



ADVANCING CIVIC CONNECTIONS

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.

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

The Challenge

Civic engagement is about neighbors collaborating with elected leaders, addressing housing and food insecurity, building community facilities, and serving on boards to shape local policies. These collective efforts by residents form the foundation of successful, vibrant and resilient communities.

For over fifteen years, Florida has consistently lagged the nation's levels of civic engagement. Despite the efforts of many, the gaps haven't narrowed. These represent more than numbers – they are warning signs that many of Florida's voices go unheard and community needs remain unmet.

This analysis uses the Census Bureau's biennial Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement, collected each September as part of the Current Population Survey (CPS). This comprehensive dataset provides civic health snapshots for every state. The analysis here compares Florida to the national average and to the most engaged states across the U.S.

Civically engaged communities are stronger communities- whether that's volunteering, voting or simply showing up for a neighbor. 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 and CEO,
The Miami Foundation

The Snapshot

The charts in this Report offer the opportunity to compare Florida to the national average and to the most civically engaged states in the nation. The national average provides a benchmark for where Florida should be. The participation rates of the most engaged states provide an aspirational benchmark for where the state could be if we were truly successful in strengthening our civic culture.

Between 2008 and 2015, the CPS measured the civic health of the nation and its communities by gauging citizen participation in four critical areas: Volunteering, Supporting Charitable Causes, Attending Public Meetings to express Opinions, and Residents Working Together to Address Community Issues.

Volunteering

Volunteering represents the act of giving time and energy in support of activities that are important – from coaching youth recreation to sitting on policy advisory Boards.

Charitable Giving

Charitable Giving represents providing financial support for groups or causes that are believed to be important.

Attending Public Meetings

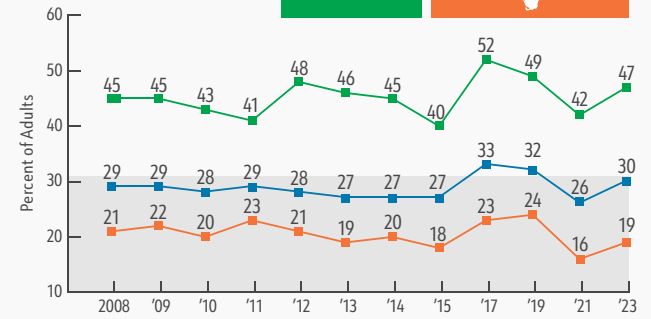
Attending Public Meetings represents the effort of appearing in public to offer advice and opinions to elected and administrative officials as they hold formal meetings to consider policy issues.

Collective Action on Community Issues

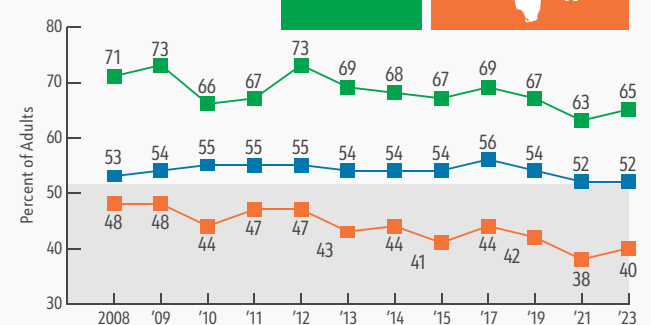
Collective action on community issues represents neighbors and residents voluntarily joining together to seek solutions to issues affecting the community at large – from crime to traffic, health care, housing and recreation.

CLICK TO VIEW THE FULL
Advancing Civic Connections Report

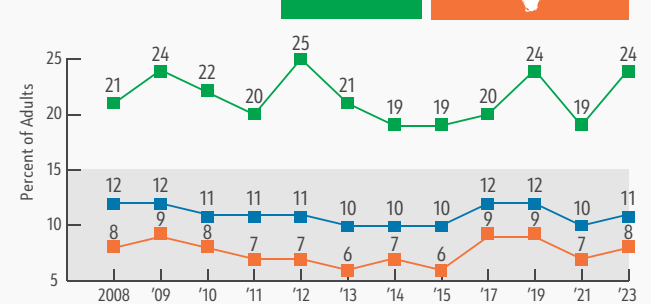
2008-2023
Volunteering



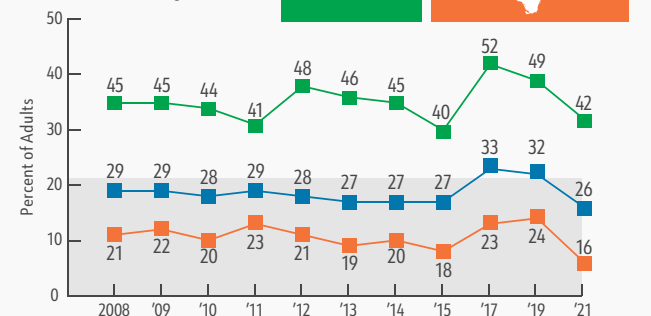
2008-2023
Charitable Giving
Donated \$25+



2008-2023
Attending Public Meetings



2008-2021
Collective Action
on Community Issues



LEGEND

NATIONAL AVERAGE

HIGHEST PERFORMING STATE

FLORIDA RATE

Considering the tumultuous environment in the country right now, this report and the series is right on target. I am working on recognizing citizens as doers and actors, not just members of a public that needs to be better served. I have written about government not just for the people, but with the people. And I think that's critical because 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. I wish more states would do the kind of research and report you have done.

