

2025



National Civic League
Colorado

Action Guide for
Improving Civic Health



Tools and strategies for assessing and improving civic health, opportunities, and infrastructure in Colorado, with key examples



Democracy
Innovation



Since 1937, the El Pomar Foundation has continued the mission set by Spencer and Julie Penrose to enhance, encourage, and promote the current and future well-being of the people of Colorado.



The Boettcher Foundation is a Denver-based philanthropic organization whose mission is to invest in the promise of Colorado and the potential of Coloradans.



This guide was written by Matt Leighninger, Doug Linkhart, Derek Okubo, and Dilara Pahirdin of the National Civic League. Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt, Louis Brandeis, and Mary Munford, the Civic League championed the democracy innovations of the early 20th Century; today the League hosts CDI, maintains the Model City Charter, organizes the All-America City Award, publishes the National Civic Review, and supports an extensive national network of local elected, appointed, and civic leaders.

Foreword

Dear Friends,

As leaders of foundations dedicated to improving the lives of Coloradans, we recognize healthy and thriving communities require robust civic participation. Whether serving on city council, boards, commissions or engaging through cultural, arts, religion, sport, human service or other voluntary associations, engagement in and with community is essential for community to thrive. National Civic League's (NCL) Colorado Civic Health Action Guide is an essential and actionable resource for those interested in Colorado's civic health.

Our foundations have a long history of philanthropy in Colorado, with both organizations beginning operations in 1937. El Pomar Foundation, based in Colorado Springs, invests in leadership development and community engagement programs to strengthen Colorado's communities and nonprofits. Based in Denver, the Boettcher Foundation invests in people, programs, and organizations across the state to foster community building and support Colorado's leadership ecosystem.

We both understand the need for leadership development and strong civic infrastructure for addressing key challenges facing our communities. We believe all sectors—public, private and nonprofit—must collaborate to strengthen civic capacity and cultivate community problem-solving. Bringing together people of diverse backgrounds and points of view is how we can build and sustain thriving communities.

We, along with our Trustees, are pleased to support production of this guide by NCL, an organization which has since 1894 encouraged robust and inclusive civic engagement that leads to and sustains participatory, equitable, and effective civil society. In short, they encourage and promote healthy communities.

We are proud NCL has had its headquarters in Colorado since 1989, and we thank President Doug Linkhart and the organization's team for this important resource. We are also pleased to join them in thanking Colorado Municipal League, Colorado Counties, Inc., and Colorado Nonprofit Association for their significant contributions to the Civic Action Guide.

We are confident Colorado communities will benefit from this essential resource.

Kyle H. Hybl

President, Chief Executive Officer, and Trustee
El Pomar Foundation



Kyle Hybl

President, Chief Executive
Officer, and Trustee
El Pomar Foundation



Katie Kramer

President and Chief
Executive Officer
Boettcher Foundation

Katie S. Kramer

President & Chief Executive Officer
Boettcher Foundation



INTRODUCTION

Civic health matters.

Strong, ongoing connections between residents, robust relationships between people and public institutions, and positive attachments between citizens and the places they live are highly correlated with a range of positive outcomes, from better physical health to higher employment rates to better resilience in the face of natural disasters.

Civic health is based on the quality of civic opportunities and the strength of civic infrastructure. When these supports are weak, people of different backgrounds and political perspectives are less likely to communicate or work together, which exacerbates partisan polarization. When these supports are distributed inequitably, they deepen economic and social inequities.

This guide describes a range of tools and strategies to assess and improve civic health, opportunities, and infrastructure in Colorado. The guide also lists examples of some of these ideas already being implemented in the state, or in other parts of the country.



Colorado
Example

Table of Contents

Section 1: Measuring Change: Tools for Assessment	7
Section 2: Forming Leadership Groups	10
Section 3: Directly Engaging Citizens	12
a) Deliberative Discussion	14
b) Digital Engagement Tools	15
c) Hybrid Strategies	16
d) Official Public Meetings	17
e) Community-Based Organizing Strategies	18
f) Citizens' Assemblies	19
g) Participatory Budgeting	20
h) Social Engagement	21
Section 4: Reaching Diverse Audiences	23
Section 5: Arts-Based Strategies	25
Section 6: Citizen Academies	27
Section 7: Civic Media & Journalism	29
Section 8: Grassroots Civic Groups	32
Section 9: Local Online Networks	35
Section 10: Civic Education & Youth Leadership	37
Section 11: Nonpartisan Voter Engagement & Support	41
Section 12: Service & Volunteerism	43
Section 13: Research & Advocacy Groups	45
Section 14: Increasing Equity	47
Section 15: Public Spaces	49
Section 16: Putting It All Together	51



SECTION 1





Measuring Change: Tools for Assessment

ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO ILLUMINATE THE STATE OF CIVIC HEALTH AND THE IMPACT OF THE ORGANIZATIONS WORKING TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

To improve civic health, we need to be able to measure it more easily, and in a wider variety of ways. We need to know the overall levels of voting, volunteerism, membership in neighborhood and school associations, participation in public decision-making, and other kinds of civic activities.

We also need to understand the strength of and interconnections between the organizations and networks that inspire, coordinate, and support those activities: a community’s civic infrastructure. Finally, we need a sense of how citizens view their civic opportunities: do they feel well informed and connected? Do they think they have a meaningful say in public decisions? Do they feel their civic work is supported and honored?

TYPES OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS

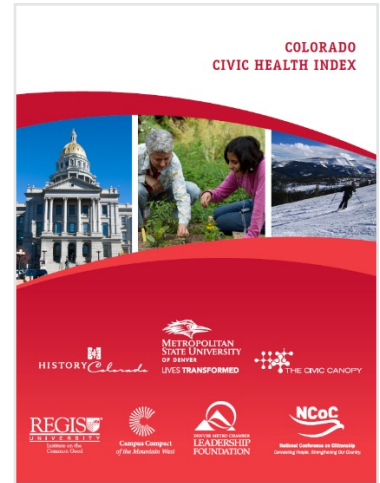
-  Census-based indices
-  Comprehensive reports
-  Survey-based reports
-  Digital ratings or audit systems



Census-Based Indices

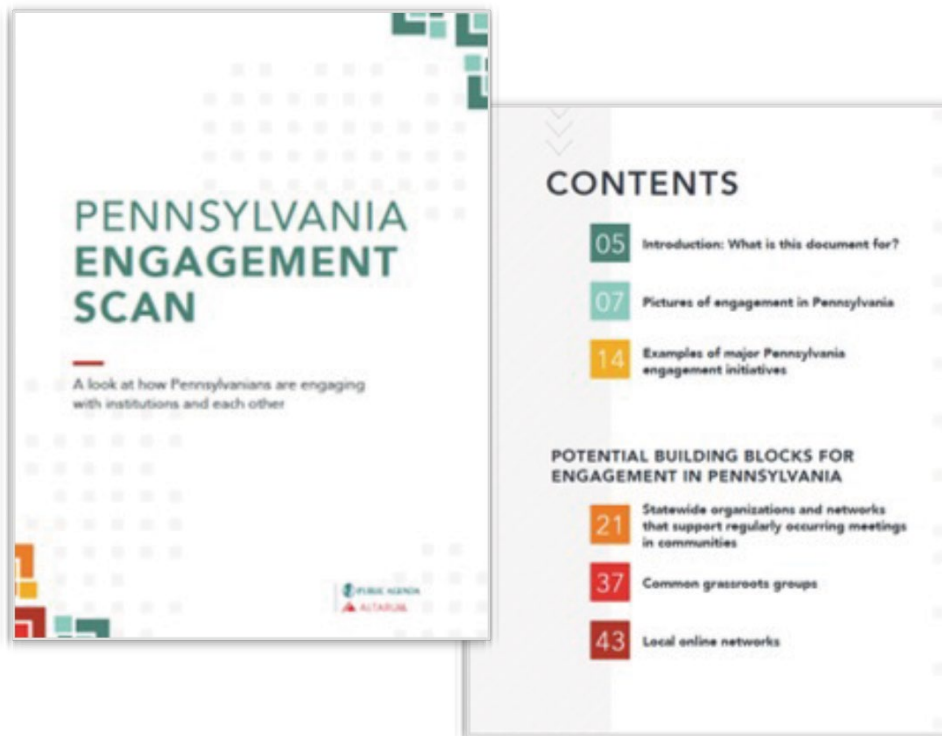
Census-based indices measure citizen attitudes based on how people answer specific Census questions.

The [Colorado Civic Health Index](#), released in 2015, uses information from the U.S. Census and other sources to report on five areas of civic health in the state: community well-being, social connections, public participation, collective understanding, and engagement with government.



Comprehensive Reports

Comprehensive reports, based on interview and desk research, describe the civic infrastructure of a place, including programs and organizations that are key civic assets, the recent history of initiatives for engaging the public, barriers to and equity in engagement, and information on how people are connected, both in-person and online.



Pennsylvania Engagement Scan, with list of topics.

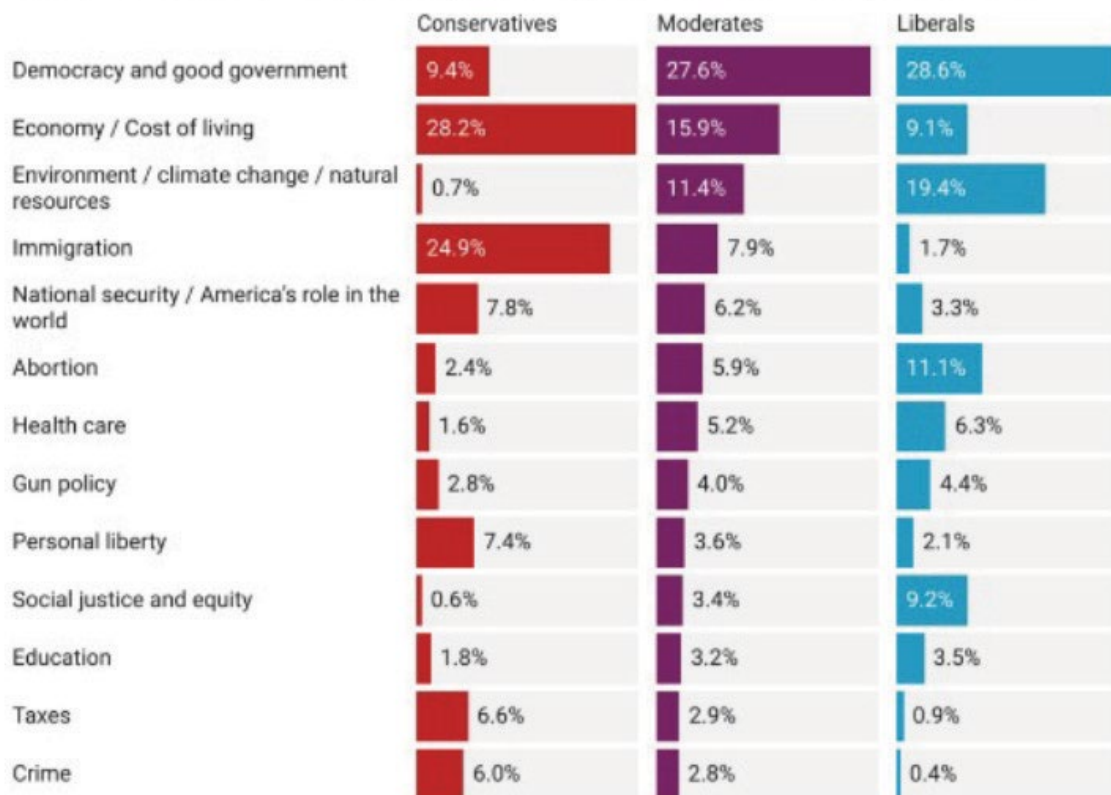
Survey-Based Reports

Survey-based reports gauge citizen attitudes toward government, other institutions, and other groups of people.

