2025 VERMONT CIVIC HEALTH INDEX ™

CENTER for RURAL STUDIES
at the University of Vermont

VERMONT
SECRETARY OF STATE

NCoC
National Conference on Citizenship
Connecting People. Strengthening Our Country.

AmeriCorps
Vermont

UP for LEARNING
Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning

VERMONT HUMANITIES
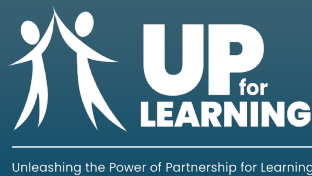
THE TEAM

Convened by the Vermont Secretary of State's Office, with assistance from the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), the Center for Rural Studies (CRS) at the University of Vermont and an Advisory Group of organizations and individuals invited to participate and guide the processes of identifying and assessing civic health, this initiative was able to identify distinct domains of civic health and numerous individual civic indicators that can be used to assess and track civic health across Vermont and across populations over time.

VERMONT SECRETARY OF STATE'S OFFICE

The Vermont Secretary of State's Office (SOS) delivers essential services to protect the public, provide reliable information, support businesses, individuals, and government, strengthen democracy, preserve our history, and build community. Our vision is that people trust in a transparent and accountable government that provides services, protection, and resources for success in communities and engagement in participatory democracy. The office has four core functions: Elections, Business Services, The Office of Professional Regulation, and Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, as well as two special programs: Civics and Safe at Home. With a renewed focus on civic engagement, the SOS office has acted as a convener for the Civic Health Index initiative, bringing together partners from across the state who are committed to this work. This report will serve as a roadmap to help define and direct our civic engagement work moving forward.

THE CENTER FOR RURAL STUDIES

The Center for Rural Studies, located at the University of Vermont, is a not for profit, research services organization with over 45 years of experience identifying and tracking a host of indicators relevant to Vermonters' wellbeing across diverse categories like the economy, environment, safety, personal well being, health and more. The CRS was able to tap into this knowledge base to identify additional local data sets to help develop the rich picture of civic health in Vermont.

SERVERMONT

SerVermont is Vermont's State Service Commission. The commission supports, promotes, and recognizes volunteerism and community service in Vermont. The commission is the entity that supports Vermont's national service programs, including AmeriCorps. The commission also plays a vital role in emergency operations by managing volunteers in times of disaster. SerVermont is part of the Vermont Agency of Human Services, and national service is the means to work on the agency's mission to improve the health and wellbeing of Vermonters today and tomorrow, and to protect those among us who are unable to protect themselves.

UP FOR LEARNING

UP for Learning is a dynamic non-profit organization that supports Vermont educational systems and communities in reimagining and transforming education by fully engaging youth through coaching, facilitation, and training. The organization fosters equitable, cross-generational relationships where youth and adults share power, voice, and responsibility, resulting in increased equity, a sense of purpose, and lasting systemic change. UP for Learning's partnerships with school-based, district-wide, and regional teams empower youth to drive change in their lives and communities. UP strengthens civic culture and promotes civic wellbeing by preparing young people to engage meaningfully in democracy.

VERMONT HUMANITIES

Vermont Humanities is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress Center for the Book, celebrating its 50th Anniversary in 2024. Their mission is to use the humanities to connect with people across Vermont to create just, vibrant, and resilient communities and to inspire a lifelong love of learning. Public programming includes a statewide, one-book community reading program; book discussions for veterans, medical professionals, and the public; free public talks; a fall festival; spoken word readings in Vermont State Parks; and a large community grants program supporting cultural organizations around Vermont. Over 70,000 Vermonters participated in their programming over the last year.

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.

THE ADVISORY GROUP

This group consists of organizations and individuals representing a diverse range of stakeholders relating to civic health. These representatives helped define aspects of civic health and were a sounding board for the process of developing domains and indicators for this work. Organizations include: CCTV Center for Media and Democracy; Center for Community News; Disability Rights Vermont; Northeast Kingdom Community Action, Office of Racial Equity; Pride Center of Vermont; Vermont Agency of Education; Vermont Community Foundation; Vermont Council on Rural Development; Vermont League of Cities and Towns and Vermont Womenpreneurs. Individuals include: Monika Ganguly-Kiefner, Sara Haskins, Chris Sheehan, Meg Staloff, and Matt Sorensen.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vermont Civic Health Index offers a look at the state's civic life, revealing considerable strengths as well as areas for growth across six key domains. The Index also spotlights some of the organizations that offer unique support for civic health across the state and presents original data from the Vermont Youth Civic Health Survey.

Vermonters rank high in crucial areas of civic health such as helping neighbors, attending public meetings, participating in groups, and staying well informed. Meanwhile, findings regarding Vermont's youth, people of color, and other groups offer insights about how we can broaden participation opportunities and deepen healthy engagement. A snapshot of some of our findings:

Volunteerism & Donating

Key Findings

- » Vermont ranks 5th in the country for informal helping and 13th for formal volunteerism.
- » Volunteerism increases as age, income, and educational attainment increase, except for youth (student) volunteering. Rates are highest for middle and high school students.
- » Vermont ranks 2nd in the county for donations to political organizations .

Next Steps: Vermont has a strong culture of volunteerism and mutual aid that needs to be supported. We need to continue to invest in and expand initiatives that work, and better understand barriers to volunteerism so that opportunities for engagement are equitably available across different groups.

Political Engagement

Key Findings

- » Vermonters rank 2nd in the country for attending public meetings.
- » Vermonters also rank 2nd in the U.S. for engaging with neighbors in frequent discussions about political, social, or local issues.
- » Vermont's voter registration rate has been steadily increasing, while voter turnout remains consistent over time. Vermont ranks 4th in the country for voting in the last local election.
- » Only 59.1% of Vermont youth report that they intend to register to vote when they become eligible

Next Steps: While Vermont ranks quite high in several indicators, there is still room for improvement. Investing in civic education will ensure that young people and adults alike feel prepared to participate in democratic processes, from voting and engaging with public officials to running for office. We can learn from communities with high levels of participation and successful programs to ensure that Vermont's rich history of engagement continues and accessibility expands.

Community & Social Context

Key Findings

- » Vermont ranks 2nd in the country for working with neighbors to do something positive for the neighborhood or community and for discussing political, societal, or local issues with neighbors.
- » Between 2013 and 2020, the percentage of Vermonters reporting never feeling uncomfortable or out of place in their community because of ethnicity, culture, race, skin color, language, accent, gender sexual orientation, or religion increased from 62% to 78%. While the increase is positive, 22% of Vermonters do report feeling uncomfortable and that is far too high.

Next Steps: We must prioritize creating inclusive and welcoming civic spaces. To do that effectively, we need to continue to learn about the experiences of historically marginalized populations and how to welcome their civic participation. We also need to invest in data equity across the state to ensure that future reports give a full picture of our challenges and strengths across different groups and geographic regions.
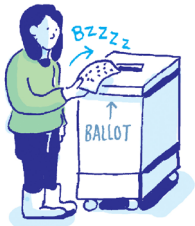
Cultural Access & Engagement

Key Findings:

- » In 2021, nearly twice as many Vermonters reported belonging to any type of group than the U.S. population overall (VT-33%, U.S.-17%).

- » The 2023 Vermont Youth Civic Health Survey found that 70% of Vermont youth reported an affiliation with a group or organization in their community or school.

- » Vermonters saw a decrease in satisfaction with access to artistic, cultural, recreational, and learning opportunities in their communities between 2017 and 2020. This is likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- » 93% of respondents to the 2024 Vermonter Poll agreed or strongly agreed that opportunities to view and participate in arts and culture are an important part of thriving and healthy communities. (CreateVT Action Plan)

Next Steps: Vermonters must continue supporting Vermont's creative and cultural sector as it recovers from the Covid-19 Pandemic. Libraries should be centered in community planning efforts, understanding their critical role in providing reliable information, serving as community gathering places, and in broadening access to social services and Vermont's public schools should prioritize access to a full range of arts education as a critical component of building a well-rounded citizenry capable of participating in and shaping a healthy democratic practice.

Media Trust & Access

Key Findings

- » Vermont ranks 2nd in the nation in the number of people who report they frequently read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal or local issues. 78.9% of Vermonters report they do this frequently compared to 67.6% of the national average.

- » Vermonters seek out national and local news sources at about the same rates for issues important to them.

Next Steps: Encouraging media literacy and supporting access to reliable news sources can help strengthen trust and build civic knowledge. Programming that addresses polarization and bias can help Vermonters navigate the increasingly complex media landscape.

Government Trust & Access

Key Findings

- » Vermonter's confidence in local government is much greater than in national government.

- » Confidence in local government was increasing before the COVID pandemic and increased substantially during the height of COVID in 2020.

Next Steps

Supporting efforts to ensure civic spaces are accessible and welcoming is crucial. This can include physical accessibility, technology training for remote participation, and training to create spaces where everyone feels safe to share their voice. Developing a civic engagement coalition that can share resources, best practices, and troubleshoot together would also be beneficial.

This report presents a baseline and a snapshot in time, but we acknowledge that it could never fully capture every experience or factor in the dynamic systems that comprise our civic health. We hope Vermont's Civic Health Index will serve to jump-start fresh conversations about our state's civic health priorities as we engage with Vermonters across the state.

INTRODUCTION

Community resilience is at the forefront of many conversations in Vermont right now, and the state's first Civic Health Index comes at a critical time. Vermont is not immune to many of the national challenges that impact civic health. The state faces challenges with housing availability and affordability, substance misuse, and increased political polarization.

Since 2020, Vermont has not only endured the COVID-19 pandemic but also two consecutive summers of devastating floods. These events have challenged our systems and our hearts. They have also provided opportunities to reflect on the importance of our civic wellbeing. We need to understand our baseline as a state so that we can identify strengths, share resources, target challenges, and ultimately improve our civic health and our community resilience.

We went into this project with some big questions. Do Vermonters have the tools they need to work with each other, and to ensure that their government works for them? Is there a difference in opportunities for rural Vermonters? What civic engagement opportunities are available to Vermont youth? Where are our biggest challenges? What is working and how can we expand on it? Not surprisingly, strong dynamic tensions are at play in the story of Vermont's civic health.

Vermont boasts wonderful examples of youth civic engagement across the state. As shown in the data presented here from the Vermont Youth Civic Health Survey, when we talked to young people about the importance of civic health—they get it! We just need to make sure they have the necessary tools and confidence to carry their ideas forward. But this is an area where Vermont's inherent strengths are not equitably accessible to all. It is important that new approaches to bolster civic education for Vermont youth focus on solutions that can be implemented statewide.