David Mathews,
Former CEO and President,
Kettering Foundation



Expanding the Measurement of Civic Health

In 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau and their partner, AmeriCorps, broadened how civic health is measured, tracking not only formal actions like volunteering but also informal ties like doing favors for neighbors and discussing public issues. This expansion grouped civic health measures into three major categories:

- 1) Organizational Participation** — including volunteering, supporting charities, and joining civic groups;
- 2) Political Involvement** — including voting, contacting public officials to express opinions, and participating in political campaigns;
- 3) Connections with Family and Neighbors** — including interactions with family members and neighbors, discussing public issues with them and exchanging favors.

Providing a more nuanced view of Florida's civic life, analysis indicates that the last of these — Connections with Family and Neighbors may be a bright spot in otherwise dismal findings.

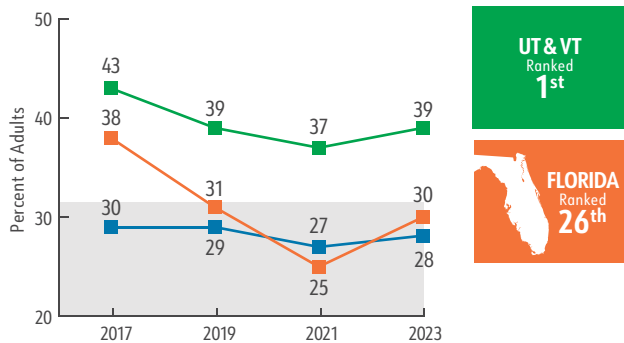
Social Networks and Civic Participation

Social networks emphasize building and maintaining relationships and connections among individuals. Civic participation involves actively engaging in public life, collective action, and decision-making processes. Social networks can play a crucial role in enabling and amplifying citizen participation by facilitating communication, mobilization, and collective action.

In light of performance on every other civic measure, Florida shows surprising strength in neighbor connectivity, ranking near the national average. As our national discourse becomes more divided, fostering these neighborly connections is vital to rebuilding civic trust and mutual support. From casual conversations to small acts of neighborly support, these connections are the bedrock of community resilience and civic action.

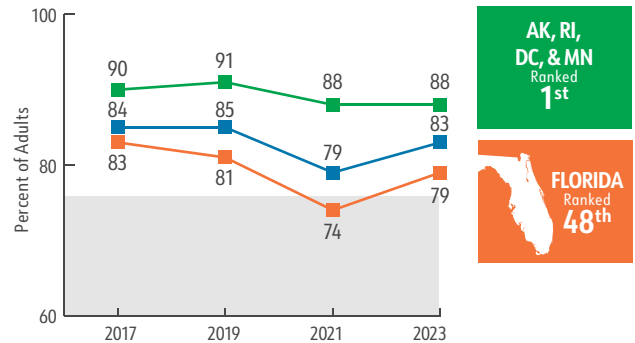
2017-2023

Frequently Talked and Spent Time with Neighbors



2017-2023

Frequently Talked and Spent Time with Friends and Family



Political Engagement and Civic Participation

In turnout for local elections, the state is ranked 37th and is generally below the national average. Regarding donations to political campaigns, Florida is ranked 33rd and is approximately at the national average. Voter turnout, direct contact with public officials, and participation in local decision-making all trail national averages and overall political engagement remains low. Economic and social barriers, widespread political exhaustion, and polarization compound this political disengagement. Reversing this trend will require a renewed commitment to more transparent governance, inclusive civic spaces, resident participation, and active community leadership.

2017-2023

LOCAL VOTING PARTICIPATION



FLORIDA RANKS

37th
in Local Election
Turnout Nationally

- Low Turnout in Local Elections
- Erosion of Trust in Institutions
- Florida's local election turnout is well below the national average at its peak nationally at 79% in 2021.

IN FLORIDA
Fewer than

8%
Contacted Local
Officials (2017-2023)

- Limited Direct Contact with Officials
- Burnout from Crisis-Driven Politics
- Lack of Local Engagement Opportunities

FLORIDA RANKS

33rd
in Political
Donations

- Minimal Political Consumer Action
- Preference for Political Donations Over Civic Action

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,
Community Strategies and Initiatives,
Central Florida Foundation



Advancing Civic Connections and Engagement

While Florida continues to struggle, there are communities across the country much more connected, with traditions that prioritize the common good. A sample of some of the most connected communities indicates that they share commonalities that contribute to social connections and center residents:

- **Prioritize trust building, not transactions**
- **Design/program civic spaces (libraries, parks, etc.) for civic connections and community action**
- **Support vibrant neighborhoods and nonprofit organizations**

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

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. The new Miami-Dade Civics Academy, along with a number of citizen academies in other Florida cities are examples of trust building and strengthening community participation

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. University and college civic centers in communities around the state 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 is 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.*

CLICK TO VIEW THE FULL
Advancing Civic Connections Report

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
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Tim Dutton
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Jim Murley
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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 particularly impacts the economic struggles of working families (ALICE Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed households). Civic engagement is part of what it takes to build stronger, healthier and economically resilient communities. Addressing the economic needs of ALICE households will allow them to contribute to a more inclusive and meaningful community engagement and participatory citizenry.

Emery Ivery, FCA Board Member



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