For example, Colorado’s [Voter Voices](#) survey was promoted by more than 30 news organizations across the state to ask Coloradans “What do you want candidates to talk about as they compete for your vote?”

Top issues by political identification

The Colorado 2024 Voter Voices survey asked respondents to rank their top three issues.



Digital Ratings / Audit Systems

Digital ratings or audit systems give people the chance to provide quick assessments of civic opportunities. The National Civic League’s [Civic Engagement Scorecard](#), for example, allows people to rate public meetings, other engagement processes, and the state of democracy in their community.



The [Family Leadership Training Institute](#) in Eagle County equips parents, caregivers, and community members with the tools to engage in shaping public policy and empowers them to work within systems to ensure positive outcomes for children and youth in health, safety, and education.



SECTION 2

Forming Leadership Groups

SUGGESTIONS FOR FORMING LOCAL CROSS-SECTOR LEADERSHIP GROUPS, INCLUDING MORE FORMAL STRUCTURES, SUCH AS ENGAGEMENT COMMISSIONS

Improving civic health should be a cross-sector, community-wide priority. Elected officials, nonprofit leaders, grassroots organizers, business leaders, school leaders, faith leaders, academics, and other community members all have roles to play. This work should be led by diverse sets of people who are tasked with developing recommendations, overseeing implementation, and measuring impacts.

There are several best practices for supporting civic health leadership that are important to keep in mind.

BEST PRACTICES TO SUPPORT CIVIC LEADERS

-  Recruit for Diversity
-  Emphasize Engagement
-  Promote Hands-On Learning
-  Provide a Clear Mandate
-  Encourage Measurement

Recruit for Diversity

In assembling leaders, think broadly about different kinds of diversity, including racial and ethnic backgrounds, political affiliation, age, education, economics, and religion. Regularly ask, “Who is not at the table who ought to be here?”

Emphasize Engagement

Clarify that being a civic health leader means that you are trying to help engage people directly, not just represent their interests.



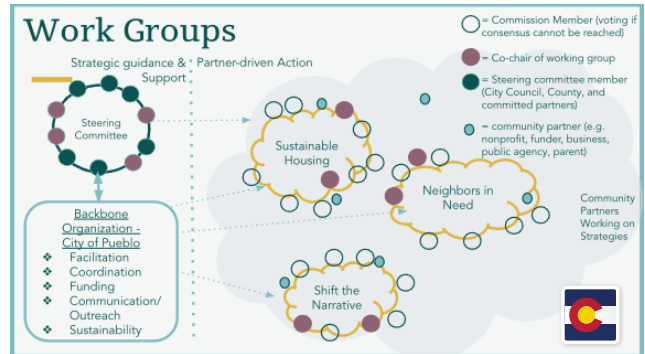
The *Elevating Leadership Development* program of the *El Pomar Foundation* trains people of color from Southern Colorado in leadership skills.

Promote Hands-On Learning

Give leaders the chance to ‘sample’ different types of civic health activities (such as the ones in sections 3a-h of this guide), so that they understand them better.

Provide a Clear Mandate

Should this leadership group be organizing civic health initiatives? Communicating and advocating for initiatives that already exist? Convening and connecting people doing this work? Assessing individual efforts? Measuring civic health overall? All of the above?



A key to coordinating leadership groups is distributing roles and tasks, as illustrated by this chart from the *Community Commission on Housing and Homelessness in Pueblo*.

Encourage Measurement

Provide leaders with the tools needed to measure civic health. Measurement will be fundamental to progress, no matter the specific mandate of the group.



The *Climate Policy Action Leadership Collaborative*, sponsored by Boulder County, was a two-year project that involved residents in setting and tracking climate change goals.



The city council in **Boulder, Colorado** used a new format for their study sessions that includes a diverse mix of participants (some of whom were selected by civic lottery) and small-group breakouts to discuss economic development priorities for the community.



SECTION 3

Directly Engaging Citizens

STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR DIRECTLY ENGAGING RESIDENTS IN DECISION-MAKING, PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING

This section describes eight complementary strategies and tools (listed at right) for engaging people directly in ways that improve civic health. The strategies differ not only in their typical goals, strengths, and limitations, but also in whether they are primarily 'thick' or 'thin.'

Thick engagement is more intensive, informed, and deliberative. Most of the action happens in small-group discussion. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels.

- ENGAGEMENT TOOLS & STRATEGIES**
- a) Deliberative Discussion
 - b) Digital Engagement Tools
 - c) Hybrid Strategies
 - d) Official Public Meetings
 - e) Community-Based Organizing
 - f) Citizens' Assemblies
 - g) Participatory Budgeting
 - h) Ongoing Social Engagement

Thin engagement is faster, easier, and more convenient. It includes a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. It is less likely to build personal or community connections.

One way of summarizing the difference is to say that thick engagement empowers small groups and thin engagement empowers individuals. The chart below from Public Agenda’s guide to [Strengthening and Sustaining Public Engagement](#) shows one way of categorizing a range of strategies and tools for directly engaging citizens.

In Colorado, organizations like the [Center for Public Deliberation](#) at Colorado State (see graphic on p. 13) and Civic Canopy have used a range of engagement strategies to involve people in making decisions, solving problems, and developing recommendations for officials.

Public Engagement Tactics and Goals

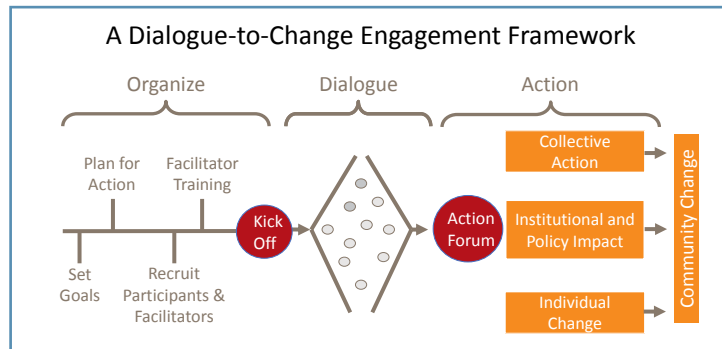
TACTICS	GOALS					
	Inform the Public	Gather Input, Feedback & Preferences	Generate New Ideas & Info	Support Volunteerism & Problem-solving	Make a Public Decision	Create a Plan or Budget
Surveys and Polls		YES			YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Focus Groups		YES			YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Online Problem—Reporting Platforms (such as www.seeclickfix.com)			YES	YES with other tactics		YES with other tactics
Idea Contests			YES	YES		YES with other tactics
Crowdfunding and Minigrants (such as www.ioby.org)			YES	YES		YES with other tactics
Serious Games	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Asset Mapping	YES		YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Local Online Networks	YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES	YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Charrettes and other Collaborative Planning Processes (see www.pps.org)			YES	YES		YES
Participatory Budgeting (see www.participatorybudgeting.org)	YES		YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES
Study Circles and Deliberative Forums (see www.everyday-democracy.org)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Adapted from Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy, Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015.

a) Deliberative Discussion

“Deliberative discussion” is a generic name for a format in which a small group of people (usually 8-10) meets in-person or by video call to talk about a public issue in a way that helps them connect, learn, and act. There are many other names for this very common kind of engagement, including: community conversations, deliberative forums, study circles. These are ‘thick’ activities (pg. 6), and they often occur as part of larger processes such as strategic planning, citizens’ assemblies (pg. 19), and participatory budgeting (pg. 20).

While a single community conversation can build relationships and help people learn, to maximize their impact – whether on policymakers, or by changing behavior, or by galvanizing volunteers – you need large numbers of people working in small groups (see the framework graphic below).



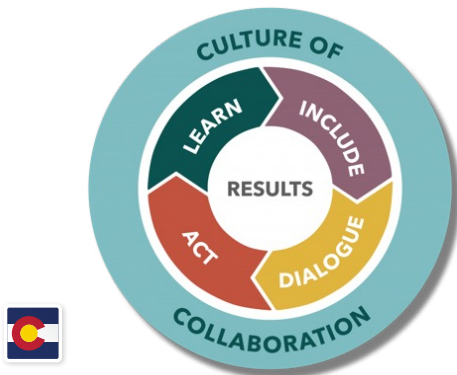
Organizing tasks and action steps to maximize the impact of a deliberative process.

TYPICAL INGREDIENTS INCLUDE:

A **discussion handout or guide** that includes information on the issue being addressed, sample views or policy options, discussion questions, and guidelines for structuring the conversation.

A **sequence** that starts with people talking about why they came, then helps them analyze or learn about the situation, then helps them consider different options, then helps them plan for action. It usually takes people several hours to go through this sequence, either in one day or over a series of meetings.

A **facilitator** who helps the group set ground rules (see example right), manage their time, and use the handout or guide.



The Community Learning Model for public participation developed by the [Civic Canopy](#), which works throughout Colorado.

Bob's Rules (Robert's kinder, gentler sibling)

- Respect other people, their ideas and opinions.
- Do not interrupt others.
- Try to say it in 25 words or less.
- Speak only to the topic at hand.
- No side conversations.
- When an idea has been stated previously and you agree, only speak when you have something new to add.
- Everyone gets a chance to share their opinion before someone speaks again.
- Speaking briefly and staying focused is everyone's responsibility. This will make the meeting run smoothly.
- These are everybody's rules and everyone is responsible for seeing that they are followed.

Example of small-group ground rules provided by Cece Hughley-Noel, Southeast Uplift in Portland, Oregon.

b) Digital Engagement Tools

There is a huge array of digital tools for engaging citizens directly, for many different goals and scenarios. Most but not all of these produce ‘thin’ forms of engagement (see p. 7) that work well when paired with ‘thick’ activities. Though they are often organized as stand-alone activities, they work best when part of larger initiatives.


CONSIDERATIONS WHEN USING DIGITAL TOOLS:

The assortment of tools changes quickly over time – see the chart below for a snapshot that illustrates some of the kinds of things they can accomplish. The [Civic Tech Field Guide](#) includes a wide variety of “tech tools for public good.”

It is important to keep in mind the persistence of ‘digital divides.’ Those who lack both high-speed internet service and a smartphone are disproportionately likely to be from certain segments of the population. And even among populations with full access and the best devices, there are divides in terms of the skills people have to use the internet. (There are, of course, divides between different populations in whether they can participate in face-to-face meetings too.)

Residents are often hesitant to share personal information because they do not know who their data will be shared with and how it will be used. They may be less likely to participate in activities that require them to log in to a service or download an app.



 *Lakewood Together is the City of Lakewood's community engagement portal, used by the city to engage residents on a wide variety of issues, including the recent update of Lakewood's comprehensive plan.*

Digital tools for engagement (some of many)

General purpose	Some representative examples
Crowdsourcing and ideation	AllOurIdeas; MindMixer; IdeaScale
Gathering feedback on problems and services	SeeClickFix; FixMyStreet; PublicStuff
Crowdfunding	Kickstarter; ioby
Petitions	Change.org
Games	@stake; CommunityPlanIt; Civic IDEA
Mapping and wikis	LocalWiki; OpenStreetMap
Illustrating options and voting on them	Metroquest; Ethelo
Hyperlocal community-building	Nextdoor; Front Porch Forum
Finding common ground in large groups	Pol.is
Polling	Mentimeter

Some digital tools are extensions or improvements of older strategies; for example, “survey panels” where people sign up to receive regular surveys on an issue or their community can improve on traditional surveys because the sample of participants can become much larger and more diverse over time. These tools can help leaders create a positive “feedback loop” by reporting back to participants on how their input was used in decision-making (see [BeHeardPhilly](#) image, right).