As this report shows, Vermont ranks quite high on many indicators of civic health when compared with other states, and many examples bear this out. We have a rich history of annual Town Meeting Day, where Vermonters come together in person to discuss and vote on budgets, town officers and other items, and many point to this as a place where people can practice respectful disagreement, work across differences, and build consensus. However, these spaces may not always feel accessible or welcoming to all Vermonters. Increasingly, larger communities are doing away with Town Meeting in favor of a more broadly accessible Australian ballot.

Over these last two summers of flooding, we have seen the Vermont spirit of neighbors helping neighbors—mutual aid groups jumping into action, the impact of philanthropy and donations, and the strength provided by community connection as we all leaned on each other. Vermont's flood response is a testament to the strength of our civic health. At the same time, disparities between different towns quickly became apparent. Witnessing Vermont's resilience over these last two years feels similar to reading the findings of this report: There is a lot to be proud of, and there is more work to do.

While Vermont generally has a strong reputation when it comes to civic engagement, we acknowledge that people of different socio-economic backgrounds, and from different places across the state experience aspects of civic health differently. So, while we celebrate the areas of strength identified in our Civic Health Index, it is our responsibility to ensure that those experiences are accessible and welcoming to all Vermonters.

Photo Source: Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

Defining Civic Health

In 2023, the Vermont Secretary of State's Office embarked on an effort to gauge the state of Vermont's civic health. But what exactly does the term civic health mean? At first we may think of terms like citizen and civic duty, which suggest concepts like voting and volunteerism. When we first convened partners to advise this work, we asked them what civic health looks like to them. Some answers included:

» **"High levels of trust in neighbors, institutions, and ourselves,"**

» **"Trust, belonging, and ownership and also the skills required to engage in constructive dialogue,"**

» **"Understanding how systems of power work in a community and what the levers for change are," and,**

» **"When people in the community feel their systems work for them and they are reflected in those systems."**

NCoC defines civic health as "the way that communities are organized to define and address public problems." These framings helped us to develop a set of overarching domains of civic health to serve as a roadmap for understanding all the ways civic health impacts our lives.

Developing indicators inclusive of the many aspects of civic wellbeing was undertaken through an iterative consultation process that included meetings with the NCoC, the Center for Rural Studies and the initiative's Advisory Group. These meetings looked at the NCoC's high level civic indicators and identified additional indicators relevant to Vermont.

Photo Source: Vermont Humanities

Process Steps Overview

Upon initial consultation with the National Conference on Citizenship, the Vermont Secretary of State received a tailored, civic health dataset composed of indicators that are available to every state in the country. With these initial indicators, the initiative was able to begin assessing how our state measures up compared to other states across several categories. Some of these indicators allowed for following trends over time and for looking at differences across specific socio-demographic populations like race and ethnicity, gender, age groups, etc. Many of the indicators' data were only available at a statewide level of geography, and in some areas, few indicators existed, leaving room to identify additional indicators and opportunities to collect more granular data to develop more detailed analyses in the future.

» The SOS received national and state level civic health indicators data from the NCoC.

» Organizations and individuals engaged in a range of civic activity in Vermont were invited to form an Advisory Board.

» The Advisory Board reviewed the NCoC indicators and discussed potential civic health narratives.

» CRS provided additional indicators for Advisory Board review and selection.

» Additional advisors were invited to the table based on initial feedback.

» A second review of all potential indicators and narratives narrowed the focus.

Youth Civic Health Survey

The Secretary of State's Office collaborated with the YMCA of the USA and Knight Impact who had previously developed the Youth Civic Health Survey as a tool to study the impact of their Youth and Government program. They allowed us to distribute this survey to students in grades 7-12 across the state of Vermont. With the support of the Agency of Education, we received over 2,500 responses which helped us to gain a better understanding of civic behaviors and mindsets of Vermont youth. We are the first state to utilize this survey in a statewide capacity. The results are incorporated throughout this report.

Keep an eye out for this icon to find our youth survey results.

Photo Source: Andrew McClellan

VERMONT'S CIVIC HEALTH DOMAINS

What are Vermont's domains of civic health? Some are readily apparent. The concepts of volunteerism, donating, and voting are well-established aspects of civic life in our democracy. The team built upon these foundational civic concepts by asking: "What other aspects of daily life impact our ability to engage in civic life in Vermont?" The team identified factors that were impactful to civic life in the state and found that these indicators could be grouped into the following general domains of civic health.

Each domain represents a general area of civic activity within our society. Within these broad domains of civic activity, individual indicators provide data that can be analyzed over time and/or compared across geographies or population groups. These measurements offer insight into civic health trends and how various aspects of civic health are experienced by different population groups. Individual indicators provide data that can be analyzed over time and/or compared across geographies or populations.

Volunteerism & Donating
- » Donate to charitable or religious organizations
- » Volunteerism
- » Donate to political organization

Political Engagement
- » Voting/Voter Turnout
- » Registered to vote
- » Discuss political, societal, or local issues with your neighbors
- » Attend a public meeting
- » Watch local municipal meetings, events and elections coverage
- » Concern about lack of community interest in Local Offices, Candidate Diversity, Voter Turnout, Board Volunteers, Services Volunteers

Community & Social Context
- » Talk or spend time with neighbors
- » Work with neighbors to do something positive for the neighborhood or community
- » Satisfaction with your personal safety in your community
- » Feeling of belonging to your local community
- » Level of trust in neighbors
- » Feel uncomfortable or out of place in your community because of things like your ethnicity, culture, race, skin color, language, accent, gender, sexual orientation, or religion

Cultural Access & Engagement
- » Satisfaction with access to artistic and cultural activities in your community
- » Satisfaction with access to sports and recreational activities in your community
- » Satisfaction with access to learning opportunities like informal seminars or trainings in your community
- » Group participation

Media Trust & Access
- » Seek out National news sources for important issues
- » Seek out Local news sources for important issues
- » Read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal or local issues

Government Trust & Access
- » Perception of local public officials
- » Confidence level in local government
- » Confidence level in national government
- » Perception of corruption in local government
- » Absentee voting

A Note on Data Gaps and Challenges

Identifying factors contributing to civic health required an assessment of those factors' characteristics including quality of the data, timeliness, ability to disaggregate data by population subgroups like geography, race and ethnicity, gender and age groups, among other factors.

The following data highlight civic wellbeing indicators for Vermont and the country overall, assess trends over time when available, and describe differences across populations within Vermont, as the data allow. The team was significantly interested in exploring differences in lived experiences of various population groups within Vermont. Unfortunately, only a few of the datasets available enable disaggregation by demographic characteristics. When possible, analyses are conducted to show differences across characteristics like income and educational attainment. The team was fortunate to partner with the YMCA and with UP for Learning to develop additional youth-centered data.

This work relies heavily on the availability and use of existing data sets relevant to civic wellbeing. As this work continues, additional existing indicators may be identified and others may be developed for future use.

One of the data gaps includes the limited ability to analyze many of the indicators across population groups or geographic levels. This has limited our ability to provide consistent analyses across socio-demographic groups like age, race and ethnicity, income, etc. Additionally, some of the domains contain very few indicators. For example, there are missing or undiscovered indicators specific to aspects of trust in media and trust in governance.

FINDINGS

Volunteerism & Donating

» Donate to charitable, religious organizations
» Volunteerism

Donating money and time (volunteerism) are essential forms of civic engagement that are highly dependent on an individual's means and abilities.

Volunteerism can bring people together from different beliefs and backgrounds as they work to address local challenges. The act of community volunteering contributes to the development of social capital like enhancing understanding among neighbors, increasing communication skills and building empathy. During times of disaster, individuals coming together to help their neighbors is facilitated when the foundations of respect and understanding are established. Resilience is improved for individuals and communities when they feel connected with neighbors and have experienced working together for common goals.

In Vermont, volunteering takes many shapes, and our language around civic engagement does not always capture the many ways that people give back. Mutual aid organizations have been very active during the pandemic and the recent floods. The individuals who are active in those networks may not even see themselves as "volunteers," but simply as community members doing what is needed in a time of crisis. In the Volunteering and Civic Life in America Summary from 2021, Vermont ranked 5th in the country for rate of informal helping (63.9%).

On the more formal end of the spectrum, Vermont's rate of formal volunteerism is 29.1%. Vermont has a high number of non-profit organizations that rely on volunteers and the state's municipal infrastructure depends on boards and commissions that have a great deal of responsibility but often offer no pay or only a small stipend. It takes more than five thousand elected and appointed municipal officials to make Vermont's local governments work, with most of these being volunteers.

Volunteering and donating are impacted by the level of trust people have in their communities and the feelings people have regarding whether they believe they can make a difference. In many ways, volunteering and donating can be described as existing on a scale of community engagement. Donating money to organizations is a less direct way to participate in civic life than taking time to volunteer and be present in a community setting. And yet, donating money is often a more accessible way for many to contribute who might not otherwise be able to volunteer their time.

Availability of time to volunteer and finances to donate are two inherent challenges within this civic health indicator. Programs like AmeriCorps operating in Vermont provide embedded resources like living allowances to those in service. While it can be challenging to live on that allowance alone, by covering basic living expenses, these programs provide an example of how to increase access to service opportunities for those who couldn't afford to serve otherwise. As more volunteerism is present in a community, more community members will spend more time being civically engaged and helping others.

VERMONT VOLUNTEERING HIGHLIGHT

Northeast Kingdom Organizing

Northeast Kingdom Organizing is a multi-issue, member-led coalition of individuals, families, faith and community-based organizations that come together to organize and advocate for justice for the people and the places of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom (Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans counties). They do this by embracing concepts and practices of community organizing and centering voices of NEK residents often ignored in decisions about their communities. NEKO's two major campaigns voted on by membership are housing and social connection. Within those campaigns NEKO works on flood recovery, land owner solidarity and tenants rights, community meals, transportation access, and more. NEKO helped muck out 200 homes in the 2024 flooding, and they plan to rebuild 100 homes left damaged from 2023 and 2024 through their partner organization and long-term recovery group, KURRVE (Kingdom United Resilience & Recovery Effort).

Vermont's National Standing

» Vermonters tend to volunteer at a higher rate than the U.S. overall
» Vermonters donate at a rate similar to that of the nation overall (50% and 48% respectively).
» In 2021 Vermonters were the second most likely of any U.S. state to donate to political organizations (VT-15%, U.S.-9%).
» In 2021 Vermonters volunteered more than the U.S. population (VT- 29%, U.S.- 23%)
» In 2021 Vermont ranked 13th out of all states for the percentage of the population that reported having recently volunteered.

