

Nebraskans Have Strong Social Connections, Weaker Political Engagement



Tuesday April 23 • By [Erin Andersen](#) | [Lincoln Journal Star](#)

Gavin Harsch loves his hometown of McCook -- so much so that two years after leaving to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, he continues to organize a free drive-in movie night for the community each summer.

Harsch was a high school senior when he started the drive-in movie night in 2013. It was his way of thanking McCook for his education and the opportunities. Now, he hopes to grow the event into a weekendlong celebration reminiscent of old-time community picnics and festivals. And after he graduates from UNL, Harsch said he will return to McCook to run the family farm.

“The connections I have made are too much to lose,” he said.

Harsch is not like most people his age. He's civic-minded, connected, dedicated and involved in his neighborhood, community and state.

Harsch joined the Nebraska Civic Health Partnership at a news conference Thursday as it released its first-ever civic health index -- measuring Nebraskans' connectedness, involvement and participation in their towns and government.

An outgrowth of the National Conference on Citizenship, the partnership is a collaborative effort of six Nebraska organizations: Nebraskans for Civic Reform, Nebraska Community Foundation, Nebraska Public Policy Center, UNO Service Learning Academy, UNL Center for Civic Engagement and Nebraska State Bar Foundation.

The index shows clear strengths, but also clear needs, said Adam Morfeld, executive director of Nebraskans for Civic Reform. Using data primarily collected from the 2012 and 2013 U.S. Census Bureau Population Surveys, the index found Nebraska ranks high among states for

family and community connections (seventh), trust of neighbors (11th) and confidence in its school systems (fifth).

Nebraska ranks in the middle or lower when it comes to voter registration (36th), voting (32nd) and talking with public officials (27th). The numbers are worst for young people, ages 18 to 24. Only 47 percent registered to vote in the 2012 election, and only 40.3 percent actually cast a ballot. The index found that the younger the person the least likely they were to contact public official.

And although Nebraskans are more civic-minded than the nation as a whole, the numbers are dropping -- fewer Nebraskans are volunteering, working with their neighbors, attending community meetings or donating to charities.

“We want to create a more modern, robust democracy for all of Nebraska,” Morfeld said.

Why is this so important?

Studies find that robust civic health results in resilient economies, representative and accountable government and higher social capital, according to the report. Simply put: people who feel connected, valued and involved are more invested in their communities.

“Civic health is something we all own together, and something that will create strong, vibrant and economically successful communities across the state,” Morfeld said.

Using the data, the NCHP created a five-step action plan:

- * Build upon the tradition connecting Nebraskans.
- * Use social media to connect people and projects.
- * Modernize the process for voter registration and voting.
- * Increase interaction between elected officials and constituents.
- * Make civic education a priority so it fosters civic action for students.

Much of this plan hinges on technology, specifically social media and how it can forge connections between generations, organizations and governments.

Julie Mason, an eighth-grader at Dawes Middle School, is active in an after-school robotics club. She’s heard the arguments that technology isolates, because people are always staring at a screen. Mason sees the opposite.

“Technology can bring people away from their screens. It can bring the outside into their world,” she said.

“I want to grow up in a place where technology is not considered a bad thing, and grow up in a world where technology can change things for the better.”

Faith Hutcherson, a sophomore at Lincoln East High School, has experienced firsthand how technology motivates young people and gives them a voice. As an intern for state Sen. Rick Kolowski of Omaha, she worked on a bill which would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to preregister to vote at the same time they got their driver's licenses.

Hutcherson spread the word at school. She saw how using Twitter increased the bill's followers from three to 53 in just three hours. And she saw how everyday people can have a voice and an impact.

“Everybody in high school wants to change the world,” Hutcherson said.

Civic involvement changes it from a dream to a reality.

Harsch echoed that sentiment.

“We as students have the capacity and can influence change in our communities,” he said.

To read the entire 2015 Nebraska Civic Health Index, visit nereform.org/nebraska-civic-health/.