Simply offering a digital tool does not mean people will use it; all the same recruitment challenges and tactics (see Section 4) apply for digital strategies, just like they do for in-person meetings.



BeHeardPhilly, one of the first large-scale survey panels, used regular surveys to engage residents of Philadelphia on issues and policies that affect them. Available by phone, web, or SMS, the panel grew to include over 10,000 diverse Philadelphians, across all city ZIP codes, recruited via street teams, transit advertising, and community events.

c) Hybrid Strategies

Some engagement strategies incorporate digital tools in an in-person process or experience. Participants meet face-to-face, but they use their phones or other devices to get information, discussion questions, polling questions, opportunities to get more involved, and other resources. When participants enter their answers, the online tools can instantly show them how all the other respondents answered the same question. These kinds of strategies can combine some of the strengths of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ forms of engagement (pg. 6-7): people have the chance to learn, connect, and deliberate, at a place and time that is convenient to them, plus their input can be immediately aggregated and displayed. They can be synchronous (they allow people meeting at the same time to participate electronically as well as face-to-face) or asynchronous (people use the digital tool to meet wherever and whenever they want).

TYPES OF HYBRID STRATEGIES:

Real-time polling tools like [Mentimeter](#) that give people a chance to answer questions or give comments during an in-person meeting.

Texting-based engagement strategies like Text Talk Act that use a texting platform to send discussion and polling questions to participants.

Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems that allow users to dial into a number and use the touch-tone keypad to answer questions and provide feedback on given ideas. One popular option for IVR is [Twilio](#), which is commonly used by companies to configure their call centers.



During President Obama’s National Dialogue on Mental Health, a coalition of nonprofit organizations and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) engaged over 50,000 people, many of them young people, in text-enabled deliberation on mental health issues. Evaluations showed that participants learned about mental health, became more likely to reach out to others to seek help, and became better able to identify when friends or family members were experiencing mental health problems. The preferences recorded by the participants helped shape the next two years of funding decisions made by SAMHSA.

d) Official Public Meetings

The engagement strategies described in 3a-c have been used many times as part of temporary initiatives, but they have rarely been incorporated in the [official public meetings](#) of city councils, school boards, planning commissions, state agencies, and other decision-making bodies. The vast majority of those official meetings continue to use the same format they have for decades: participants are allowed three minutes at the microphone to address the officials, on any topic they choose, with almost no interaction between citizens, officials, or staff. These meetings produce frustration on the part of both citizens and officials and seem to erode public trust in government.

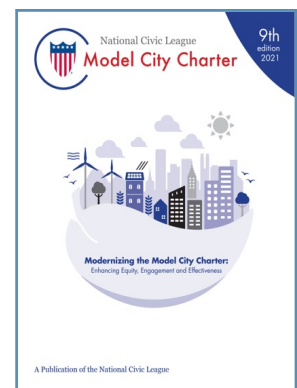
CONSIDERATIONS IN IMPROVING PUBLIC MEETINGS:

[Open meetings laws](#) often seem like an impediment to innovation, but in most states, they do allow positive changes in the format of public meetings.

Simply changing the format of meetings may not be sufficient; officials should engage residents before and after meetings, online and off, in ways that gather productive input and encourage more people to attend the meetings.

Giving people a chance to rate the meetings can help communities measure progress as they make improvements and may help encourage change (pg. 3).

Updating the laws and ordinances that govern public meetings, using templates like the Model City Charter (see below), can provide a stronger legal framework for civic health.



The Model City Charter has been maintained by the National Civic League since 1902. The most recent edition, issued in 2021, is the first to uphold equity and engagement as core priorities of local government.

e) Community-Based Organizing Strategies

“Community organizing” is an umbrella term describing a whole family of nonpartisan strategies and processes. People who live near each other or share some common problem join together in an organization that acts in their shared self-interest. Community organizers generally assume that social change necessarily involves conflict and social struggle in order to generate collective power for the powerless. One of the core goals of most community organizing approaches is to generate durable power for an organization representing the community, allowing it to influence key decision-makers on a range of issues over time.



The Western Colorado Alliance for Community Action is a grassroots organization that unites residents across western Colorado to build community power through organizing and leadership development.

COMMON ORGANIZING STRATEGIES INCLUDE:

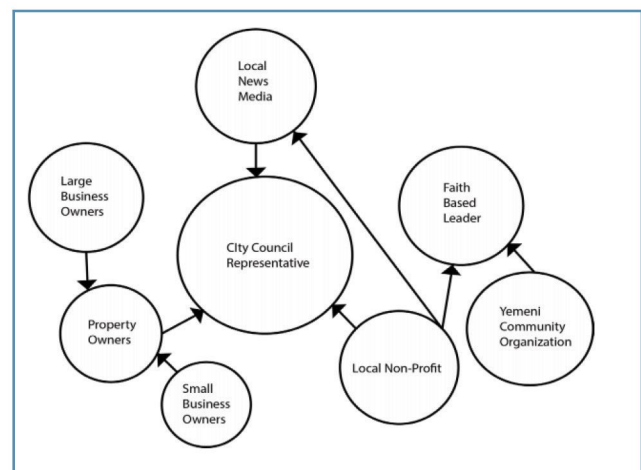
House meetings are structured conversations held in a safe space where participants talk about the challenges they are facing, the values they share, and how they can work together to achieve the changes they seek.

Power mapping is a process in which people work out who holds power on a particular issue and who has the authority to make the change that residents seek.

“Asset-based community development” is related to community organizing; it is a philosophy and process that encourages people to name the positive assets they and their community possess, building from those rather than focusing on their deficits.



Colorado People's Alliance is a power building organization working with those directly impacted by issue related to climate, economic, and immigrant justice. It is a member-led organization dedicated to advancing progressive social change.



Example of a power and proximity map (created by Nicole Cabral, edited by Jennifer Orellana).

Sortition-based processes can be paired with survey panels (pg. 9-10), which can be helpful in both achieving the representative sample needed for the assembly and connecting the assembly’s work with a larger number of people.

Participants produce a final report along with actionable and well-justified proposals. The final report is presented to the mandating government body which commits to following up with the citizens’ assembly within a reasonable time frame.



Steps in a democratic lottery system to determine who will participate in a citizens’ assembly, from the Federation for Innovations in Democracy in Europe. FIDE North America advocates for, provides technical guidance to, and conducts evaluations of citizens’ assemblies in North America.

g) Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget. Citizens generate and refine ideas for how to spend the funds, often working in teams that connect with experts and staff, and then there is a vote where everyone in the community can prioritize the ideas and allocate the money. PB was originally a face-to-face process but has also been conducted online or as a hybrid strategy.

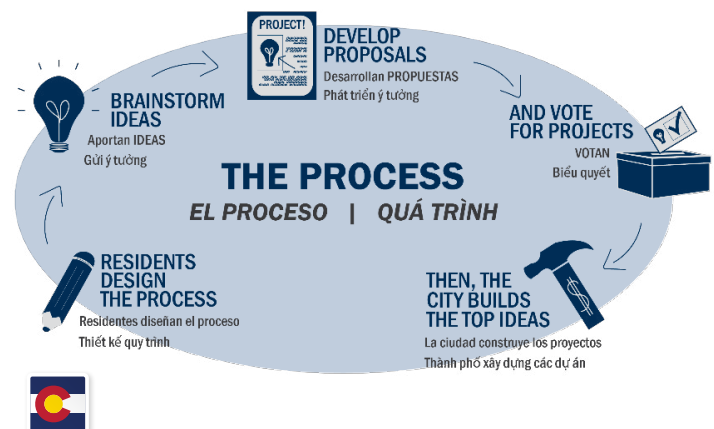
MORE ABOUT PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING:

PB was invented in Brazil in 1989 and there have since been almost 12,000 PB processes in over [3,000 cities on six continents](#).

Over 700,000 people have participated in PB in the U.S. and Canada.

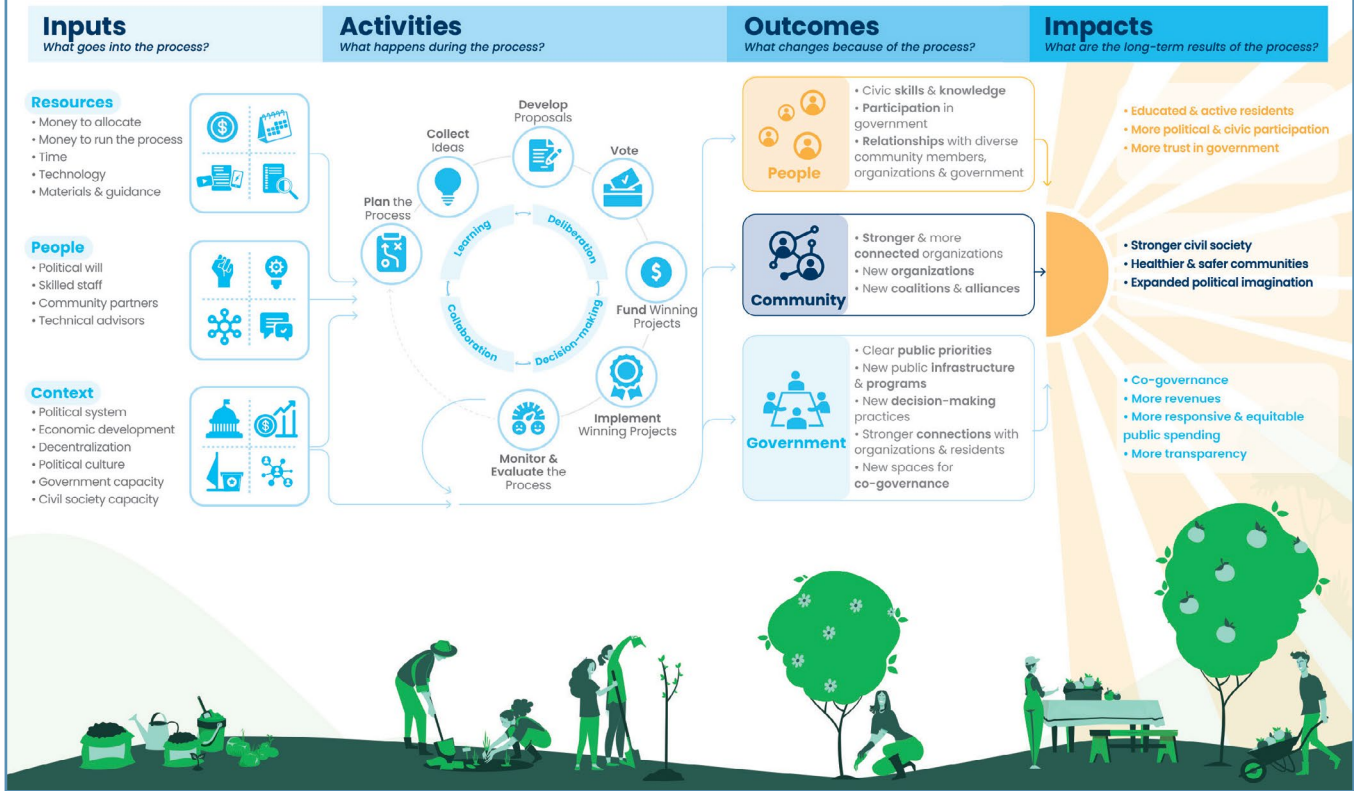
Some PB processes are focused on neighborhoods or city wards, while others (particularly in Latin America) have a second tier in which neighborhood participants are selected to serve in a metro-wide process to advise the overall city budget.

In many cases, participatory budgeting has been shown to reduce inequality, improve public health, reduce corruption, and increase trust.



