationships across the entire United States (Figure 9)

Figure 9 / 2017-2023

Frequently Talked & Spent Time with Friends & Family

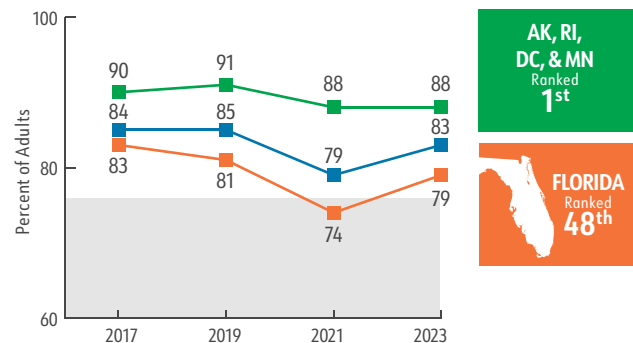
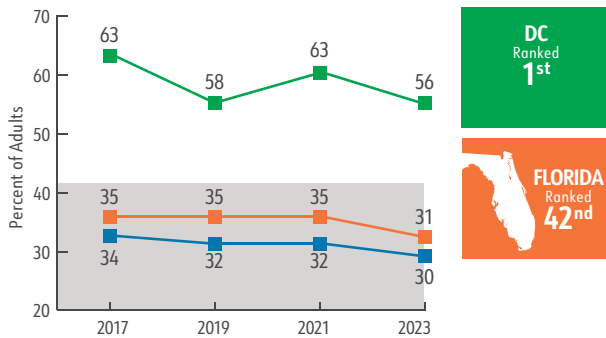


Figure 10 / 2017-2023

Frequently Discussed Public Issues with Friends & Family



As with their neighbors, Americans show some reticence to frequently discuss public issues with friends and family. (Figure 10)

Given the increasing polarization of the Nation, it is not surprising that an average of only about a third felt that they could often discuss issues with friends and family. While Florida ranked 42nd and was consistently below the national average, more than 30 percent of residents found family and friends to be a resource in discussing public issues.

Advancing Civic Connections underscores and extends some worrying trends about the Sunshine State's civic engagement that should spark concern from community leaders and policymakers. Despite Florida's historically large segment of older adults, and conventional wisdom that, on measures like volunteerism and philanthropy, older generations are more likely to be active than younger ones, Florida consistently fares poorly on those key dimensions of civic engagement. To benefit from the creativity, energy and resources of our older residents, Florida leaders need to focus on solving how older Floridians, especially new residents, can better see themselves as Floridians with opportunities to contribute to civic life.

Jeff Johnson, Director Florida AARP





# Engaging with Friends, Family & Issues

## Social Networks & Civic Connections

The Internet and social media are also vehicles for building and maintaining social networks. Despite reports of young people spending hours scrolling through social media daily, only a small minority of adults reported that they frequently posted their views on issues on social media sites. Nationally, about 6 percent did so between 2017 and 2023. Florida looked a lot like the nation at large, with about 7 percent frequently using social media sites to express their views on public issues. (Figure 11)

Figure 11 / 2017-2023  
Frequently Posted Views About Public Issues on Social Media

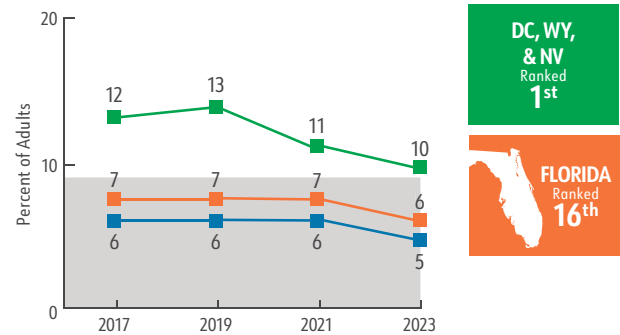
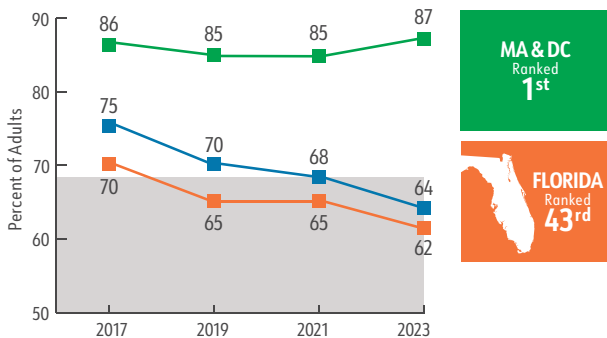