29%
of Vermonters reported volunteering compared to **23% of the entire nation**

50%
of Vermonters reported donating compared to **48% of the entire nation**

Inside Vermont Volunteering

» The percent of Vermonters donating $25 or more to a charity or religious organization has declined slightly over recent time while the percent of Vermonters volunteering has seen a more significant decline, by 8 percentage points between 2019 and 2021.

Percent of Vermonters Donating and Volunteering Over Time
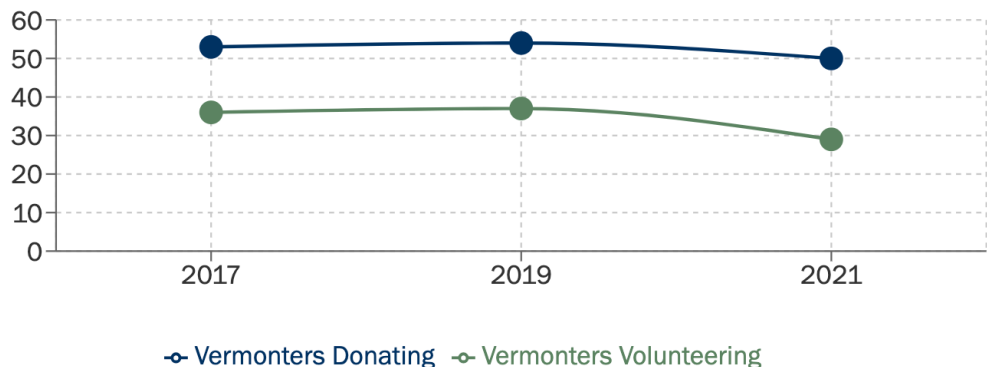
Legend: ⊸ Vermonters Donating   ⊸ Vermonters Volunteering

» Volunteerism increases as age, income and educational attainment increase, except for youth volunteering. Volunteering is highest during school attendance, when our educational system provides robust curricular support for this; it dips significantly afterward, then slowly increases with age.

Volunteerism in Vermont by Demographics

Photo Source: Jay Mullen

Political Engagement

» Voting/Voter Turnout
» Registered to vote
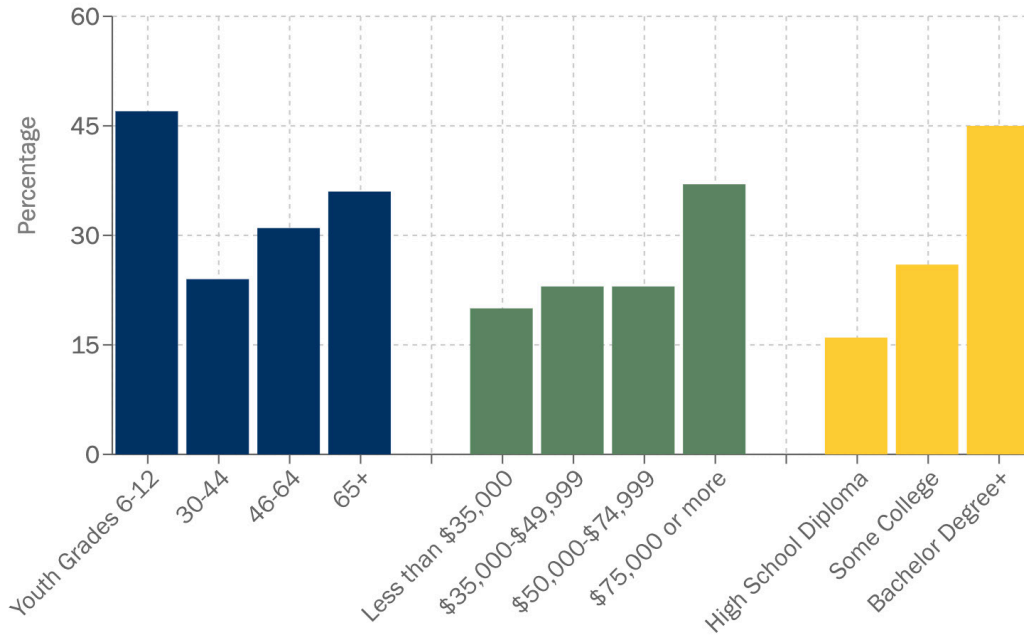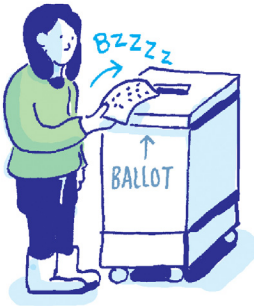» Read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal or local issues
» Discuss political, societal, or local issues with your neighbors
» Attend a public meeting
» Donate to political organization
» Watch local municipal meetings, events and elections coverage
» Local officials' level of concern about lack of community interest in Local Offices, Candidate Diversity, Voter Turnout, Board Volunteers, Services Volunteers.

Political engagement is defined here as activities that contribute to awareness of political issues and that intend to directly influence governance processes. These include actions like voting, discussing politics with others, reaching out to public officials about certain issues, and using purchasing power to take a stance on issues. Again, these actions may all exist on a continuum based on level of engagement. For example, the rates of voter registration are much higher than the rates of voter turnout.

Challenges to political engagement include obstacles to physical participation like lack of childcare, work schedules and access to the physical spaces where engagement takes place. There are also social challenges that include confusion or lack of knowledge about politics and political processes. Additionally, trust in political processes has been eroded in recent years, driven by increasingly divisive political discourse. This erosion of trust may be leading to lower participation in civic processes over time.

Overall, and maybe not surprisingly for a small state, Vermonters are much more likely to engage with their neighbors than other states, a testament to the strong sense of community many Vermonters feel. Vermonters also are very active in terms of donating to political organizations, accessing information and news about political, social and local issues, and are very active voters.

That said, there are areas of concern when it comes to political engagement. Vermont communities may struggle to fill local elected or appointed offices, the vast majority of which are volunteer positions. While Vermonters may be more active voters than in other parts of the country, there are still instances where voter turnout is low, especially in areas where there are uncontested races. Even in places where Vermont ranks high, the percentage of participation is still low overall and offers plenty of room for improvement.

Photo Source: Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

Vermont's National Standing

» Vermonters were the second most likely of any U.S. state to engage in frequent discussions about political, social or local issues with neighbors in 2021 (VT-14%, U.S. 8%).
» In 2021 Vermonters were more likely to access information about political, social or local issues than the U.S. population overall (VT-79%, U.S.-68%), ranking second among all U.S. states.
» Vermonters were more likely to vote in local elections and attend public meetings in 2021 than the U.S. average, ranking fourth among all states for local voting (69%) and second for attending public meetings (17%).
» In 2022 Vermonters had higher voter registration than the U.S. population overall (VT-75%, U.S.-69%).

75%
of Vermonters reported registering to vote compared to **69% of the entire nation**

79%
of Vermonters reported frequently accessing information about political or social issues compared to **68% of the entire nation**

2nd
Vermonters **rank 2nd in attending public meetings** at 17%, compared to the national average of 10%

Inside Vermont Political Engagement

» The percentage of Vermonters registered to vote is increasing over time.
» Vermont has many laws in place to make voting as accessible as possible including automatic voter registration when applying for a Driver's License and same day voter registration.
» Vermont is one of two states that allows incarcerated people to vote.
» In Vermont voter turnout varies substantially across municipalities with a range of up to nearly 81% turnout in one community to as little as 26% voter turnout in another community in 2022.
» Five of the six towns with voter turnout of 75% or more are among the smallest communities in Vermont, each with less than 500 registered voters, while lower voter turnout rates are often found in communities with larger populations.

2024 Vermont Youth Survey

When you become eligible do you intend to register to vote?

36.1% No

4.8% Yes, already registered

Yes

59.1%
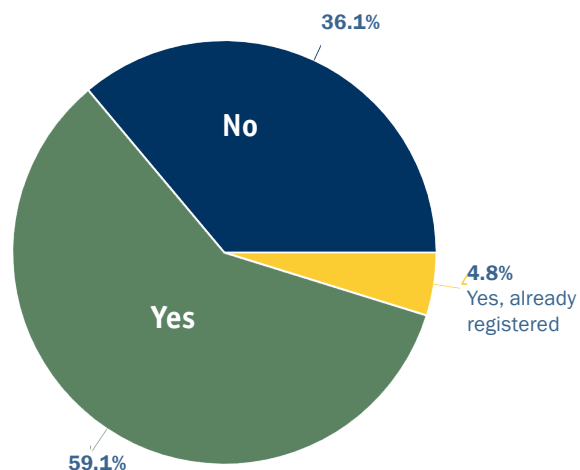
There are differences between data collected through the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) and data from the Vermont Secretary of State's office. The CPS data is based on when respondents say they are registered, and the Secretary of State's data are actual registered voter counts. The CPS self-reported data enables analysis of how Vermont compares to other states, but is not based on actual voter counts. At the time of this report (Fall, 2024), the Vermont Secretary of State's Office reports that 522,600 Vermonters are registered. This indicates that over 90% of eligible Vermonters are currently registered to vote.

While the percentage of Vermonters registered to vote has been increasing, **voter turnout remains consistent** over time in our state.

40 Years of Vermont Voter Turnout

Presidential Elections   Midterm Elections
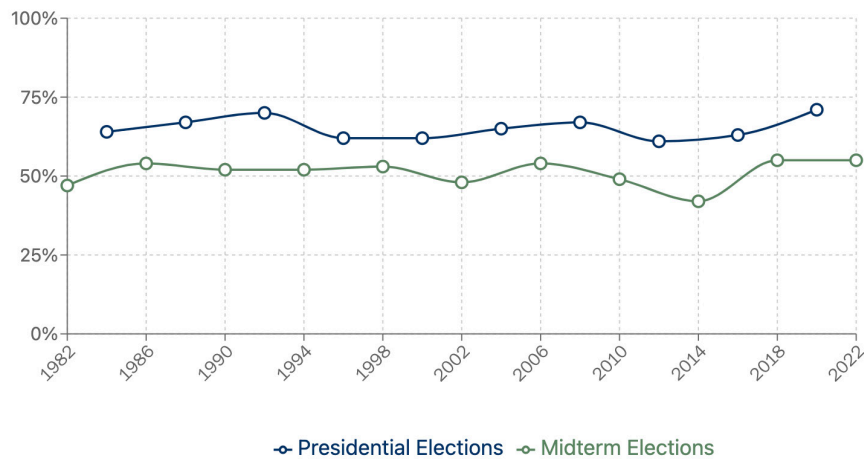
14%
of Vermonters report frequently discussing political, societal or local issues with neighbors

Vermonter's Local Political Engagement
Municipal official respondents to recent research conducted by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns found a majority sharing high or very high levels of concern regarding lack of community interest in all listed civic categories. *(Source- VLCT Municipal Officials Survey)*

   » Lack of interest in local offices – 53%
   » Lack of candidate diversity – 55%
   » Low voter turnout – 56%
   » Few board volunteers – 56%

Municipal officials' concern regarding voter turnout notwithstanding, Vermonters are in fact increasingly likely to vote in local elections, and voter turnout has remained consistent over time.