*Denver’s participatory budgeting program, the **Denver People’s Budget**, empowered residents to decide how to allocate public funds for community projects. In its first cycle, over 6,000 community members participated, directing \$3 million toward 12 neighborhood infrastructure projects.*

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING THEORY OF CHANGE




A theory of change for participatory budgeting, developed by members of the Global PB Research and Practitioner Boards.

h) Social Engagement

Some forms of engagement are successful and sustainable because people find them convenient and fun. [On The Table](#), an initiative in Chicago which brought people together to discuss public issues over dinner, engaged over 55,000 people and expanded to ten other cities before the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the work. The Boettcher Foundation’s Community Connections program and the El Pomar Foundation’s Community Engagement area support many similar projects. The City of Decatur, Georgia, hosts a variety of social events, including “[Touch a Budget](#)” (featuring fire trucks and other city vehicles), to explain the city budget and get input on budget options. CREATE BUCKHANNON, a community organization in Buckhannon, West Virginia, has held a weekly lunch almost every Thursday since 2009. The group has helped citizens plan and establish a new farmer’s market and new bike trails.



 *On the Table was initiated by the Chicago Community Trust; 74% of participants said the experience helped them “understand public issues better,” and 53% said they would “take action on an idea they discussed.”*

COMMON INGREDIENTS:

A simple format for discussion **over a meal** (in some cases, participants get their choice of topics and pick a table based on what they want to discuss; in others, everyone gets the same set of discussion questions on the same topic).

Locations and an **atmosphere** that make it comfortable for people to bring their kids.

Events that recur – some of the more successful examples are weekly – so that people know what to expect and participation grows over time.

Intentional efforts to recruit a **wide variety of people** to participate.

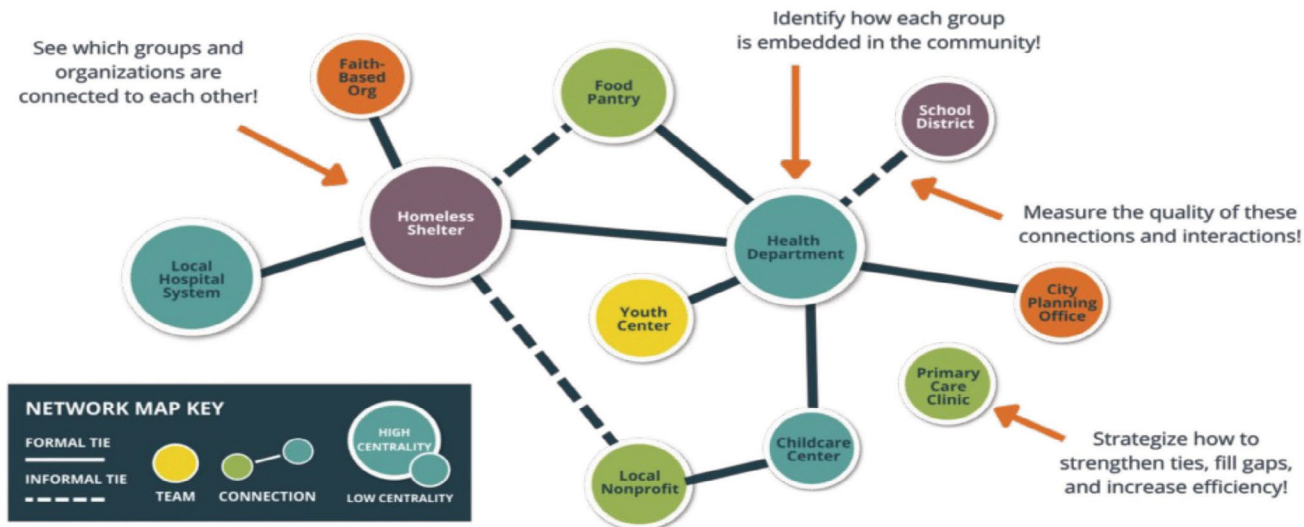


The Jane Addams School for Democracy, a partnership between the University of Minnesota and the Westside neighborhood of St. Paul, involved 50-200 people every month in “neighborhood learning circles” and cultural exchanges, in four languages, over a period of almost twenty years.



In Denver, Warm Cookies of the Revolution has engaged almost a million people in a wide variety of events, all of which feature some combination of food, music, fun, and civic education.

MAPPING A COMMUNITY ECOSYSTEM



SECTION 4

Reaching Diverse Audiences

RECRUITMENT AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR REACHING LARGE, DIVERSE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE

Perhaps the most fundamental skill in strengthening civic health is recruitment: proactively reaching out to large numbers of people to attract them to the events, platforms, surveys, and other activities that will help them make decisions, solve problems, and build community. This is particularly important for bringing people to the table whose voices, for one reason or another, simply aren't being heard. ["Going where the people are,"](#) and holding discussions in the places where they already gather (online spaces as well as in-person ones), is often an excellent step in this direction, but even that isn't always sufficient. People participate in things because they are asked to do so by someone they know and trust, and so the key to recruitment is tapping into that web of existing, trusting relationships in the community.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

- Stakeholder Mapping
- Timeline Exercise
- Goal Setting
- Digital Tools



Stakeholder Mapping

Conducting a stakeholder mapping exercise, or ‘tree exercise,’ to show which people and organizations are trusted by which groups and populations in the community.



Timeline Exercise

There are often good reasons why people haven’t gotten involved in the past – a timeline exercise (see p. 5) can help uncover past incidents, divisions, or unsuccessful engagement efforts that help explain why people don’t want to participate.



Goal Setting

Set goals for how many people you are trying to attract, and which sets of people are important but may be particularly difficult to recruit.



Digital Tools

Digital tools that help manage relational organizing have been used extensively on political campaigns – they can also be useful for outreach around civic activities.



The Latino Community Foundation of Colorado (LCFC) is a state-wide philanthropic foundation committed to strengthening Latino communities by investing in leadership, civic engagement, economic prosperity, and cultural pride. LCFC drives impact through programs like [Adelante Colorado](#), a two-year capacity-building initiative for Latino-led non-profits, and state-wide grant making via the [Ayuda Colorado Fund and NPI Grant Program](#), which support grassroots infrastructure and operations. Its “[One Community. One Legacy.](#)” campaign includes a revolving loan fund and future-focused Vision and Legacy Funds. From youth development and immigrant justice to leadership fellowships like [Las Mujeres Valientes](#) and state-wide coalition work, LCFC centers Latinx voices to advance equity and empower thriving, self-determined communities across Colorado.



The Art Students League of Denver offers all-ages arts workshops to diverse immigrant populations throughout the Denver metro area through the Denver Public Library's Plaza Program, which was the recipient of a 2013 Mayor's Award.

SECTION 5

Arts-Based Strategies

ARTS-BASED STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING CIVIC HEALTH THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCE, CONNECTION, EDUCATION, AND UNDERSTANDING

The arts can be a catalyst for helping people understand each other, learn about their history, solve public problems, and address trauma and division. These are all ways to strengthen civic health. Plus, visual, performing, and culinary arts all serve the basic function of bringing people together and building community.



SOME ARTS-BASED STRATEGIES CAN BE PARTICULARLY VALUABLE TO CIVIC HEALTH:

Initiatives that use the arts as a focal point for networking and interaction, such as the work of the Cultural Office of the Pikes Peak Region (pictured, previous page) or the events hosted by the Plaza project.

Loveland’s “Arts in Public Places” program includes 563 diverse works of art valued at approximately \$12.3 million. Private contributions by arts organizations, citizens and artists, have donated over 69% of the value of the collection, making the City of Loveland unique among other municipalities.



Participatory theater programs that help people navigate conflict and work out better ways to make decisions together, such as “[City Council](#)”.

“City Council” was a participatory theater project held in Houston, Texas, Tempe, Arizona, New York City, New York, San Francisco, California, and Keene, New Hampshire, where volunteers acted out city council discussions using transcripts from actual meetings.



The [ACT Human Rights Film Festival](#), hosted by Colorado State University, is dedicated to elevating human rights and democracy through film and meaningful conversations. Over the past decade, the festival has showcased 228 films, welcomed 155 special guests, and engaged more than 20,000 audience members from 48 countries across six continents. The festival’s mission is to create positive change by fostering dialogue and awareness around critical human rights issues through the medium of film.



The **Manitou Springs Citizens Academy** is a free, in-person series of classes designed to provide residents with an inside look at the city's operations, encouraging community involvement and understanding of local governance.



MANITOU SPRINGS

SECTION 6

Citizen Academies

CITIZEN ACADEMIES AND OTHER GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS ORGANIZED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Citizen academies are training programs organized by local governments (and other institutions) that give residents a better understanding of how city councils, police departments, planning departments, and other city functions work. There are some academies focused on state government, and others that are geared toward newer immigrants and people whose first language is not English. Citizen police academies focus on law enforcement in particular. Most of these programs were interrupted by the pandemic; they can be re-introduced and upgraded in a number of ways.

UPGRADING CITIZEN ACADEMIES



Collaborative Curriculum



Digital Tools & Strategies



Joint Learning



Cross-Generation Participation



Collaborative Curriculum

Shifting the emphasis from simply ‘how government works’ to including at least some discussion with participants about ‘how government and citizens could work together better.’



Joint Learning

Providing opportunities for citizens and city employees to go through the training together, not just as trainers and trainees but as co-learners.



Digital Tools & Strategies

Including digital tools and strategies, particularly ones that help citizens and governments share information, gather input, and gauge citizen attitudes.



Cross-Gen Participation

Including people of different generations in the same training program.



Crime Lab session in the Larimer County Sheriff's Office Citizen Academy



SECTION 7

Civic Media

CIVIC MEDIA / PUBLIC JOURNALISM PROJECTS THAT COVER KEY ASPECTS OF CIVIC LIFE

The concepts of “civic media,” “civic journalism,” and “public journalism” are all based on the idea that reporting and journalism can strengthen civic health. Rather than focusing on partisan conflict and national personalities, [civic media](#) provides more news that people can use: different options on major policy questions, potential solutions to public problems, and ways for residents to get engaged. [Civic journalists](#) not only inform the public, they also directly engage their audiences through interactive candidate forums, processes to determine which issues to cover, training community “documenters” to cover public meetings, and other activities.

In addition to increasing the supply of good coverage and important information, many civic media efforts focus on increasing “media literacy,” which is our capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms—from print to video to the internet. Media literacy projects help people apply critical thinking to media messages and use media to create their own messages.

SOME EXAMPLES OF CIVIC MEDIA AND JOURNALISM:

[City Bureau](#), a Chicago-based nonprofit that just won a Pulitzer Prize for local reporting, organizes a [Documenters](#) program (logo on previous page) that trains and pays citizen journalists in 11 cities to report on city council, school board, planning commission, and other public meetings where important local decisions are being made.

The [Texas Tribune](#), a nonprofit media organization, is known for original, explanatory journalism. It has the largest newsroom covering a state capital of any media outlet anywhere in the country. The Tribune hosts dozens of on-the-record, livestreamed, public events where “public officials, policy experts and others talk about the work they’re doing and various issues affecting Texans,” along with an annual [Texas Tribune Festival](#) that attracts thousands of people to Austin to “learn about Texas’ biggest challenges and to spark thoughtful discussion about solutions.”

Efforts to update the laws on transparency and public records are important for both journalists and citizens. Many of the existing laws were enacted decades ago, don’t account for the internet, allow information to be redacted, and charge fees for public access to public information on key issues like budgets, transportation, and law enforcement.