Figure 12 / 2017-2023  
Frequently Attended to News about Public Issues



One would hope that interactions about public issues with neighbors, friends and family would be buttressed by attention to the ever-unfolding news. Most Floridians report that they do tune into the news. There is, however, ample room for improvement. Florida ranked 42nd overall among states. Perhaps more importantly as well as surprisingly, there was a decline of about 10 percent – both in Florida and the Nation – of people who reported that they often attended to the news between 2017 and 2023. (Figure 12)



This sobering yet comprehensive look at Civic Engagement in Florida provides a roadmap for increased citizen involvement. Although much work needs to be done, having an in-depth analysis such as this allows stakeholders, including government, business, education and not for profit entities to focus vital time and limited resources on the areas that are most critical. I applaud the continued work of Florida Civic Advance and its leadership in being bold and transparent on such an important and challenging issue for Florida.

Ken Pruitt, Founder & President,  
The P5 Group. LLC,  
former Florida Senate President,  
St. Lucie County Property Appraiser

# Political Engagement

Finally, we turn to the question of Floridians' political involvement. There is a straightforward way to characterize it. Save for voting in local elections and, perhaps, making donations to campaigns – most Floridians are not taking steps to be directly involved in political activity, much the same as reported above for aspects of communal activity.

In turnout for local elections, the state is ranked 37th and is generally below the national average. (Figure 13)

In donating to political campaigns, Florida is ranked 33rd and is approximately at the national average. It is worth noting that from a financial perspective, Floridians appear to be more likely to support political candidates than charitable causes.

Floridians also don't have much direct contact with public officials. Not more than 8 percent of residents contacted a public official to express their opinion between the years between 2017 and 2023. (Figure 14)

In states with a strong tradition of citizen participation – like Maine, Vermont and Montana – over two out of every ten people talked to their public officials. Even in the relatively passive political action or either buying or boycotting products because of issues surrounding producers, Florida was ranked near the bottom of the states with only about one in ten residents participating. (Figure 15)