Public meeting attendance has varied over time, with 2019 being the recent high point for public attendance. The impacts of the COVID pandemic influenced this indicator in 2021.

Vermont's municipalities are overwhelmingly dependent upon the direct engagement of municipal volunteers to fill essential municipal roles such as select board members, planning commissioners, development review board members, justices of the peace, conservation board commissioners and many more. These volunteer roles, which sometimes include small stipends, represent a unique intersection between political engagement and volunteerism and bolster the strength of civic engagement in Vermont.

	2017	2019	2021
Percent of Vermonters Reporting They Voted in Last Local Election	63%	62%	69%
Percent of Vermonters Attending Public Meetings	19%	24%	17%

⭐ VERMONT POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT HIGHLIGHT

Get on Board Program

SoVT Get on Board is a local leadership development program, produced by the Southern Vermont Economy Project (SVEP), that works to strengthen Southern Vermont communities by recruiting and equipping more residents for community leadership positions. Over 3 months, SoVermont Get on Board program participants gather (mostly in person) for a series of sessions which help them gain an understanding of Vermont's local government structures and practices, learn best practices for successful volunteer-led community revitalization efforts, engage with local, regional, and state-wide resource partners, form a supportive connection with peers through the program, leave with action steps for participating in their own community, and be provided direct connections to leaders in their community for ongoing mentorship.

Some feedback from the program:

» *"I really enjoyed the program! I definitely felt more confident when speaking at town meeting and facing some questions as my organization was on the ballot in three towns."*

» *"I really enjoyed the Get on Board series, it was neat to learn more about these quirky parts of how Vermont works, connect with other invested and inspiring folks, and get motivated to get into things!"*

» *"There are a lot of engaged people, we just need to figure out where to put them."*

» *"This class helped me learn that we can connect, we don't have to do this work alone!"*

Photo Source: Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

Community & Social Context

> » Talk or spend time with neighbors.
> » Work with neighbors to do something positive for the neighborhood or community.
> » Satisfaction with your personal safety in your community.
> » Feeling of belonging to your local community.
> » Level of trust in neighbors.
> » Feel uncomfortable or out of place in your community because of things like your ethnicity, culture, race, skin color, language, accent, gender, sexual orientation, or religion.

Many studies show that social interactions foster a sense of community and decrease feelings of isolation for individuals. And increasing opportunities for community connections lead to more opportunities for social interactions. This kind of feedback loop not only strengthens neighborhoods and communities, but also helps to connect individuals with local resources, increase awareness of current happenings in their community, and increase their feeling of social integration. Social connections can go beyond interacting with family, friends, and immediate circles to include interactions with people from varying backgrounds, ages, cultures, races and ethnicities, all of which decrease interpersonal biases. A community with high levels of social interaction among its neighbors exhibits greater resilience in the face of social and physical challenges like increased political polarization or natural disaster response.

It is important to note that a sense of belonging in a community is not universally accessible. Many feel uncomfortable in their community because of their ethnicity, culture, race, skin color, language, accent, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, class status, or religion. We recognize that every Vermont resident experiences aspects of civic life differently. The demographic characteristics that make us all unique also impact our access to civic life. Some new Vermonters, especially New Americans coming to the United States and to Vermont, may experience relatively limited access to civic life. According to Pablo Bose, a UVM faculty researcher working with New American communities in Vermont, many New American Vermonters "are focused on navigating the day-to-day of life in Vermont and much more on the families and networks they've left behind."

For New American families in Vermont, engaging in aspects of civic life can vary depending on where they are in the state. According to Bose, "in Northern VT where we have decades of people being resettled, transitioning to green cards and then citizenship (and having kids and families here), there are organizations (like S Committee for Refugees and Immigrants and Association of Africans Living in Vermont) that have been doing this work for decades and have well developed pathways for different forms of civic engagement. In Southern Vermont, where New American programs are newer, the organizations (like Ethiopian Community Development Council and Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation) and networks are still in early phases of development. These structural circumstances also contribute to varying degrees of access to civic engagement opportunities.

Developing and strengthening access to socio-cultural assets that acknowledge and celebrate the cultures and communities that comprise Vermont's populations helps to ensure all Vermonters feel seen and included in aspects of our state's civic life.

32%
of Vermonters reported working with neighbors for the community compared to **18% of the entire nation**

35%
of Vermonters reported hearing from or spending time with neighbors compared to **27% of the entire nation**
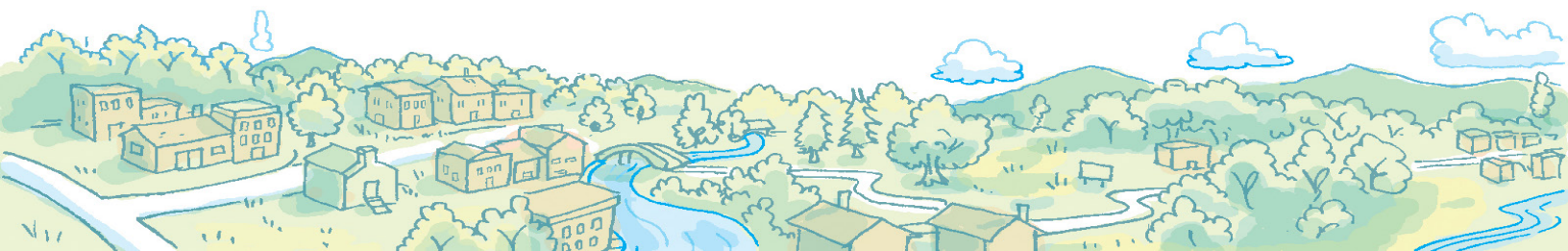
Inside Community & Social Context

» The percentage of Vermonters reporting frequently talking with or spending time with neighbors decreased marginally from about 38% in 2017 to 35% in 2021.
» The percentage of Vermonters reporting engagement with neighbors to undertake positive neighborhood/community activities has increased from about 26% to nearly 32% between 2017 and 2021.
» Vermonters' feelings of personal safety in their community has not changed significantly between 2013 and 2020.
» Between 2013 and 2020 the percentage of Vermonters saying they trust "most or all" of their neighbors increased by nearly a third, from about 44% to 73%.
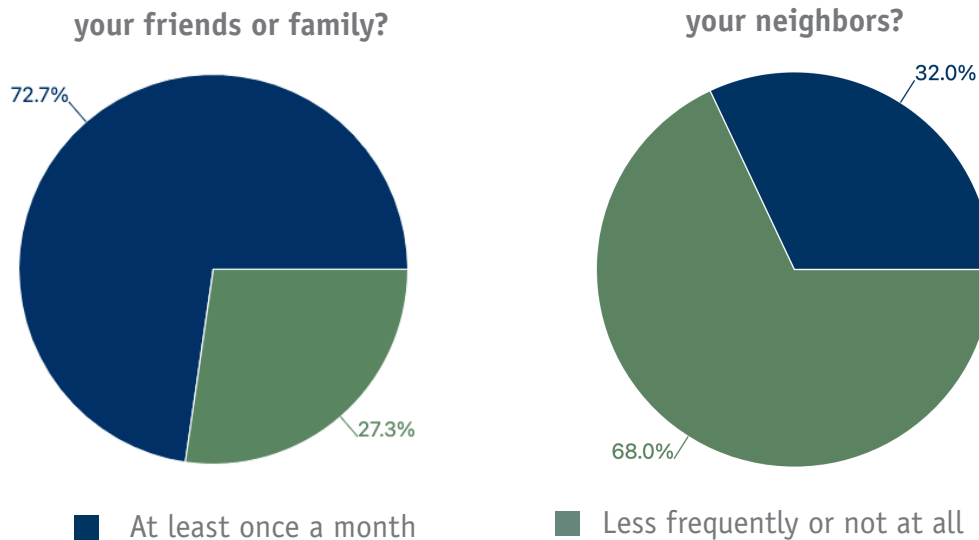» Between 2013 and 2020 the percentage of Vermonters reporting never feeling uncomfortable or out of place in their community because of things like their ethnicity, culture, race, skin color, language, accent, gender, sexual orientation, or religion increased from about 62% to 78%.
  » At the same time, looking at this another way, about 22% of Vermonters have felt uncomfortable or out of place in their communities due to one or more of these socio-demographic characteristics.

Vermonters' Engagement with Neighbors

-o- Frequently talk with neighbors   -o- Work with neighbors on community projects
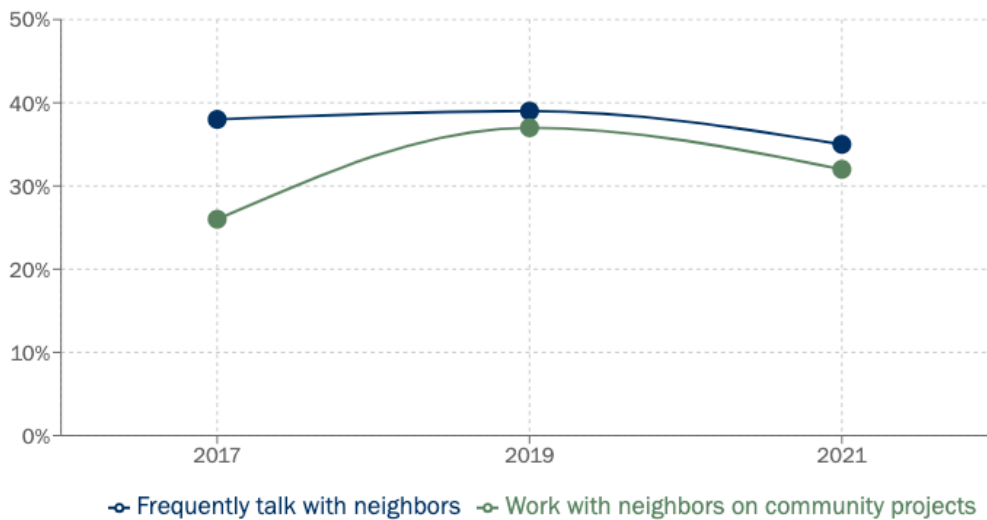
In the past 12 months, how often did you discuss political, societal, or local issues with...

your friends or family?