ALAMOSA CITIZEN
The homepage for the San Luis Valley

April 21, 2025
MONDAY BRIEFING

Clear skies, daytime temps in the 60-degree range and overnight temps above freezing will make for a pleasant last full week of April. The month has yielded new record-high temperatures for April 9, April 11, and then April 12 when the mercury reached 79 degrees. The diminishing Rio Grande is topic A when representatives from Texas, New Mexico and Colorado arrive for the Rio Grande Compact meetings this week in Alamosa. More notes below:

COOPER THE WEATHER DOG

UPPER SAN JUAN, CO (842) SNOW WATER EQUIVALENT
Snow Range

Current as of 04/16/2025
Unit of Measure: 100%
To Median Peak: 24%
From Last Median Peak: 2
Percentage: 2

Median Peak SWE
Year
Region (N / S)
State, National
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
2025

USDA
National Water and Climate Center

1. Troubling southern mountains
The record-warm temperatures in [February](#), another stretch of warm days and little moisture in March, and more record heat



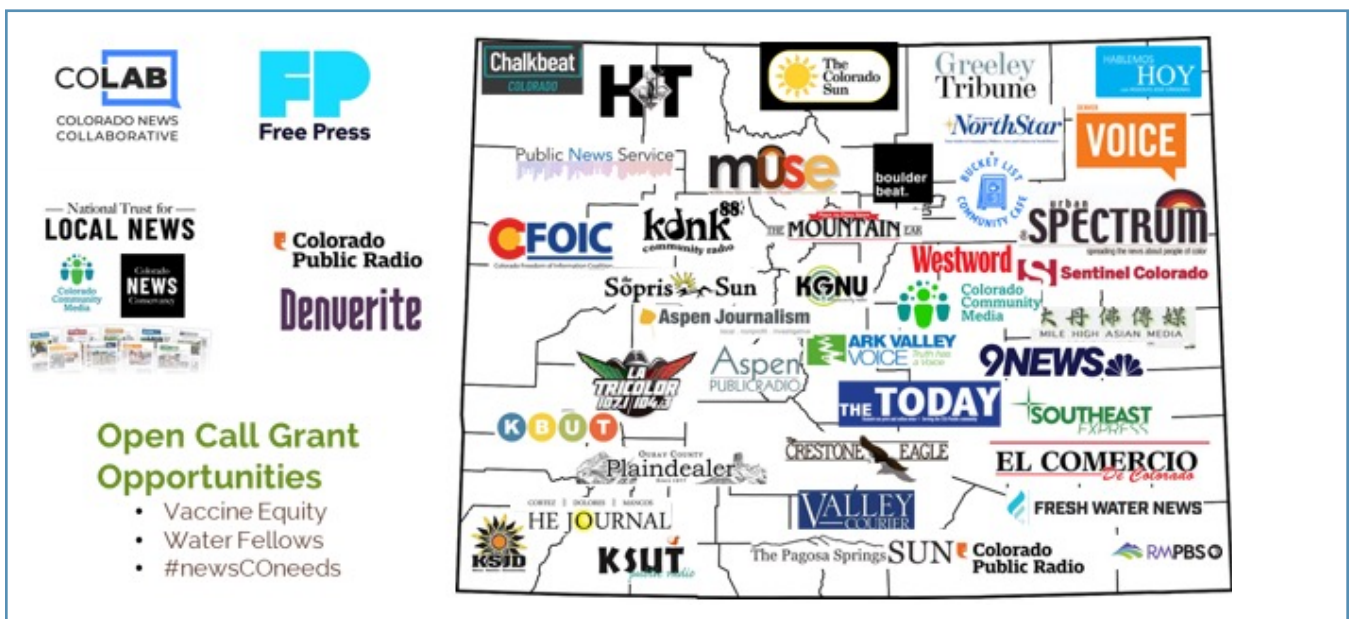
A digital news outlet serving the San Luis Valley, the [Alamosa Citizen](#) focuses on local journalism that informs and engages the community. It has received support from national and local funders to sustain its operations.

The [Germantown Info Hub](#) is a “hyper-local newsroom doing reporting for and with residents” of Germantown, a neighborhood in Philadelphia. The Info Hub uses weekly text messages, tables at events, and other venues to invite residents to share ideas for stories and issues. “Ideas from the community are shared with community journalists and media partners and used to inform monthly community discussions.”



The Germantown Info Hub

The [Colorado Media Project](#) has engaged a broad-based coalition of civic leaders, students, academics, philanthropists, journalists, business leaders, technologists, national thought leaders, and local residents (below left) in addressing the disturbing expansion of local news deserts and the negative impacts on Colorado and its residents.



Colorado Media Project 2021 Grantees



Session of the Neighborhood University program run by **Hey Neighbors** in Colorado Springs



SECTION 8

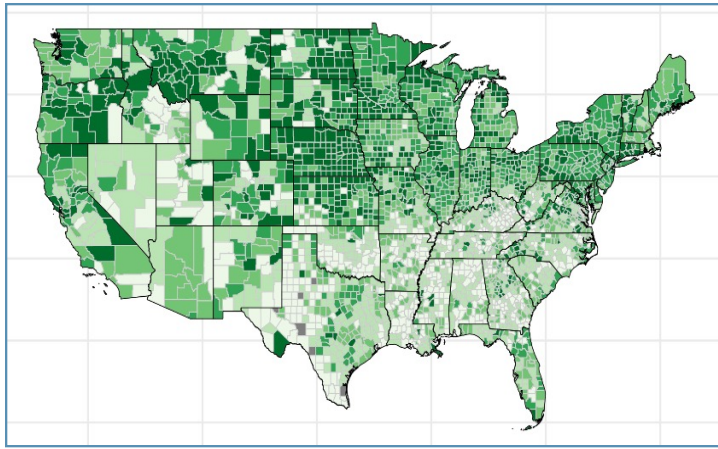
Grassroots Civic Groups

COMMUNITY-BASED CIVIC GROUPS AND STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING THEM

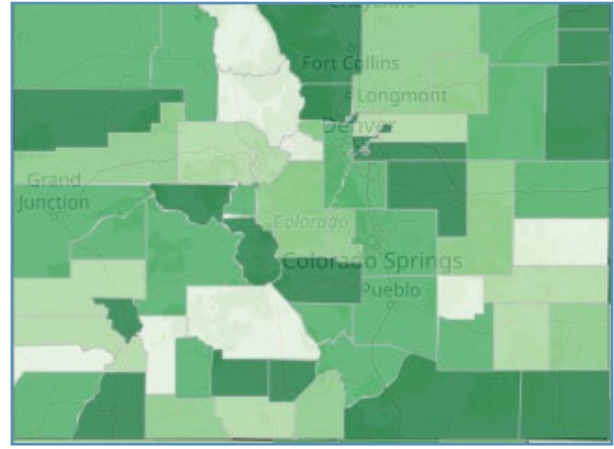
Every community has a “ground floor of democracy”: neighborhood and homeowner associations, parent associations and other school- or university-based groups, service clubs, boards and commissions, and other grassroots groups. These kinds of groups have the potential to offer highly accessible, meaningful civic opportunities to a wide range of people. In some cases they are reaching this potential, but in other instances, grassroots civic groups need more skills and support to engage, sustain, and grow their memberships. Citizens also need help starting up more of these groups; according to a recent report (see next page), communities that need them most often lack critical civic opportunities.



The Fremont Street Troll in Seattle, Washington, was created when a group of neighborhood residents received a mini-grant from the city for a project that would improve public safety. The mini-grant was used for the materials, while volunteers created the sculpture. The troll is located under a freeway overpass that was previously a dark and dangerous location; it is now a tourist attraction.



a. United States



b. Colorado



Maps of the continental United States and state of Colorado from [The Unequal Landscape of Civic Opportunity in America](#) ranked by county and zip code, respectively, according to civic opportunity score. A score of 5 indicates high civic opportunity, meaning it is easy for people to find organizations that offer membership, volunteering opportunities, host public events, and engage in public and civic actions. Conversely, a score of 1 indicates low civic opportunity.

GRASSROOTS CIVIC GROUPS CAN BENEFIT FROM:

Workshops and trainings that focus on:

- Strategies and tools for outreach, recruitment, and relational organizing (see Section 4);
- Design and facilitation of in-person or [virtual meetings](#) (see Section 3c);
- Strategies and tools for live polling and decision-making (including digital tools such as [Mentimeter](#));
- How to incorporate food, games, music, sports, and theater (see Sections 3h, 4).

Bringing people who belong to local online networks (see Section 9) together for in-person events, and encouraging in-person event participants to join local digital networks.

Mini-grant programs that provide financial support for neighborhood projects (see Fremont Troll). Since 1996, the Denver Foundation has operated a [Strengthening Neighborhoods](#) program that has provided grants of \$5,000 or less for resident-led projects. The program was born out of a process in which the foundation gathered input from the communities it serves.

Strategies and tools for measuring participant satisfaction (see Section 3b).

Stronger ties with public institutions, such as local governments and school systems, and clearer expectations about the roles that grassroots groups can play in public decision-making. Elected officials and staff are often unsure how well the grassroots group represents their neighborhood or constituency, partly because the engagement efforts aren't extensive or apparent – meanwhile, grassroots group leaders and members are often unsure whether and how their input is being incorporated in decisions. This lack of clarity and trust leads to frustration on both sides.



Antonito Together is a grassroots organization in Antonito, Colorado (pop 610), that empowers residents to shape their community future through local leadership, youth engagement, and cultural preservation. The group has launched projects like the Antonito Community History Collection and a Youth Advisory Council, fostering pride and active participation among all generations.



Illustration by Jarad Greene from an [article](#) about Vermont-based [Front Porch Forum](#).

SECTION 9

Local Online Networks

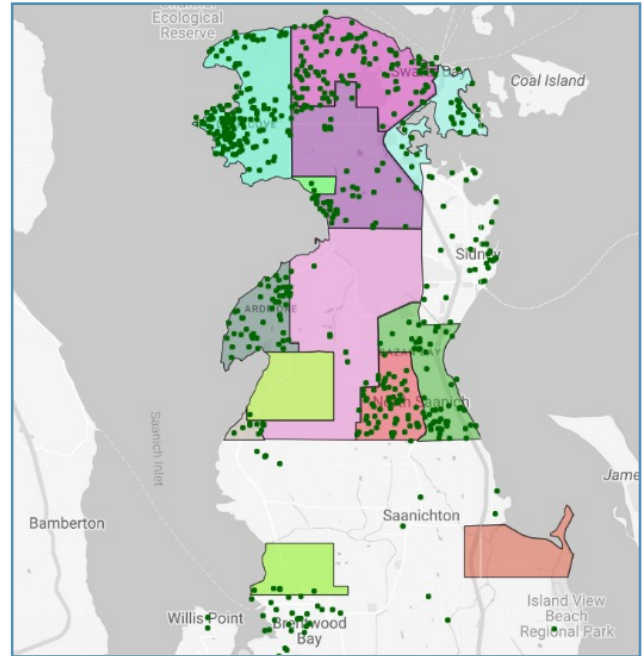
LOCAL AND NEIGHBORHOOD ONLINE NETWORKS AND STRATEGIES FOR TAPPING THEIR FULL POTENTIAL

Local and neighborhood online networks are already an important asset for civic health, and they have a great deal more untapped potential. Most American households belong to an online network that focuses on where they live: either an email list, a Facebook group page, a Nextdoor neighborhood, or some other customized platform.

These online spaces combine the convenience and scalability of a digital tool with the many benefits of face-to-face relationships (see ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ on pp. 6-7). Many local online networks function mainly as webs for information-sharing (“does anyone know a good plumber?,” “when is the school board meeting?,” “has anyone seen my lost cat?”), and some have been criticized for enabling racial profiling (when residents report people on their street as ‘suspicious’ when they simply look different from other residents).

One of the key differences between different online networks is how they are moderated. Front Porch Forum in Vermont (see previous page), which has almost 200,000 users in the state, prides itself on having trained human moderators rather than unmoderated or technologically moderated discussion threads.