Figure 15 / 2017-2023  
Bought or Boycotted Products Based on Public Issues

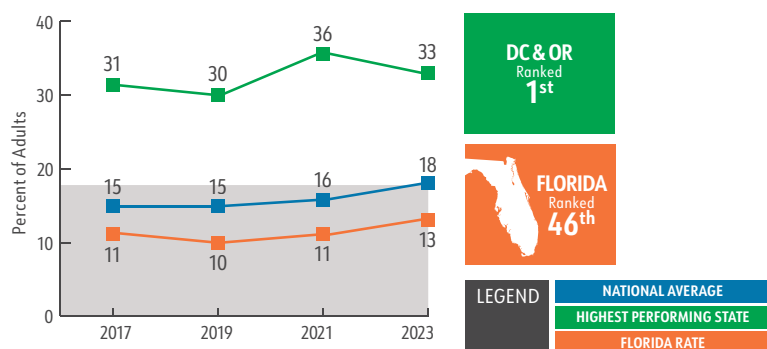


Figure 13 / 2017-2023  
Voted in Local Elections

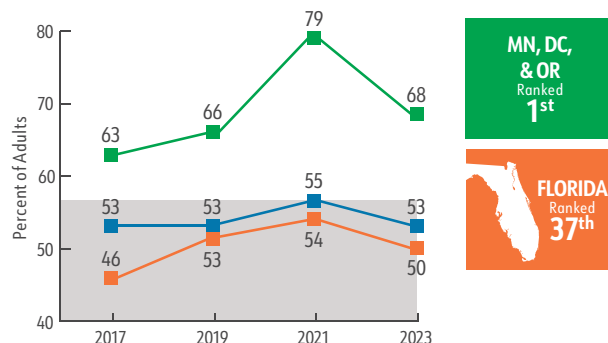


Figure 14 / 2017-2023  
Contacted Public Officials to Express Views on Public Issues

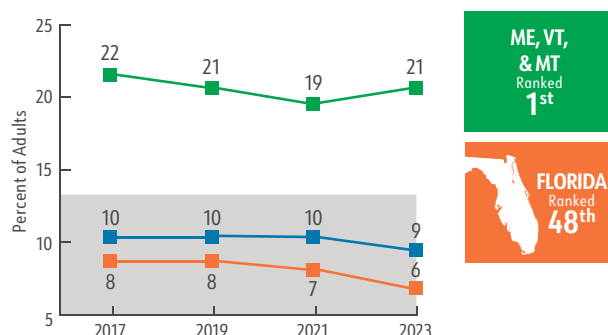
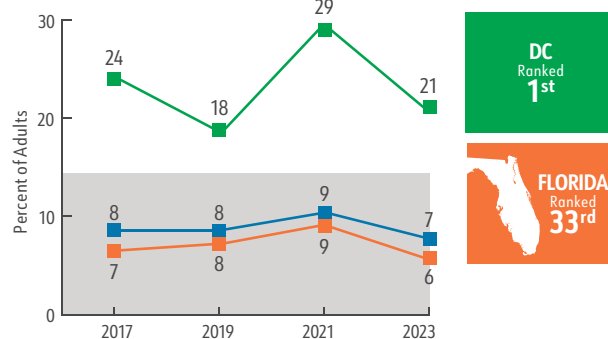


Figure 16 / 2017-2023  
Donated at Least \$25 to a Campaign



# Challenge & Opportunities for Civic Connections

**A CRISIS OF TRUST.** Florida's low levels of civic participation have been long-standing and, in the face of a crisis of trust, efforts to reverse this trend will present considerable challenges for communities across the state. Governments here in Florida and throughout the nation are beset by diminished trust in institutions. At the national level, public trust has fallen dramatically in the past 75 years. In the mid-1960's over three quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to "do what is right." By 2023, that number fell to a remarkable 16 percent.<sup>6</sup>

As has been noted in many public opinion surveys, local governments enjoy higher levels of trust than the government in the nation's capital. However, there are some important caveats about the level of trust that residents feel about their city hall and courthouse. In 2023, Gallup reported that almost a majority – 49 percent – of Americans had only a "fair amount" of trust and confidence in their local government to handle community problems and fully a third had little or no confidence. Only 18 percent of residents expressed a great deal of confidence in the governance of their community. Additionally, the percentage of residents expressing either some or a great deal of trust in their local government has fallen by almost ten percent since 2019.<sup>7</sup>

Trust is not a one-way street that just encourages residents to be more trusting of local governments. Research on public managers shows that their attitudes towards public participation play an important role in the success or failure of participatory practices.<sup>8</sup>

The roots of trust lie in the opinions that citizens hold about their elected leaders. In recent years, Americans overwhelmingly believe that elected officials do not care about the opinions of ordinary people. This perception is fueled by the belief that lawmakers are unduly influenced by wealthy individuals, campaign donors, special interest groups, and their own political parties, rather than the wellbeing of the citizens. Many Americans feel that elected officials are primarily motivated by personal financial gain rather than a desire to serve the public. More than 80% of Americans believe elected officials don't care what people like them think.<sup>9</sup> Two thirds of Americans believe that their local elected officials behave unethically at least some of the time and a majority believe that they do not often admit their mistakes or take responsibility for them.<sup>10</sup>