72.7%
27.3%

your neighbors?

32.0%
68.0%

2024 Vermont Youth Survey

■ At least once a month   ■ Less frequently or not at all

Race & Ethnicity in Community & Social Context

Vermont is accustomed to being described as one of the least racially and ethnically diverse populations among the states. Data from the 2020 Decennial Census describe Vermont as the third least racially and ethnically diversified of all U.S. states (Maine and West Virginia ranked 1st and 2nd, respectively).

According to Census Bureau data from 2013, over 94% of Vermonters identified as "Non-Hispanic, white alone," meaning that just 6% of our state population identified as being of any other combinations of race and ethnicity. In 2023, just ten years later, 89% of Vermont's population self-identified as being "Non-Hispanic, white alone," meaning that over the course of a decade Vermont's racial and ethnic diversity increased by 5 percentage points. Within this contex, we acknowledge the data limitations inhibiting a full analysis about the ways in which Vermonters with diverse backgrounds experience aspects of civic life in Vermont.

For some indicators like several of those below, the most recent available data that can be broken out by race/ethnicity comes from 2013. There is a clear need for more efforts to collect more detailed data that will allow for better understanding of the experiences of people of color living in Vermont.

» In 2013 non-white identifying Vermonters reported being satisfied with their personal safety in their community by about 14 percentage points less than their white identifying neighbors (65% and 79%).
» In 2013 29% of non-white identifying Vermonters reported they trust "most or all" of their neighbors while 46% of white identifying Vermonters reported trusting "all or most" of their neighbors.
» In 2013 about 29% of non-white identifying Vermonters reported having a strong sense of belonging in their community while nearly 42% of white identifying Vermonters reported the same.
» In 2013 about 34% of non-white identifying Vermonters reported feeling uncomfortable or out of place in their community "some, most or all of the time" because of things like their ethnicity, culture, race, skin color, language, accent, gender, sexual orientation, or religion while 13% of white identifying Vermonters reported the same.

2024 Vermont Youth Survey

In the past 12 months, how often did you talk to or spend time with people from a racial, ethnic, or cultural background that is different than yours?

- ■ At least once a month
- ■ Less frequently or not at all

82.2%

18.0%
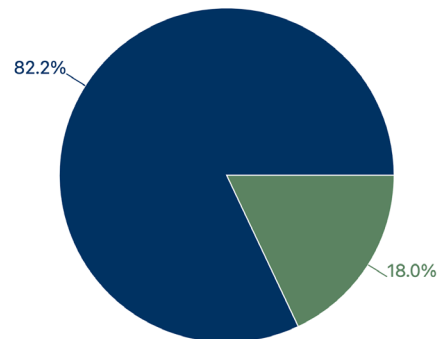
Photo Source: Vermont Humanities

⭐ VERMONT COMMUNITY & SOCIAL CONTEXT HIGHLIGHT

Vermont Declaration of Inclusion

The initiative began in 2021 with a goal to have every town in Vermont adopt and implement a Declaration of Inclusion. The purpose of the Declaration is to encourage Vermont to be, and promote it as, the most welcoming State where everyone who lives, works, or visits here has a sense of acceptance and belonging. The Declaration of Inclusion Initiative team is made up of five Rutland County residents who "share a vision of Vermont being the most welcoming, safe, and secure state in the country for everyone, especially those that have been historically marginalized." As of November 7, 2024, 157 towns and cities, encompassing more than 78% of the population have adopted the Declaration of Inclusion.

How often do you feel uncomfortable or out of place in your community because of things like your ethnicity, culture, race, skin color, language, accent, gender, sexual orientation, or religion?
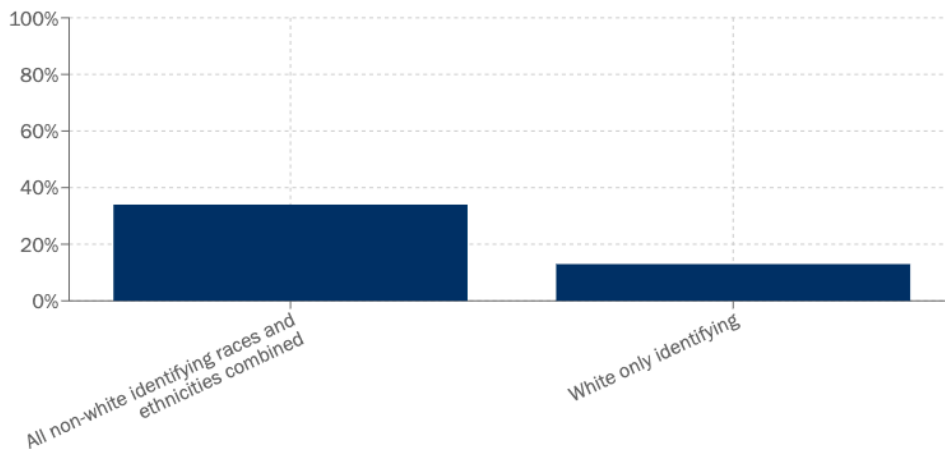
Source- Center for Rural Studies- Vermont Longitudinal Wellbeing Study, 2013

Photo Source: Vermont Humanities

Cultural Access & Engagement

- » Satisfaction with access to artistic and cultural activities in your community
- » Satisfaction with access to sports and recreational activities in your community
- » Satisfaction with access to learning opportunities like informal seminars or trainings in your community
- » Group participation

Increasing access to and engagement with community cultural resources can result in reducing interpersonal biases, creating and strengthening social connections, increasing community knowledge and increasing participation in community-based activities. Increasing access to community groups helps to strengthen both the social and cultural capital of the community. Cultural institutions like libraries are essential for providing equitable access to reliable information and links to social services. Barriers to cultural access and engagement include factors like lack of time, transportation or accessibility accommodations, language and cultural barriers, and lack of readily accessible information. In the 2024 Vermonter Poll, 93% of Vermonters agreed or strongly agreed that opportunities to view and participate in arts and culture are an important part of thriving and healthy communities but this sector was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and is still recovering. The Create VT Action Plan published in August 2021 outlines strengths, opportunities, and challenges across creative sectors and underscores the importance of arts and culture in civic life.

As the CreateVT Action Plan states, "Like roads and bridges, creativity and innovation are essential infrastructure for Vermont's recovery and future. A growing body of research demonstrates the power of the creative economy as a catalyst for growth and change, particularly in rural places, and particularly in times of crisis and recovery. Creativity is embedded in Vermont's character and communities, from the innovation of technology startups to the surge in artisan foods and the vitality of bustling community arts centers and libraries. Local arts and culture are in turn one of the biggest amenities drawing visitors and younger residents to Vermont."

> **"**
>
> What if we placed creativity, culture and innovation at the center of our path forward?
>
> *-CreateVT Action Plan*

Vermont's National Standing

33%

In 2021, **nearly twice as many Vermonters** reported belonging to any type of group (Civic, Religious or otherwise) than the U.S. population overall (VT-33%, U.S.-17%), ranking Vermont as having the 9th highest percentage of its residents involved in any group participation among all states.

Inside Vermont

	2013	2017	2020*
Percent of Vermonters "Very or Somewhat Satisfied" with access to artistic and cultural activities in their community.	65%	60%	11%
Percent of Vermonters "Very or Somewhat Satisfied" with access to sports and recreational activities in their community.	71%	61%	31%
Percent of Vermonters "Very or Somewhat Satisfied" with access to learning opportunities like informal seminars or trainings.	50%	54%	32%

Source- Center for Rural Studies- Vermont Longitudinal Wellbeing Study

*2020 data were absolutely impacted by the COVID Pandemic.

Youth in Cultural Access & Engagement

70%

In 2024 70% of Vermont youth in public school grades 6-12 reported an affiliation with a group or organization in their community or school (YMCA) **compared to nearly 33%** of adults in 2021(CPS).

Photo Source: Vermont Humanities

VERMONT CULTURAL ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT HIGHLIGHT

Vermont Reads

Vermont Humanities' one-book, one-state reading program Vermont Reads has been building civic engagement for almost 25 years. Beginning with Karen Hesse's book *Witness,* a novel about the Klan in Vermont, continuing through Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* and Congressman John Lewis' *March* trilogy, Vermont Reads is more than a book club – every participating community must include community building elements that increase social capital and civic engagement.

In 2024, Vermont Humanities chose Gather by Kenneth M. Cadow, a local author and the principal at Oxbow High School in the Upper Valley. Highly acclaimed, Gather most recently won the prestigious Kirkus Prize. Gather tells the story of a resourceful teenager, Ian, in rural Vermont struggling to hold on to his family home while his mom recovers from addiction. In the first six months of the program year, over 110 Vermont Communities have submitted community project ideas, requesting over 7,500 books. Two current projects include:

» Central Vermont Career Center (Barre): Using the young adult voice of the main character, the Career Center will facilitate targeted conversations to help career and tech ed students express their own experiences and needs from their own perspective.

» Jenna's Promise (Johnson): In partnership with the Johnson Public Library, Jenna's Promise, an addiction recovery support program, will host community conversations about housing insecurity, food insecurity, addiction, and other issues with free childcare and food provided.

Media Trust & Access

> » Seek out national news sources for important issues.
> » Seek out local news sources for important issues.
> » Read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal or local issues

The media ecosystem around the world and in the United States has experienced exponential growth with the advent of the internet over about the last 30 years. While this proliferation has dramatically increased access to differing opinions and perspectives, this growth has come at a price. The limits of journalistic objectivity are more easily pushed or ignored entirely by those who may wish to control narratives for their own purposes. At the same time, for-profit journalistic outlets have been dramatically consolidated, many local news operations shuttered, and the depth of journalistic research limited, to increase financial returns. These challenges, along with the recent polarized rhetoric in political and civic discourse have contributed to lower levels of public trust in media

Vermont's National Standing

2nd

Vermont ranks 2nd in the nation for the number of people who report they frequently read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal or local issues. 78.9% of Vermonters report they do this frequently compared to 67.6% of the national average.