A few organizations focused on supporting these networks, such as [Placespeak](#) (sample map, above right) and [Common Agency](#), are trying to overcome the challenges and help residents reach a next level of engagement by layering in-person activities onto the online connections. These experiments seem promising because the local online networks already have what most civic health efforts need: large numbers of participants.



The PlaceSpeak map for North Saanich, British Columbia, with each dot showing a participating household. Place Speak is designed not only to support connections between residents, but to engage them in public decisions made by governments and other institutions.

Helping Neighbors Connect

Front Porch Forum is a free community-building service in Vermont and parts of New York. Your neighborhood's forum is only open to the people who live there. It's all about helping neighbors connect. **Invite neighbors and others to join.**

Join the conversation

How will you use this account?

Neighbor Business Nonprofit Government

Personal account, just for me

House no.

154

Street name (no house number)

Maple St

Apt.

3R

City

Bristol

State/province

Vermont

or



Aquetzta empowers youth with strong ties to Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x communities across Colorado to develop powerful connections and become leaders in their communities.



SECTION 10

Civic Education & Youth Leadership

PROJECTS AND STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING CIVIC EDUCATION AND YOUTH CIVIC LEADERSHIP

In many places, educators and officials are reinforcing the need to expand civic education and support civic learning. A wide variety of projects, organized by schools, universities, nonprofit organizations, and elected officials, aim to give young people the knowledge and skills they need to be productive citizens and leaders. Some of these efforts focus on increasing students’ understanding of our government and political systems, others involve young people in assessing and solving local problems, and many more provide opportunities for service and volunteerism (see the table of “promising practices,” right).

Promising Practices for Civic Learning

1. Classroom instruction in civics, government, history, law, economics, and geography
2. Discussion of current events
3. Service learning
4. Extracurricular activities
5. Student participation in school governance
6. Simulations of democratic processes and procedures
7. News media literacy
8. Action civics
9. Social-emotional learning (SEL)
10. School climate reform

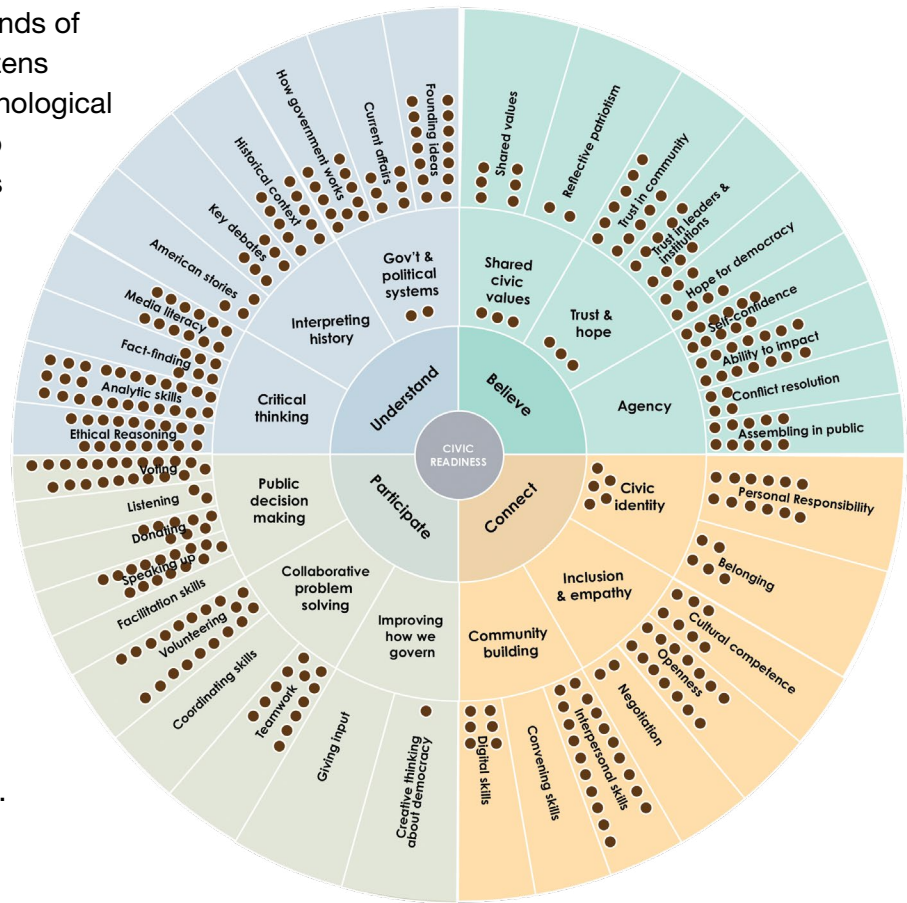
Table from *The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution* by Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg

SOME OF THE CHALLENGES THAT CIVIC EDUCATORS (AND YOUNG PEOPLE THEMSELVES) GRAPPLE WITH INCLUDE:

The need to better define what kinds of knowledge and skills today's citizens require, especially given the technological and societal changes we face, so that civic education opportunities can adequately prepare people.

A comparative lack of opportunities for people to practice the skills and use the knowledge they gain through civic education (see Wheel of Civic Opportunities graphic, p. 3).

The need for more ways to measure progress – both of individuals and communities – in gaining, using, and benefiting from civic education (see Wheel of Civic Readiness graphic, right).



The Wheel of Civic Readiness, from the [Mapping Civic Measurement](#) report by the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, shows measurement tools (each dot = a tool) for assessing people's understanding, beliefs, and skills for participation and connection.

CIVIC EDUCATION & YOUTH CIVIC LEADERSHIP IN COLORADO

Colorado is home to many initiatives focused on civic education and youth civic leadership. Some examples include:

The [Aquetza: Youth, Leadership, Education And Community Empowerment Program](#) is hosted by UMAS y MEXA de CD Boulder. It is a free, residential, community-based summer program that provides high school students with strong ties to Chicano/Latino communities from across Colorado with an interactive, academic enrichment experience focused on the history, literature, health science, and relevant social and political issues surrounding their cultural communities, through rigorous academic work in ethnic studies, writing, reading, and science.

The [Youth Civic Action Program](#) (YCAP) is a partnership between the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State, local schools, and community groups to bring hands-on civic engagement into the high school classroom. In this program, trained university student facilitators go into local classrooms (pictured above) to help students move from talk to action and work on real projects designed to create meaningful change in their communities.

[The Colorado Democracy Challenge](#) is a New Era Colorado program that aims to empower high school students to be civically engaged members of their community. Organizers work with high schools across Colorado to promote lifelong habits around civic engagement: pre-registering students to vote, training volunteers to be civic leaders at their schools, and leading workshops on how to be civically involved in all areas of local government.



New Era Colorado staff members pose with Las Animas High School students after a workshop.

[The Amache Preservation Society](#), founded by Granada High School teacher John Hopper and run by student volunteers (pictured above), preserves and interprets the Amache site, a World War II incarceration camp for Japanese citizens, through restoration, museum curation, and educational outreach. The Society partners closely with the Town of Granada, Prowers County, the state of Colorado, and the National Park Service — facilitating land preservation and community events— and works with survivors and descendants of Amache, who participate in annual pilgrimages, oral history projects, and collaborative commemorations. Their efforts over 30+ years have made Amache the most intact WWII incarceration camp site in the U.S. and a model of youth-led historic preservation.

The CREATE ([Community Resilience and Environmental Action Training and Education](#)) program inspires and supports youth-led initiatives that contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities while fostering local collaboration and civic engagement capacity. It is hosted by the Climate Democracy Initiative in Denver.



CREATE fellows at work



The League of Women Voters provides nonpartisan voter education, hosts candidate forums, and works to expand voting rights.

SECTION 11

Nonpartisan Voter Engagement & Support






SUPPORTING VOTERS BY PROTECTING VOTING RIGHTS, SAFEGUARDING ELECTIONS, EDUCATING ABOUT THE VOTING PROCESS, AND INFORMING THE ELECTORATE

Voting and civic health go together: when people are better connected to their communities, they are more likely to vote, and when they vote they are performing a central civic duty.

Many organizations and government agencies are working to protect voter rights, uphold free and fair elections, help people understand how to register and when to vote, and provide people with information on issues and candidates so that they can vote more confidently.

The need for these kinds of supports is high: across the country, roughly 50 percent of all the people who register never actually vote, and closer to 75 percent of those registered don't vote in primaries and local elections.

NONPARTISAN SUPPORTS FOR VOTERS

-  Information Sharing Tools
-  Voter Education
-  GOTV Campaigns
-  Electoral Reform
-  Election Worker Protection

NONPARTISAN SUPPORTS FOR VOTING INCLUDE:

Information Sharing Tools

Voter information tools such as [TurboVote](#) and [VOTE411](#), that let people know how to register, where to vote, when primaries and elections are being held, and how to vote by mail.

Voter Education

Voter education tools like [ActiVote](#) (see below) that help people compare their policy views with those of candidates, understand ballot initiatives and referenda, and advance their knowledge through games and other activities.

GOTV Campaigns

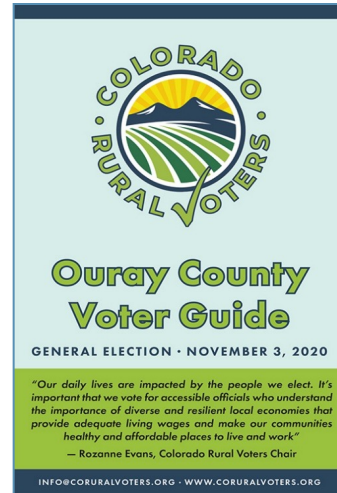
Get out the vote campaigns, some using relational organizing (see Section 4), that encourage people to vote.

Election Worker Protection

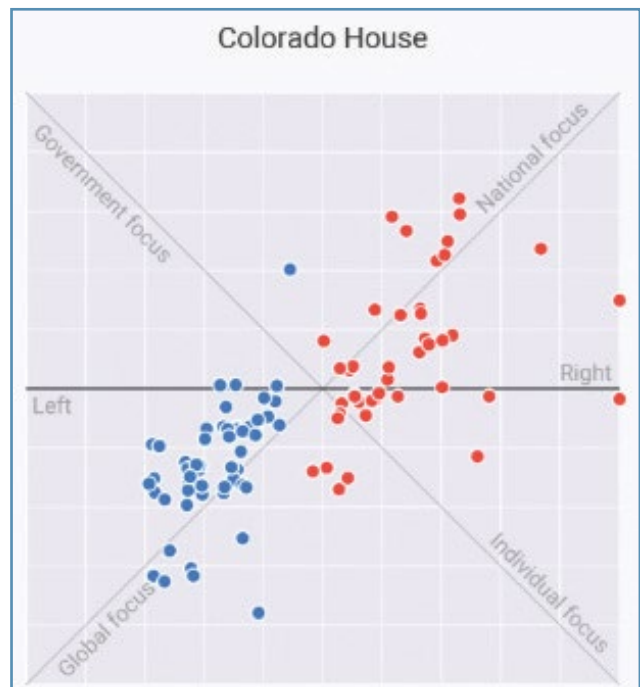
Measures to protect election workers and support them in their work.

Electoral Reform

Electoral reforms that safeguard elections, make voting clearer and simpler, and try to ensure that the will of voters is evident in election results.



Colorado Rural Voters is a nonpartisan organization run by local volunteers from five counties, aiming to increase voter participation and representation in rural communities. They produce voter guides like the one pictured above.



A graphic from ActiVote charting the policy views of all members of the Colorado House of Representatives. ActiVote is a nonpartisan civic tech platform created with voters at the center of the design. It is the nation's largest and fastest-growing voter education tool, and the only one to provide in-depth information on how users' policy preferences match up with those of the candidates in the local, state, and national races in which they can cast a ballot.



La Puente workgroups come from all over the country, serving for a designated period of time, to help complete projects and impact communities.