To complicate matters further, almost two thirds (64 percent) of Americans believe that American's trust in each other has been shrinking and 70 percent believe that low trust in each other makes it harder to solve community problems.<sup>11</sup>

Undoubtedly Americans' lack of trust and lack of connection with each other underlies the Surgeon General's Advisory that the United States has an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The lack of social connection is a barrier to collective action that can improve the community and the quality of governance. It also represents a threat to public health. Social connections strengthen social capital, reduce the risk of premature mortality, make communities more resilient in the face of disaster, more economically productive and less likely to experience high levels of crime and violence.

Finally, in this era of extreme polarization, most Americans are just tired of politics. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (65%) say they always or often feel exhausted when thinking about politics and 55% feel angry. By contrast, just 10% say they always or often feel hopeful about politics, and even fewer (4%) are excited.<sup>12</sup>

Florida Civic Advance (FCA) lays out a compelling challenge; data show that Floridians do not trust their government, nor each other. Through volunteering, joining civic associations, donating to charities, just meeting with neighbors to discuss community problems—these actions build the trust necessary for our democracy to thrive. FCA will help us do this necessary work.

Steve Seibert, former Executive Director, Florida Humanities Council, former Secretary, Department of Community Affairs, former Pinellas County Commissioner

"Advancing Civic Connections" reminds us that despite the challenges, a more engaged Florida is within reach. As leaders, it is our responsibility to create inclusive spaces, build trust, and empower every resident to take part in shaping our shared future.

Mayor John Dailey, Tallahassee

Civic engagement is the heartbeat of a thriving community — it empowers individuals to shape the future, strengthens trust among neighbors, and ensures that every voice contributes to the collective well-being. Philanthropy isn't just about writing checks — it's about showing up, listening, and building trust. When we invest in civic connection, we're not just funding programs; we're fueling the relationships and conversations that drive real, lasting change in our communities.

Sandi Vidal, Vice President of Community Strategies and Initiatives, Central Florida Foundation



## Challenge & Opportunities for Civic Connections

**TOWARD AN MORE ENGAGED FLORIDA.** At times, these barriers may seem insurmountable. But they are not. Polco recently drew from its databases to identify five geographically diverse examples of US counties that are the most socially connected. They include Washtenaw County, Michigan, Boulder County, Colorado, Mercer County, Pennsylvania, Ontario County, New York and Johnson County, Kansas.

Spread across the country, each of these communities share commonalities that contribute to the social connections among their residents. Each of them has critical civic infrastructure that includes robust non-profit organizations, vibrant neighborhood associations, parks, festivals and other places for residents to build supportive friendships and networks, strong traditions of volunteerism, dynamic and community centered churches and shared values that support inclusivity and a belief in the common good. For thoughtful communities that seek a stronger, less isolated civic life, developing or strengthening these characteristics seems within reach. It requires a vision, a willingness to work and learn and a commitment to stay the course.

Research by Eric Uslander and Mitchell Brown suggests that the traditional notion that improving trust may not build more civic participation. Rather, they argue that the causal arrow runs the other way. If we provide opportunities for community residents to participate with each other and with their community governments, trust will grow.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly, the provision of those civic opportunities, as well as other components of civic infrastructure, exist or are possible for many city and county governments in Florida. But, as Uslander and Brown point out, income inequality can weaken trust and the relationship between participation and trust. That is certainly an issue in Florida where levels of income inequality are high throughout most of the state. However, thoughtful attention to the need for community-wide and inclusive participation may help reduce some of the effects of income inequality.

The work of Scheufele, et al<sup>15</sup> finds that connections with neighbors and participation in community discussions can increase political involvement, issue awareness, and a growing sense of community. Initiatives aimed at strengthening these social networks could be vital in moving the needle on civic engagement, especially if fostered by local journalism and alternative media innovations.