Inside Vermont

> » Vermonters seek out national and local news sources at about the same rates for issues important to them.
> » Political affiliation has a marked impact on the use of both national and local news sources to inform opinions on issues of importance.
> » Fifty percent of Vermonters aged 18-24 report never using local or national news sources to explore issues important to them, by far the greatest percent among all age groups not using these news sources.

My local Vermont news comes from..... (Check all that apply)
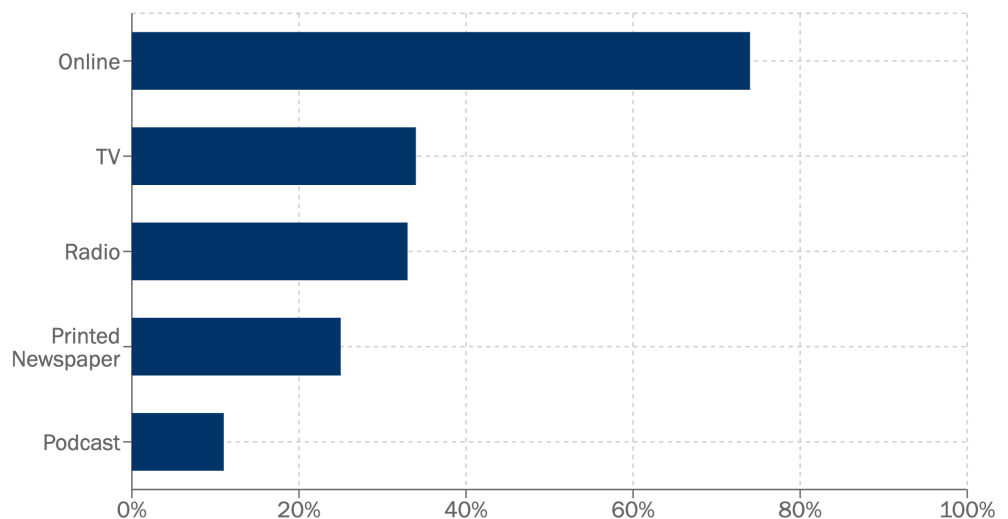
Source-2024 Vermonter Poll

Use national news sources by political affiliation

	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Progressive	Libertarian	No affiliation
Never	23%	11%	5%	0%	22%	32%
Sometimes	7%	32%	44%	42%	26%	44%
Often	35%	38%	38%	42%	39%	12%
Always	35%	20%	14%	17%	13%	13%

Use local news sources by political affiliation

	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Progressive	Libertarian	No affiliation
Never	32%	9%	14%	3%	8%	15%
Sometimes	12%	33%	33%	51%	58%	57%
Often	39%	37%	37%	27%	29%	15%
Always	27%	21%	18%	19%	4%	14%

Use national news sources by age

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75-84	85+
Never	50%	7%	24%	6%	32%	9%	0%	0%
Sometimes	5%	39%	42%	29%	15%	40%	20%	0%
Often	36%	32%	23%	35%	28%	40%	40%	100%
Always	9%	22%	11%	29%	26%	11%	40%	0%

Use local news sources by age

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75-84	85+
Never	50%	1%	18%	6%	37%	8%	0%	0%
Sometimes	9%	49%	46%	29%	22%	49%	0%	0%
Often	32%	25%	24%	38%	20%	32%	67%	100%
Always	9%	24%	12%	27%	20%	11%	33%	0%

In the past 12 months, how often **did you post your views** about political, societal, or local issues on the internet or social media?
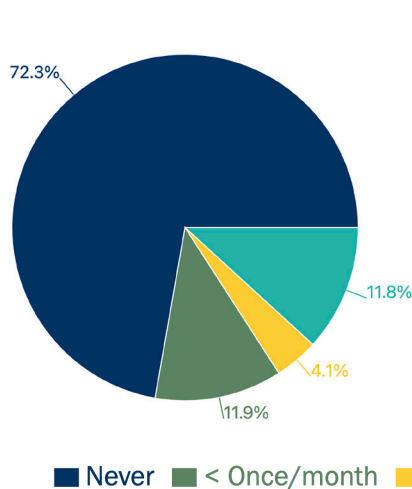
In the past 12 months, how often **did you read, watch, or listen to news** or information about political, societal, or local issues?

2024 Vermont Youth Survey

72.3%
11.8%
4.1%
11.9%

17.3%
10.7%
17.9%
54.1%

■ Never   ■ < Once/month   ■ Once/month   ■ Multiple times/month+
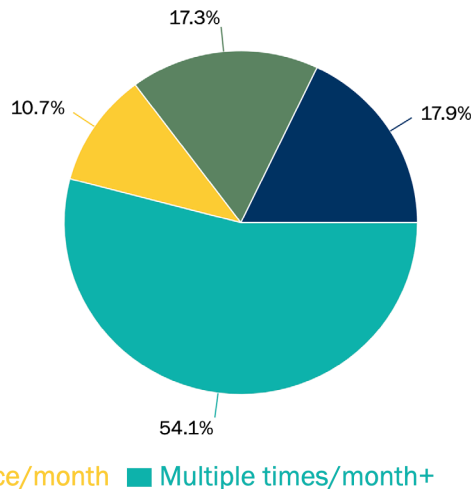
⭐ VERMONT MEDIA TRUST & ACCESS HIGHLIGHT

Front Porch Forum

Front Porch Forum (FPF) is a Vermont-based network of online neighborhood forums. Anyone can join the Forum for free where they live or work and make public posts. These posts range from selling items and searching for lost pets to endorsing political candidates or recommending local services. Unlike most social media, FPF moderates all posts to ensure that they remain civil. With over 235,000 active members, it is an integral part of civic life for many Vermonters.

In a recent study conducted by the Center for Media Engagement and New_ Public, over 11,000 users completed a survey. When asked if they had taken the following action as a response to seeing something in FPF, 60.67% of users said they attended a local event or public meeting, 53,2% said they discussed local issues with a neighbor, 25% let a neighbor borrow something, 21% volunteered, 18.3% contacted a local public official, and 14.6% got involved in a local political campaign or grassroots effort to improve community. When asked if they had become more informed about aspects of their community as a result of Front Porch Forum, 81% reported they had become more informed about neighborhood/town/community issues, 60.8% said they had access to opportunities to be more engaged in their neighborhood or town, 59% learned new perspectives on local issues, and 43% found information on local government services.

Vermont Access Network

Organizations like the Vermont Access Network (VAN) are specifically engaged in democratizing access to local governance through technology in our state. The Vermont Access Network connects 24 Community Media Centers that together operate 81 local cable channels across Vermont. VAN Centers use emerging communications technologies to:

» foster free speech
» encourage civic engagement
» enhance public discourse
» allow elected officials and community members to communicate better

Community News Service

In 2019, the University of Vermont launched the Community News Service (CNS), a student-powered partnership between the University and community newspapers across the state. CNS matches student reporters with professional editors to provide critical reporting to trusted sources of local news in Vermont. Since then, CNS has been both a newsroom and a laboratory for experimentation in creative ways to address the challenges facing local news.

In 2024, more than 75 CNS students contributed to hundreds of print, digital, broadcast, and visual news stories about communities across Vermont. From statehouse activity and elections to flood preparedness and recreation, UVM's Center for Community News reporters are contributing to Vermont's civic information ecosystem and helping to sustain trusted sources of local news.

Government Trust & Access

» Public officials in my community pay attention to what people think
» Confidence in your local government
» Confidence in your national government
» Corruption is widespread throughout the government in my community
» Absentee Voting - voting by mail

Public trust in the integrity of governance is critical to civic health. This trust is declining in many places, especially as political polarization has been increasing in recent years. And in Vermont and across the nation, we have also seen a growing lack of respect for people in public service roles. This exacts an emotional toll on those upon whom we rely so heavily on for many local governance functions like selectboards, planning commissions and development review boards. The increasingly divisive discourse, growing lack of respect for volunteers and declining trust in governance, among other factors, are contributing to the challenges of finding and keeping community volunteers who run Vermont's local governments.

Accessibility to government is crucial to civic health. Considerations range from residents' ability to physically access government facilities and meetings to feeling welcomed and accepted to participate in governance processes.

Elements like ramps, elevators and accommodations for residents who are vision or hearing impaired are examples of enabling physical access. Governments also must consider: are people able to take time away from home and work obligations to participate in governance processes in person or remotely? Are remote options viable for thorough participation? Do these online communications meet ADA guidelines? Can all our residents access the internet, either from home or a public space? Are people able to participate at times when governance meetings take place? The timing of meetings is often kept standardized to facilitate ongoing participation but may also result in preventing some from ever participating. Are translation services needed? Do we offer childcare, transportation, and flexible participation options?

Social accessibility refers to how included and welcome people feel to participate in their communities. Governments must continuously check in to ensure they are welcoming and accessible to all by asking questions like: How welcoming are our local boards and meetings to residents of all socio-demographic backgrounds, including factors such as race, income and education level? Are the perspectives of long-time residents, newcomers, seniors and youth given equal consideration? Do we publicize engagement and leadership opportunities to invite residents of all backgrounds? Do we offer a range of participation options throughout the year—from community-wide meetings and small-group discussions to surveys and voting—to allow for a range of participation needs and preferences?

Serving on a public body or running for office can feel like too large a sacrifice for some. This can be because of logistical reasons, such as not having the time or not having the financial security to make volunteer or low-stipend public service possible. For others this can be due to fear for personal safety. Governments need to meaningfully address concerns about serving the political sphere including ensuring that service is without threat to life, safety and mental health.

Direct engagement in governance begins at the municipal level. And if those seeking to participate experience challenges with access to local governance, it becomes easier to develop distrust. Providing municipal officials with resources to make governments more physically accessible and welcoming for all residents, organizations like the Vermont League of Cities and Towns hope to play an important role in setting the foundation for high marks in Vermont's civic health.

⭐ VERMONT GOVERNMENT TRUST & ACCESS HIGHLIGHT

Vermont League of Cities and Towns

There are organizations working in Vermont to ensure greater access to, and trust in the quality of our local municipalities. The Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) is one such organization, with every single city and town in Vermont currently part of this membership organization. The VLCT provides training and resources that facilitate making community members into effective local government leaders. They train about 1,000 new selectboard members, town moderators, clerks, treasurers, planning commissioners, and more each year. And they provide legal advice to about 4,000 local officials every year. The results of these efforts lead to the development of local officials who earn the respect and trust of their neighbors.