SECTION 12

Service & Volunteerism

METHODS TO SUPPORT, IMPROVE, AND PROMOTE SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES, PROGRAMMING, AND IMPACT

Service is fundamental to civic health. Thousands of organizations provide volunteering opportunities, helping people improve their communities, support young people, and assist those in need. Many service programs focus on teenagers and young adults, while others encourage volunteerism by mid-career adults and senior citizens (see examples on the following page).



Developing & Managing Volunteer Programs graphic from the Management Library

INNOVATIONS TO IMPROVE SERVICE AND ITS IMPACT:

Connecting service programs with other civic opportunities and nonprofit groups, to better direct volunteer efforts to the places and situations where they are needed, and providing service fellowships that match mid-career volunteers with organizations that could best use their help.



La Puente mobilizes volunteers in the San Luis Valley to help communities address poverty and homelessness

Maximizing the educational potential of service by applying the principles and practices of “service learning.” Service learning encourages critical thinking and personal reflection on volunteer experiences, and helps people get better at analyzing and solving public problems.

Emphasizing service as a vehicle for workforce development, and offering volunteer opportunities that give people job skills, expose them to new career paths, and help them make connections with potential employers.

Providing incentives to volunteers, such as scholarships for higher education or a grant that helps the volunteer start a business or buy a first home.

Making service mandatory for high school students.



Volunteers with the [United Way of the Yampa Valley](#) help put on the Community Thanksgiving Dinner, which feeds hundreds of people annually. The United Way matches local volunteers with nonprofits working in education, financial stability, and health.



Members of the [CLARO Research Institute](#) conduct community-engaged research to document challenges facing Colorado Latinos and develop policy solutions.

SECTION 13

Research & Advocacy Groups

POLICY RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS WHO INFORM THE PUBLIC AND FACILITATE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

Civic health is stronger when people understand the laws and public policy options that elected officials are considering, and when people know how to share their policy preferences with their elected representatives. A wide range of organizations are involved in policy research, elected official and stakeholder engagement, and public awareness and advocacy campaigns.

Many of those organizations also educate residents about the legislative process and mobilize them so they may be effective advocates in their communities. This category therefore overlaps to some extent with civic education and all of the work represented in Section 3: Directly Engaging Citizens.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

The [Center for Policy and Democracy](#) at the University of Colorado-Denver is a hub for research, teaching, and community engagement on public policy and democracy. The Center works across disciplines, states, and countries to bring various perspectives to study and inform how policies and politics impact the most important issues facing democratic societies today.

The [Rural Communities Resource Center](#) is a grassroots nonprofit organization in Northeast Colorado. The Resource Center provides advocacy, education, and support to create systems change and develop programs that promote the physical, emotional and economic health of the area.

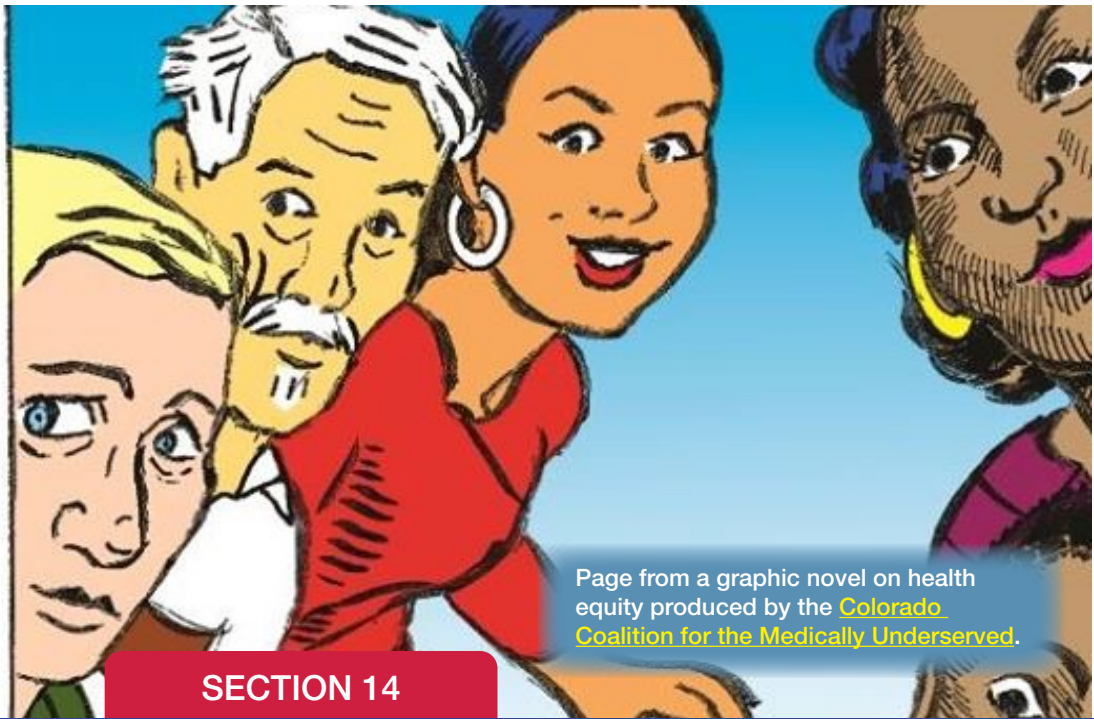
[Advocacy Denver](#) advocates for the rights of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. They inform lawmakers about the impact of legislation on individuals with disabilities, advocate for (or against) key bills, and enlist influencers to grow awareness. The work spans public benefits, health care, education, immigration and criminal justice issues.

The [Colorado Latino Leadership, Advocacy & Research Organization](#) (CLLARO) operates a Capitol Fellowship Program that increases the number of Latino civic leaders who know how to influence legislation, advocates for Latino community interests, and conducts research and analysis on policy issues affecting vulnerable or oppressed Latino populations in Colorado.



CLLARO's Capitol Fellowship Program provides public policy training to college students--typically the first in their families to attend college--and places them in paid internships with state legislators and other public officials and policy advocates during the Colorado legislative session.

LET'S TALK ABOUT HEALTH EQUITY!



Page from a graphic novel on health equity produced by the [Colorado Coalition for the Medically Underserved](#).

SECTION 14

Increasing Equity

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING EQUITY IN CIVIC HEALTH, AND IMPORTANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN THE PROCESS

Though researchers are just beginning to explore the connections between equity and civic health, it seems likely that when institutions establish better two-way relationships and higher levels of trust with groups of people who have been marginalized, this has positive impacts on the civic health of both the marginalized populations and the community as a whole.

Furthermore, because civic health increases our quality of life – including safety, wealth, physical health, and other indicators – it is important that those benefits are shared by everyone. Just like everyone should have good opportunities to get an education or get a job, civic opportunities should be available to all regardless of their age, gender, racial or ethnic background, income level, or where they live or work.

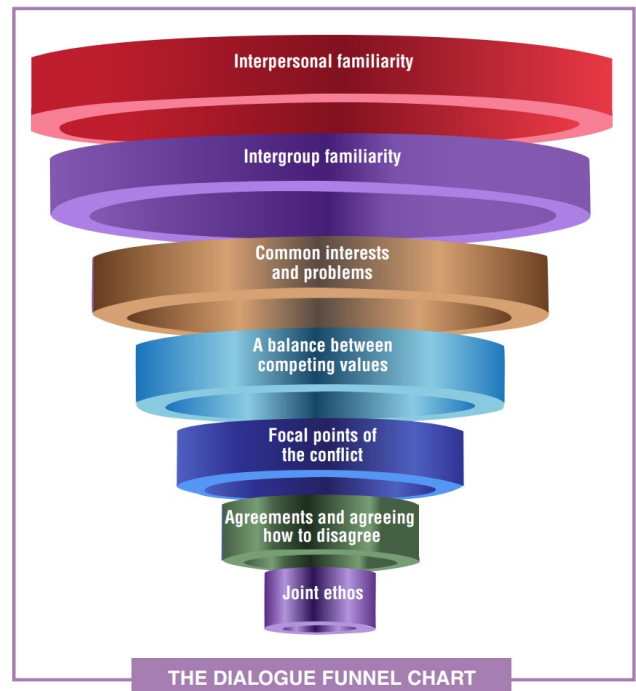


Chart from Kettering Foundation's 2022 [Connections](#) report showing a program model for using dialogue to address long-standing conflicts and inequities.

“Work in support of democracy in the 21st century has to confront the realities of inequality in our systems... extreme levels of inequality in our community are often cited as one of the major threats to democracy. Democracy should mean, at minimum, that we have a system that is providing shared opportunities for self-actualization of all our citizens.”

- Sharon Davies, President, Kettering Foundation

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER:

The [history of race](#), and how people of different racial backgrounds have interacted in a community, continues to affect how many people think and whether or not they get involved.

People in positions of authority need to be explicit about wanting to understand and affect equity, or many community members will assume they are not interested.

Talking about equity and difference can be extremely helpful but it is rarely sufficient: people also want to see action by leaders and institutions, and they are often willing to help implement those actions and make changes in their own lives.

Developing processes for gathering, sharing, and analyzing data can help illuminate whether decisions are being made in equitable ways, and whether the impacts of those decisions are equitable.



The Citizens Project works to educate and empower people in the Pikes Peak region to embrace all members of the community, regardless of race, economic status, ethnicity, religion, national origin, gender, age, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability. They “seek to promote equity in our public spaces and challenge community members to uphold this value.”

The Small Town Project in Rocky Ford, Colorado, is a non-profit dedicated to improving local quality of life through food security, economic empowerment, and community engagement. Its flagship Rocky Ford Food Share Project provides free, healthy food to anyone in need, including those not served by traditional assistance programs. The organization also leads initiatives in community beautification, youth leadership, direct support for vulnerable residents, all guided by a commitment to equity and inclusion.

Denver's [Civic Center Park](#) is an historic public space that hosts numerous civic events, festivals, and community gatherings. It is supported by the Civic Center Conservancy, an independent nonprofit that engages individuals, businesses, and community groups.



SECTION 15

Public Spaces

WIRED, WELCOMING INDOOR AND OUTDOOR SPACES FOR PEOPLE TO GATHER, WORK TOGETHER, AND BUILD COMMUNITY

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt is said to have remarked that “Democracy needs a place to sit down.” We need accessible, welcoming, wired public spaces for people to get together in order to solve problems, make decisions, and – perhaps most importantly – be part of a community. These can be public libraries, community centers, faith institutions, schools, theaters, museums, universities, and other kinds of buildings.

For the same reasons, we also need welcoming outdoor spaces, like parks, plazas, athletic fields, playgrounds, and amphitheaters.

Public libraries have been particularly adept at reinventing themselves as 21st Century community hubs, providing internet access, meeting spaces, and a variety of activities and services to a wide range of people.

“When designed, managed and programmed with intention, our shared public spaces can bring people back into public life to strengthen their communities and fortify our democracy.”

- [Reimagining the Civic Commons](#) report, 2023

WAYS TO CAPITALIZE ON THE POTENTIAL OF PUBLIC SPACES:

Engaging people in designing or renovating them – organizations like the [Project For Public Spaces](#) offer strategies for helping people make decisions, allocate funds, and contribute their own time, skills, and energy to the construction and maintenance of public spaces.

Making public spaces accessible – to pedestrians, people with disabilities, and people using public transit to get there.

Ensuring that there is programming that brings life to public spaces: music, theater, dance, food, sports, and activities for kids.

Honoring the history of the community – recent as well as foundational – in naming parks and buildings and in creating displays and installations.



The [Grassroots Community Building](#) was constructed as a welcoming space for residents of Cope, Joes, and Kirk. Supported by the Grassroots Community Center organization, it offers a variety of amenities, including a computer room for personal use and a small library where visitors can borrow or donate books.