Challenges aside, it is possible to foster a more engaged Florida. Florida communities can make real progress towards a more vibrant civic culture by:

- Building opportunities for all residents to participate
- Strengthening trust
- Promoting community connections
- Attending to and enhancing civic infrastructure
- Ensuring that residents have access to accurate information.

Civic engagement among Florida's residents has been at or near the lowest in the nation for at least a decade and a half. The health of our democratic system of governance depends critically on the informed participation of citizens; and virtually all that participation takes place where we live, work and play. Local elected officials, public administrators, philanthropic organizations, business and other community leaders, and community groups can all play a role in creating a positive civic vision and reshaping the civic future of their city, county, town or neighborhood. It is time to take both the civic opportunity and the civic responsibility seriously.

**I find the Florida Civic Advance report both sobering and timely. Ultimately, this report is both a diagnostic tool and a call to action. It provides a valuable foundation for understanding where we are and where we need to go. For those of us in public institutions, the findings reinforce our responsibility to foster a civic culture that is inclusive, resilient, and built to last. Now is the time to move from reflection to collective action.**

Agatha Caraballo, PhD, Founding Director, Maurice A. Ferré Institute for Civic Leadership, Florida International University

**“Advancing Civic Connections” highlights the persistence of low levels of community engagement across our state. The data shows the lack of public trust in leaders and institutions, low rates of voluntarism and charitable giving, and poor voter turnout. This report is a call to action for leaders in the public and private sectors, faith-based organizations, and educational institutions to step up and foster inclusive opportunities for connection across difference so we can create vibrant, engaged communities that can effectively tackle the myriad challenges facing Florida, and the rest of the nation.”**

Robin F. Bachin, Founding Director, Office of Civic and Community Engagement, University of Miami



## Endnotes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. New York :G. Dearborn & Co., 1838, Chapter 5.
2. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/civic-engagement-volunteering-supplement.html>
3. <https://floridacivichealth.org/files/beyond-vote.pdf>
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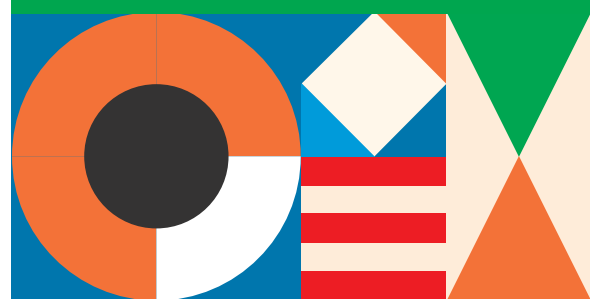


**I love the focus on strengthening social networks and (re)investing in local journalism as a solution to increasing civic engagement. Citizens need to trust their news sources. Having a local context to national issues can help motivate community members to take action.**

Daniel Gibson, Purpose Built Communities

**The Florida Civic Advance is the real deal when it comes to promoting democracy in Florida. Its premise is that the civic infrastructure of Florida communities, including non-profit associations, volunteering, philanthropy, and citizen engagement, are key to freedom and prosperity. It is the only organization that seeks to measure civic health, address civic challenges, identify successful civic action, and bring like-minded organizations together in a non-partisan network to promote the common good. It deserves recognition and support from all who care about the future of Florida.**

Stuart Langton, Retired Civic Leader and Author, former FCA Board Member



# CALL TO ACTION in Florida

For thoughtful Florida communities that seek a stronger, less isolated civic life, developing or strengthening community connections is within reach. It requires a broadly held civic vision that is built on the belief that a well-informed citizenry is more likely to participate, and it is the civic bedrock of a healthy democracy.