41st

According to a report from the Coalition for Integrity, in 2020 Vermont ranked 41st among all 51 states and the District of Columbia using an index of 31 public official anti-corruption policy measures.

NOTE: Vermont historically did not have an Ethics Commission or a comprehensive ethics code for public officials. In 2017 the Vermont Legislature created the Ethics Commission, in 2022 enacted an ethics code for State public servants, and in the 2024 session created a municipal ethics code with Act 171. These anti-corruption measures hopefully will continue to build Vermonters' trust in government.

4th

The Massachusetts Institute for Technology's Elections Performance Index (composed of 18 election indicators) ranked Vermont 4th among all states and the District of Columbia for overall election performance in 2022.

Inside Vermont

- » Vermonter's confidence in local government is much higher than in national government.
- » Confidence in local government was increasing before the COVID pandemic and increased substantially during the height of COVID in 2020.
- » Public perceptions of local government corruption improved between 2013 and 2020.
- » Race and ethnicity impact perceptions of and confidence in local governance.
- » In the 2024 Legislative session the Vermont Legislature enacted Act 133, which codified changes to longstanding Open Meeting Law to incorporate lessons learned from COVID about how to expand the concepts of participation beyond a physical meeting location. The legislature has created a working group to address multiple questions about public access to government and public bodies. A report is due November 15, 2025.
- » The percentage of Vermonters utilizing absentee voting in Vermont increased very gradually from the 1980s through the early 2000s at which point many more Vermonters began using absentee ballots to vote. Voting by absentee ballot reached an all-time high in 2020 when universal vote-by-mail was adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

|	2013	2017	2020
Percent of Vermonters with "No Confidence" in National Government	30%	34%	51%
Percent of Vermonters with "No Confidence" in Local Government	9%	9%	7%
Percent of Vermonters who agree with "Corruption is widespread in throughout government in my community"	19%	23%	12%

Source: Center for Rural Studies - Vermont Longitudinal Wellbeing Study

In June 2020, the beginning of the COVID pandemic, researchers conducted the Vermont Wellbeing Study to help understand the immediate impact of the pandemic on our population. Limited demographic data were collected, but the following indicators were able to be disaggregated.

Over the past three months, how much confidence have you had in your local and national government?

» Gender did not have any appreciable impact on Vermonters' confidence in local or national government in June 2020 during the COVID pandemic.
» Confidence in local government increased as reported household income level increased. At the same time, no significant change in confidence in the national government was seen based on income level.
» Confidence in local government also increased as educational attainment increased, while confidence in national government decreased as level of educational attainment increased.

40 Years of Absentee Voting Vermont
(percent of Vermonters who use absentee voting)
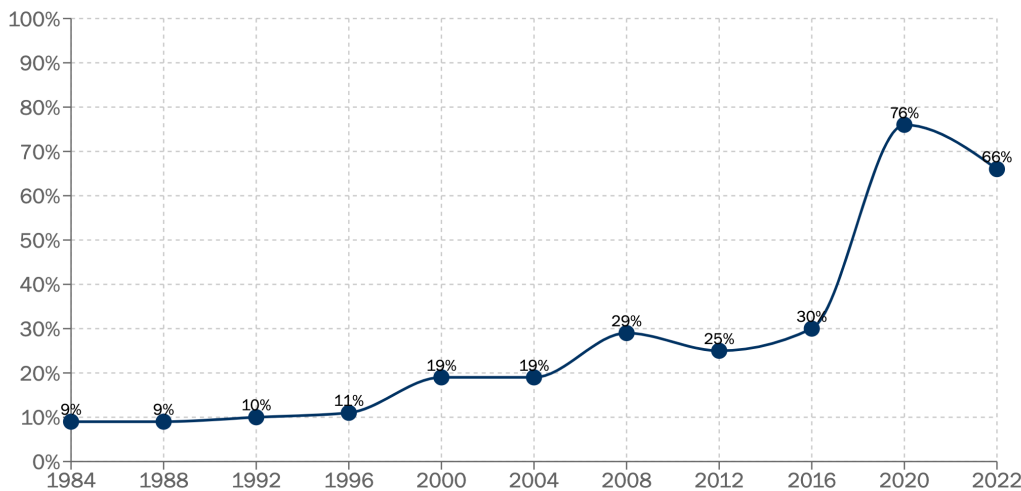
Source: Vermont Secretary of State's Office

Photo Source: Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

YOUTH CIVIC HEALTH IN VERMONT

The Vermont Civic Health Index project engaged youth in a variety of ways to learn more about civic challenges they face, the strengths they bring to civic health in Vermont, and what will encourage their continued civic growth.

After receiving and analyzing the results of the Youth Civic Health Survey, the Vermont civic health index project collaborated with UP for Learning and Vermont educators to convene with sixty students from six Vermont schools at the State House in June 2024 to further explore and collect feedback on the youth survey findings. This gathering represented a unique opportunity for students to discuss and make sense of their own survey data.

Engaging youth in this process ensures they are knowledgeable about the factors contributing to civic health, feel engaged within their communities, are exposed to people from different backgrounds and different opinions and are empowered to speak and act on the issues important to them. This engagement facilitates the development of the next generations that will participate in and guide future democratic processes and lead our communities, the state of Vermont and our country forward with empathy and compassion.

We must continue to ensure that youth are empowered to participate in civic conversations and be part of the work. Unfortunately, there are many barriers to participation: When the work is outside of the school day, transportation and food become barriers to youth participation. When the work happens during the school day, students may need to miss class (which is more feasible for some students than others). It is clear that many youth feel unprepared to participate in civic spaces and need opportunities to practice these skills and build confidence. Perhaps one of the biggest barriers to equitable participation is youths' sense of agency: Have they historically felt like their voice has mattered? Are adults encouraging them to continue to speak out? Do they trust their participation will result in meaningful change? Youth at the margins face the most barriers to participation. We may require a paradigm shift in the way youth and adults see their roles in a participatory democracy. In order for equitable change to occur, youth and adults should be sharing power, voice and responsibility.

What do youth see as barriers to their civic engagement?

> » Logistical barriers: Busy schedules, transportation, not knowing how, leaving for college soon…
> » Partisanship leading to fear of judgment, apathy, or lack of space for youth voices.
> » Ageism/adultism: Sense that adults don't listen, or don't trust what youth have to say.

.

What are suggestions youth have to increase their civic engagement?

> » Meet students where they are by expanding access to in-school opportunities like:
>> » Civics classes
>> » Public speaking opportunities
>> » Clubs and volunteering opportunities
>> » Guest speakers
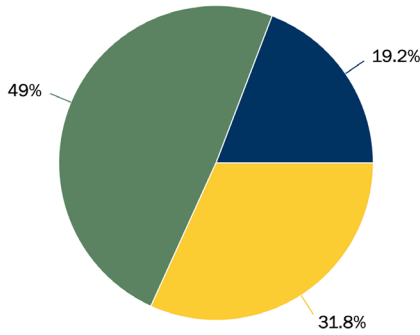>> » Meaningful school and community leadership opportunities
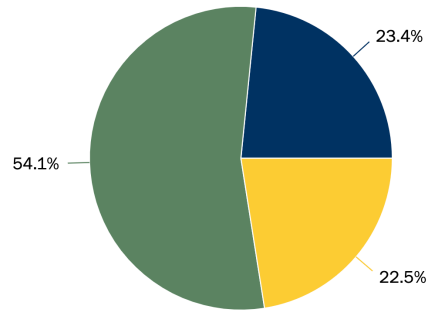
VERMONT YOUTH SURVEY FINDINGS

If you wanted to help address an issue or problem in your school or community, how prepared would you feel to:

■ Not Prepared ■ Somewhat/Slightly Prepared ■ Well/Very Prepared

Research and learn more about the issue

- 19.2%
- 31.8%
- 49%

Come up with a plan to take action

- 23.4%
- 22.5%
- 54.1%

Recruit others to join your efforts

- 19.2%
- 31.8%
- 49%
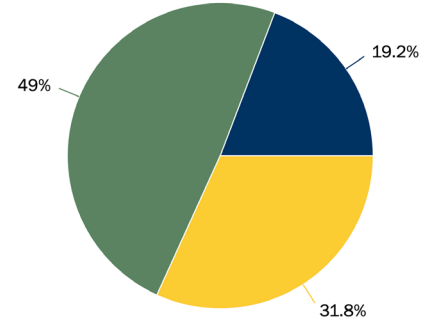
Connect with groups/organizations that care about the issue

- 29.3%
- 20%
- 50.8%
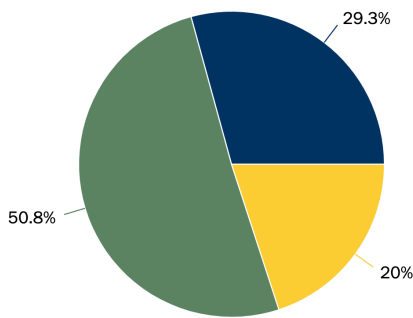
Start a petition on the issue and gather signatures

- 26.7%
- 24.6%
- 48.8%
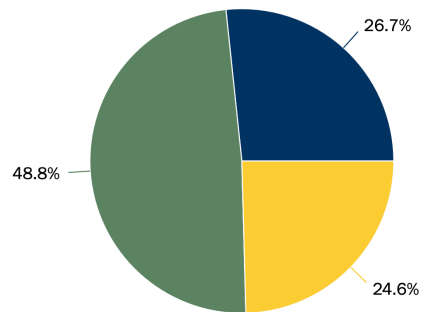
Schedule and host a meeting on the issue

- 42.6%
- 13.6%
- 43.7%
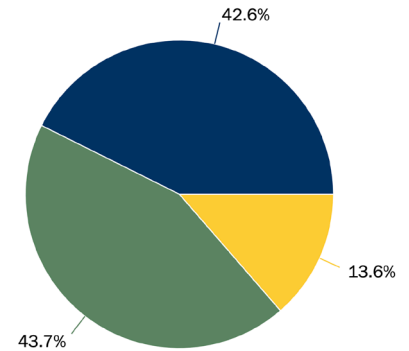
Speak publicly on the issue in front of an audience