The [Sterling Community Fund](#) is an endowment funded by residents to provide sustainable support for projects that enhance the quality of life in Logan County. With over \$3.5 million in assets, the SCF has backed initiatives like [Heritage Park](#), [city hiking trails](#), and [lighting at the Logan County Fairgrounds](#). The fund continues to grow and aims to support future amenities such as a community center, children’s splash park, expanded trails, green spaces, and public art displays. Community members are encouraged to contribute and take part in decision making through the fund’s Legacy Society and advisory committee.



The [Museum of Outdoor Arts \(MOA\)](#) places site-specific sculpture in public locations throughout the Denver metro area. From commercial office parks to botanic gardens, city parks, and traditional sculpture gardens, art is placed to interpret space as “a museum without walls.” The mission of MOA is “making art a part of everyday life.”



SECTION 16

Putting It All Together

COMBINING PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES FOR A COMPREHENSIVE CIVIC HEALTH PLAN

All the civic opportunities described in this guide are valuable, in different ways. For civic health planners (a category of leader that doesn't exist in most places, but should), this guide shows the possibilities and some of the existing Colorado examples – it is not a comprehensive assessment, nor an attempt to compare Colorado with other states.

The anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that the state has many strengths and many areas for improvement when it comes to civic health and civic opportunities. Civic health planners in Colorado have much to consider.

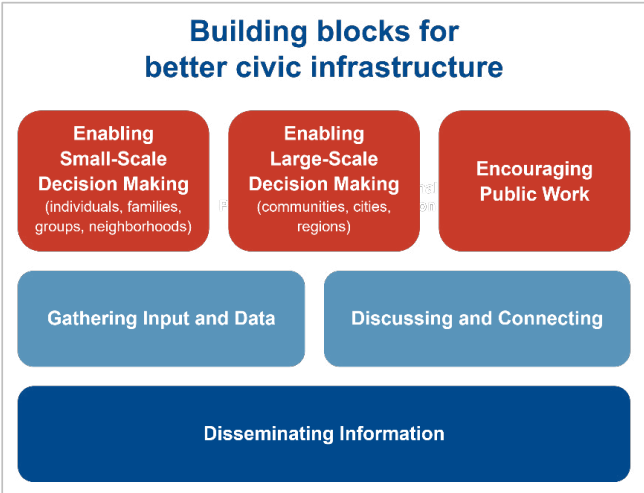


Chart from Nabatchi and Leighninger, Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy, Wiley 2015

IN COLORADO, AS IN MOST STATES:

Civic opportunities are often disconnected from one another – for example, most civic education programs don’t lead directly to opportunities to use those civic skills, opportunities to inform public policy on an issue are disconnected from chances to volunteer on that issue, and programs for young people are disconnected from programs for seniors.

Programs and initiatives that improve civic health have emerged separately, rather than as part of a plan – states and cities generally don’t take stock of their civic infrastructure and decide how to improve it.

The civic health of a state or city is rarely measured, particularly not in ways that would assess whether and how a range of civic opportunities is able to achieve a collective impact on civic health.

Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities*

** Adapted from a previous spectrum developed by the International Association for Public Participation*

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	CIRCULATING INFORMATION	DISCUSSING AND CONNECTING	GATHERING INITIAL INPUT	DELIBERATING AND RECOMMENDING	DECIDING AND ACTING
<i>What is happening</i>	Local governments, nonprofits, civic organizations, the media, and citizens themselves are making information available about key public issues. Some of this is raw data, provided in ways that make it easy to use and analyze. Some cities also use "citizen's academies" to give people a much closer look at how government works.	Citizens, local officials, city staff, and other stakeholders get regular opportunities to build relationships, discuss issues, and celebrate community.	Local governments, other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves reach out to gauge immediate public opinion on a particular issue or question.	Local governments, other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves recruit a wide range of people to address a public issue or decision. The sessions follow good group process guidelines. The participants talk about why the issue matters to them, consider a range of policy options, and make recommendations about what they think should be done.	Local officials and other decision-makers are making policy decisions, developing a plan, or creating a budget based (at least in part) on what they have heard from citizens and other stakeholders. Local officials, city staff, other organizations, and citizens themselves are taking action in a variety of ways to address key issues and opportunities.
<i>How it is happening</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online • media coverage • public meetings • citizen's academies • online land use visualization tools • serious games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • public meetings • block parties • festivals • workshops • online forums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surveys • polls • focus groups • listening sessions • public hearings • online crowd sourcing • Geographic Info. Systems (GIS) • online budget simulators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • small face-to-face discussions • online deliberations • large action forums or town hall meetings • deliberations that occur as part of existing meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individual volunteer activities • action teams and committees • changes made by organizations • policy decisions • strategic plans • comp plans • budgets

The [Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map](#) will provide one important tool for surveying the civic infrastructure of a state, city, or town. Produced by the Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League, the Map provides the first comprehensive look at the universe of organizations promoting healthy democracy in America. The dataset includes groups working on a wide range of priorities: service and volunteerism, civic education, voter engagement, civic media, deliberation and participation, electoral reform, organizing, bridge-building, and civic technology. The Map portal will allow people to view these organizations geographically (where they are), by network (how they're connected), and financially (how they're funded).

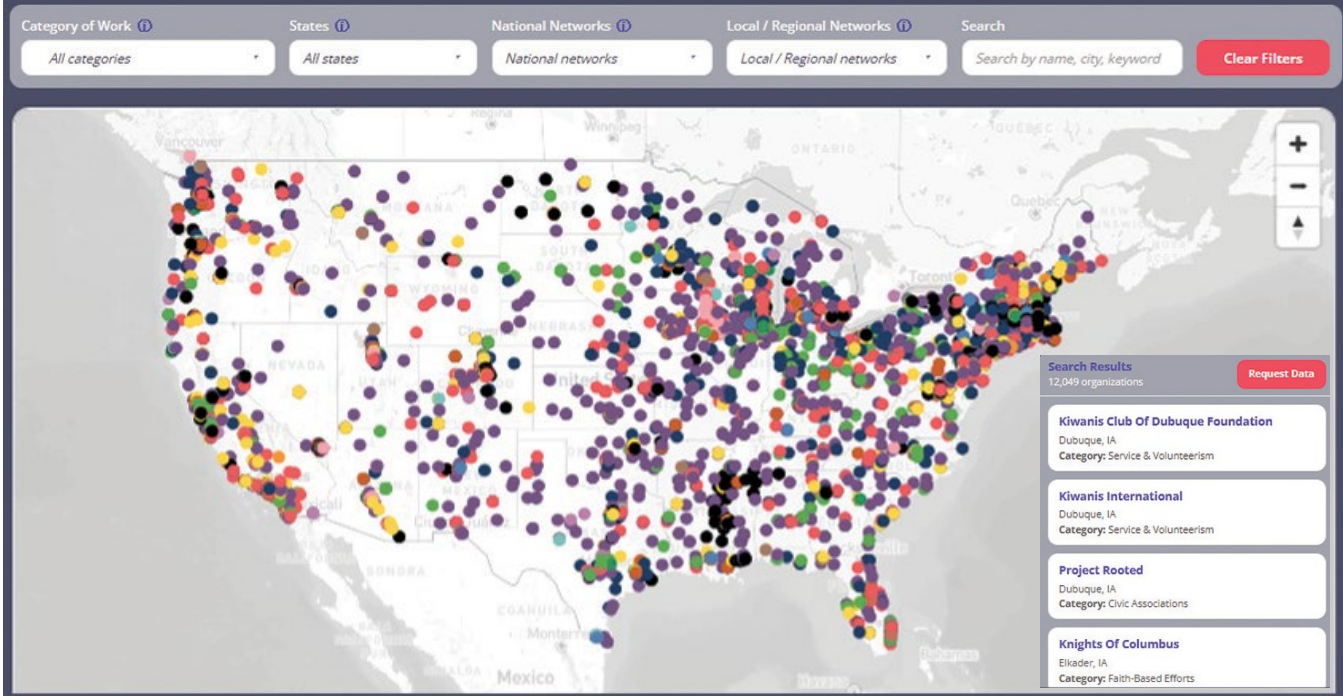
Explore the Healthy Democracy Ecosystem—Across All 50 States

The Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map makes visible—and connects—the organizations, funders, networks, and practitioners strengthening democracy across the country, highlighting the many groups working hard to meet today's challenges.

12,049 Groups Mapped

163 Networks and Coalitions

14 Categories of Work



In addition to looking at civic health nationally, from the top down, it also makes sense to look at it from the ground up, from the perspective of the individual citizen. What kinds of activities should be available to people? The two charts on the previous page offer different ways of thinking about that question: the first focuses on the activities, the second on how one public institution – local government – can support them.

But it should be clear from this guide that civic health is more than a governmental responsibility. Better civic health benefits every community member, every organization, and every leader. Governments, school systems, foundations, universities, business associations, libraries, and other institutions can all play key roles in improving and sustaining civic infrastructure, but no single group should dictate the plan or bear the whole burden of implementing it.

In helping people plan for better civic health, we should also be creative. A fairly common practice in land use planning and visioning is to invite participants to take photographs or draw pictures of places in their community that they value or that need upgrading. This same approach can be used to more broadly imagine the possibilities for civic infrastructure in communities.

Above all, the civic infrastructure of a place must reflect the needs and goals of its residents. There are no 'cookie-cutter' recipes for this work: every state, city, and town should develop ideas and plans that fit their own unique needs, assets, and goals – and their own creative vision of what kind of democracy they want.



Democracy
Innovation

Strengthening Civic Health in States Across the Country

Civic Health Matters

Civic health is the foundation of thriving communities, shaping how residents connect, trust institutions, and engage with their surroundings. Strong civic health leads to better physical health, higher employment, and greater resilience, while weak or unequal civic health deepens division and inequality. By strengthening civic infrastructure, communities can foster collaboration, overcome differences, and build a more inclusive and connected society.

Introducing State-Specific Civic Action Guides

The Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League is working to create civic action guides tailored to the unique needs of each state. These 30-50 page guides will be practical, user-friendly resources packed with actionable strategies to build and sustain strong civic infrastructure. Creation of statewide guides, which includes staffing, formatting, and travel, starts at \$40,000.

What's Included

- **Civic Health Assessment Tools** – Map the current state of civic health and identify key organizations working to strengthen democracy and social capital.
- **Attitudinal Research Tools** – Gain insights into citizens' preferences on how to enhance democracy and civic infrastructure.
- **Cross-Sector Leadership Groups** – Recommendations for creating local leadership groups, including engagement commissions and more.
- **Engagement Strategies** – Tools and strategies for engaging citizens in decision-making and problem-solving through through in-person deliberative processes, digital tools, hybrid strategies, sortitional processes like citizen assemblies, and participatory budgeting.
- **Recruitment and Communication Strategies** – Reach diverse groups of people and engage them meaningfully.
- **Cross-Sector Leadership Programs** – Create or strengthen citizen academies and local leadership programs.
- **Legal Framework Support** – Model ordinances and state laws to provide a supportive legal framework for public engagement;
- **Online Civic Infrastructure** – Assess and improve hyperlocal online networks and enhance digital civic life.
- **Youth Civic Leadership** – Foster and support youth leadership through civic education.
- **Sustaining Grassroots Groups** – Provide tools for sustaining and growing community groups like neighborhood associations, service clubs, and parent groups.



Our Commitment to Your State

We'll collaborate closely with state leaders and stakeholders to ensure that the content of your state's civic action guide reflects your unique needs and goals. Our work will include:

- Video calls and in-person meetings with key stakeholders.
- Tailored action steps that meet the specific needs of your state.

Email democracyinnovation@ncl.org to invest in the civic health of your state and help create a more resilient, engaged, and connected community.