1

## **Strengthen Community Participation and Civic Connections**

*Prioritize Trust, Not Transactions* – While Floridians are not robustly engaged in the political process, including voting, it is likely that a major reason is a lack of trust in institutions including government and community organizations. The most promising approach is to provide opportunities for community residents to participate and connect with each other and with their community governments. This includes fostering local, participatory decision-making and community-led initiatives like direct democracy and participatory budgeting. Rebuilding trust – and spurring civic engagement – requires authentic relationships and is not driven by external timelines like project plans and election cycles.

2

## **Comprehensive and Accessible Continuing Civic Education**

A well-informed citizenry is essential to a healthy democracy. A robust civic education from an early age, K-12 through adulthood could assure the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate civic processes, understand policy issues, and advocate effectively. This approach could demystify complex political systems and processes, making engagement feel less intimidating, particularly for those who have been historically excluded or feel disconnected from traditional political institutions. The new Miami-Dade Civics Academy, along with a number of citizen academies in Florida cities and university civic centers are examples of efforts at continuing civic education. Since the passage of the Sandra Day O'Connor Civic Education Act in 2010, Florida's K-12 civic education initiative has served as a model for the nation.

3

## **Ensure Access to Accurate Information**

There are numerous barriers that need to be overcome to assure that residents and organizations have the information needed to be effective participants in civic life. These include attention to the realities of a multi-lingual community, the digital divide, the dearth of credible community news sources and the preponderance of misinformation. There are some examples of successful efforts that can help Florida communities with this challenge, E.g. Pensacola's CivicCon, Sarasota's Suncoast Searchlight, Central Florida Foundation's Journalism Ecosystem Summit, Lexington's CivicLex, and Signal Cleveland.

Now it the time for residents, local elected officials, public administrators, philanthropic organizations, business and other community groups to join together and play a role in reshaping the civic future of their city, county, town or neighborhood.

*It is time to take both the civic opportunity and our civic responsibility seriously.*

## Thank You to Our FCA Board Members



**Natalie Castelanos**  
Vice President,  
Catalyst Miami



**Merdochey T. LaFrance**  
Managing Principal,  
iTaylor Strategies



**Dr. Doug Dobson**  
former Executive  
Director, University  
of Central Florida  
Lou Frey Institute



**Janice Lucas**  
Commissioner,  
Panama City



**Tim Dutton**  
foundation  
consultant,  
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**Jim Murley**  
former Chief  
Resilience Officer,  
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**Emery Ivery**  
former director,  
Suncoast  
United Way



**Hon. Dennis Ross**  
Director, American Center  
for Political Leadership at  
Southeastern University;  
former United States  
Representative



**Bob Jones**  
former director,  
Florida State University  
Consensus Center,  
Tallahassee

“

As a native Floridian and a product of this state's public schools and universities, this report strikes both a personal and professional chord. It's a clear call to action: if we are serious about building a more connected, civically healthy Florida, we must invest in the infrastructure of belonging, where every resident, regardless of background or zip code, feels empowered to show up and shape the future of their community.

Merdochey LaFrance, FCA Board Member

This report is both a reality check and a roadmap. In 1999 Robert Putnam warned us in *Bowling Alone* that without intentional effort to rebuild civic connections and social trust, our democracy would suffer, our communities would fragment, and our collective capacity to solve problems would shrink. Advancing Civic Connections echoes these concerns. It shows that Florida, like much of the country, is living out the very decline Putnam foresaw — low rates of volunteering, diminished public trust, and weak engagement in civic life. But this report provides practical directions and a renewed call to action. The challenge now is to respond.

Janice Lucas, FCA Board Member

Advancing Civic Connections highlights the historically low rate of civic participation for Floridians. This is especially true for the economic struggles of working families (ALICE Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed households). As United Way has put it, civic engagement is part of the fabric of community, and part of what it takes to build stronger communities. By addressing the economic needs of ALICE households, which can limit their access to resources and opportunities, initiatives also contribute to a more inclusive and meaningful community engagement and participatory citizenry.

Emery Ivery, FCA Board Member



*First Edition: Florida Civic Advance's — Civic Matters Series*

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