- 46.9%
- 16.1%
- 37%
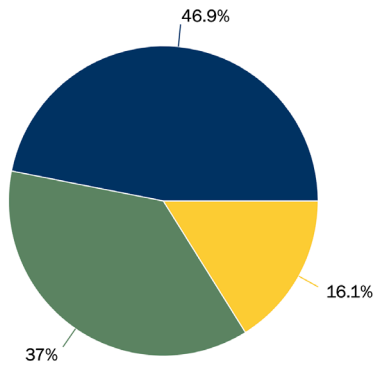
Convince someone who disagrees with your position on the issue to change their mind

- 27.6%
- 22.4%
- 50%
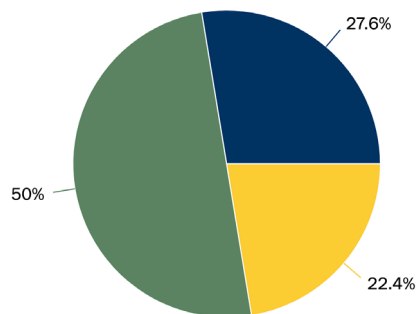
Share your opinion with a local news/media outlet

- 45.6%
- 13.8%
- 40.7%
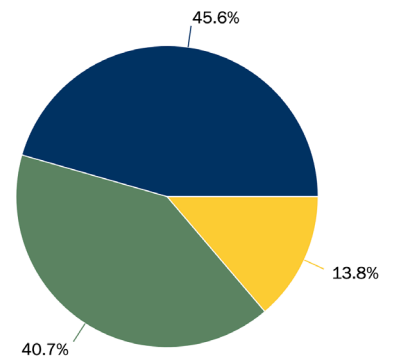
NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This baseline data development work serves as a departure point for the development of new and the continuation of ongoing efforts to engage with Vermonters and Vermont organizations to improve upon all aspects of civic health in the state. The ideas listed below were generated in part through conversations during this process and are by no means comprehensive. Continuing these conversations, holding listening sessions and creating plans to fill data gaps will contribute to additional ideas and fill in knowledge gaps about the civic health of Vermont and its residents over time.

Hold Community Conversations

» Public engagement is a crucial component to ensuring all Vermonter's perspectives are heard and that they feel seen. Conversations about all aspects of civic health can take place across the state in civic spaces like libraries, meeting halls and auditoriums.

Develop a Civic Engagement Coalition, and Support Local Efforts

» Statewide, the development of a coalition of organizations and individuals engaged in aspects of civic health could help align and strengthen efforts to increase Vermont's civic health. Locally, a growing number of towns have volunteer committees that support community civic health; their efforts include helping the town with outreach and communications, making local meetings more accessible by organizing facilitation, child care, refreshments, and offering other creative support for existing town committees and initiatives. These local initiatives could be offered support, and assisted to network and share ideas.

Build a Civic Resource Map

» Nationally, there are several initiatives to create resource maps to better understand the complex network of partners working in civic spaces. The National Civic League's Healthy Democracy and the Institute for Citizens & Scholars Mapping Civic Measurement are both models and potential partners to expand on this work in Vermont.

Support Vermont's Culture of Volunteerism

» Increase opportunities for Vermonters to be exposed to and participate in civic activities.

» Fund volunteerism opportunities to help level the financial burden to participate in civic life.

Improve Access to Vermont's Civic Spaces

» Advance efforts to ensure civic gathering spaces from town halls to public theaters continue to increase physical accessibility through infrastructure improvements like ramps and other ADA improvements.

» Ensure that all communities can embrace new technologies to support remote participation including training on how to run remote or hybrid meetings. Increase access to language translation, flexible meeting times, and other measures to reduce barriers to participation. .

» Support and improve training for municipal government to ensure that spaces are welcoming to diverse voices.

Expand Civics Education

» Increase civic education opportunities and exposure for all Vermonters including youth in and out of school and adults.

» Develop opportunities for municipal officials to further develop skills, infrastructure, and processes to facilitate participation.

» Recognize and award Vermonters across sectors for their civic contributions.

» Consider launching a civics seal for Vermont high school to encourage increased focus on civic education.

Invest in Arts and Culture

» Vermonters and Vermont's governmental agencies should step up to support Vermont's creative and cultural sector as it continues to recover from the Covid-19 Pandemic and as outlined in the CreateVT Action Plan, with the understanding that the sector is a critical part of Vermont's civic and economic infrastructure.

» Municipal and public libraries should be centered in community planning efforts, understanding their critical role in providing reliable information, serving as community gathering places, and in broadening access to social services like assistance with job hunting, accessing health care, and building civic engagement.

» Vermont's public schools should prioritize access to a full range of arts education including music, theater, literature, and the visual arts as a critical component of building a well-rounded citizenry capable of participating in and shaping a healthy democratic practice.

Develop Additional Data

» There are several places where data do not exist or are not robust enough to help us track and develop conclusions about aspects of Vermont's civic health. The following are a few examples of data gaps highlighted through this work.

  » Data disaggregation by socio-demographic groups.

  » Vermonters' willingness and ability to serve as civic volunteers or public servants.

  » Municipal vacancies

  » Uncontested political races (acknowledging this metric presents challenges for Vermont's small population communities)

  » Municipal officials' socio-demographics

  » Physical and social accessibility impacts on civic engagement

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Strengthening Vermont's civic health means finding alignment between multiple values that are often in tension. Vermont's state motto, "Freedom and Unity," is a prime example of this. It encourages us to embrace both individual freedom and collective responsibility. Self-reliance and respect for individual differences are key aspects of Vermont's cultural landscape while lending a hand to a neighbor or participating in mutual aid actions are also deeply rooted Vermont traditions. The interplay between individual freedom and collective responsibility is an essential element of a healthy democracy.

This same balance between individual and collective responsibility is reflected in election policy, where accessibility and security must be integrated. Vermont has made significant strides in making voting easier and more accessible for all eligible residents, whether through mail-in voting, early voting, or same-day registration. Vermont's decentralized voting system makes our elections both highly secure and accessible. Across the state, 247 town and city clerks manage elections in their districts, bringing an invaluable level of intimate knowledge and attention to detail to the process. Achieving election security and accessibility is not a zero-sum game; a balance of both is critical to preserving public trust and encouraging civic participation.

When it comes to participation, another challenge is navigating the ever-present, healthy dynamic between two competing values: democratic quantity and democratic quality. How can we reduce barriers to engagement (time, complexity, technology) while also ensuring participation is informed and meaningful? What are inclusive decision-making systems that also offer opportunities to understand neighbors' viewpoints, weigh trade-offs, and co-create solutions? What policy changes are needed to ensure that we build on Vermont's strong local democracy institutions while incorporating 21st century engagement tools?

As we continue to shape Vermont's civic landscape, considering these hard questions, holding space for competing, but equally important values, and embracing diverse experiences and backgrounds are crucial steps to improving our civic health. It is through this balancing act that we can build Vermont communities that are not only more engaged and informed but also more equitable and resilient.

VERMONT'S CIVIC HEALTH AT A GLANCE

CIVIC HEALTH INDICATORS	Vermont %	Vermont's Rank	National %	Number 1 Rank	Number 1 Ranked %
VOTING AND REGISTRATION					
Voting	62.2%	6th	52.2%	Oregon	70.0%
Registration	75.4%	11th	69.1%	Oregon	82.7%
VOLUNTEERING AND GIVING					
Volunteering	29.1%	13th	23.2%	Utah	40.7%
How Often Volunteer - Frequently	21.4%	23rd	20.6%	Oklahoma	31.5%
Donations to Political Organization ($25 or more)	15.1%	2nd	9.4%	DC	27.9%
Donations to Charitable or Religious Organization ($25 or more)	50.0%	30th	48.1%	Minnesota	61.8%
INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND NEIGHBORS					
Hear from or spend time with family/friends (frequently)	79.5%	36th	79.3%	DC	88.2%
Discuss political, societal or local issues with family or friends (frequently)	44.3%	4th	35.1%	DC	62.3%
Talk with or spend time with neighbors (frequently)	35.2%	3rd	26.9%	Wisconsin	35.6%
Discuss political, societal or local issues with neighbors (frequently)	14.2%	2nd	7.9%	DC	15.9%
Do favors for neighbors (frequently)	12.8%	8th	10.0%	Colorado	16.5%
Work with neighbors to do something positive for neighborhood or community	31.8%	2nd	18.0%	Utah	35.8%
Participation in a group (any type)	32.7%	9th	17.1%	Maine	38.7%
POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT					
Post your views about political, societal or local issues on the internet or social media (frequently)	7.0%	15th	6.2%	Nevada	10.5%
Read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal or local issues (frequently)	78.9%	2nd	67.6%	DC	84.0%
Voted in last local election	69.2%	4th	55.3%	DC	77.3%
Attended a public meeting	17.4%	2nd	8.2%	Maine	19.1%
Contacted or visited public official	18.5%	2nd	9.5%	Montana	18.7%
Bought or boycotted a product or service?	25.2%	7th	17.1%	DC	36.2%

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 2022 November Voting and Registration Supplement.

Using a probability selected sample of about 60,000 occupied households, the CPS collects monthly data on employment and demographic characteristics of the nation. Depending on the CPS supplement, the single-year Vermont CPS sample size used for this report ranges from 243-770 (volunteering/civic engagement supplement) and to 1,147 (voting supplement) residents from across Vermont. 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 Vermont 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, while helpful in benchmarking, national rankings 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 essential that our margin of error estimates is approximate, as CPS sampling is highly complex, and accurate estimation of error rates involves many parameters that are not publicly available.

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
Missouri State University
Park University
Saint Louis University
University of Missouri Kansas City
University of Missouri Saint Louis
Washington University

Nebraska
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

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

Vermont
Vermont's Secretary of State
Vermont Humanities
The Center for Rural Studies
SerVermont
Up for Learning

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
Got Your 6

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

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

CITIES

Atlanta
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
Park University
Washington University

Miami
Florida Joint Center for Citizenship
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
Miami Foundation

Pittsburgh
University of Pittsburgh
Carnegie Mellon University

Seattle
Seattle City Club

Twin Cities
Center for Democracy and Citizenship
Citizens League
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

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Chairman, Board of Advisors, National
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Former Assistant to the President of the
United States & Director, Domestic Policy
Council & US Freedom Corps

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Arizona

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Founder, Saguaro Seminar
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Missouri State University

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Engagement Initiatives Center for Future of
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Michael Weiser
Chairman Emeritus, National Conference
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NOTES

NOTES

National Conference on Citizenship · 1946 ·

Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont

VERMONT SECRETARY OF STATE

NCoC
National Conference on Citizenship

AmeriCorps Vermont

UP for LEARNING
Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning

VERMONT HUMANITIES