

# Civic Health Update: Community Engagement and Political Involvement in Nebraska

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[By Kelsey Arends, Dr. Lisa Pytlik Zillig, and Dr. Mitchel Herian](#) / Prairie Fire

Developing muscle strength can be a tedious process. Generally it starts by realizing a weakness. At the beginning of training, a muscle can feel awkward or sore, but before long, the muscle is strong, the body is more capable and efficient, and it's difficult to remember life before the newfound strength.

Just like physical strength, civic life in Nebraska shows clear strengths, as well as areas that could use a metaphorical workout. Last month we introduced the topic of civic health, measured by indicators ranging from connecting with family and friends to having confidence in institutions to actions like volunteering and voting. Just as it is important for individuals to check up on their personal health, as a community it is important to check up on our civic health. That checkup comes in the form of the 2015 Nebraska Civic Health Index, which uses data from the US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey to document Nebraskans' tendency to participate in community and civic life.

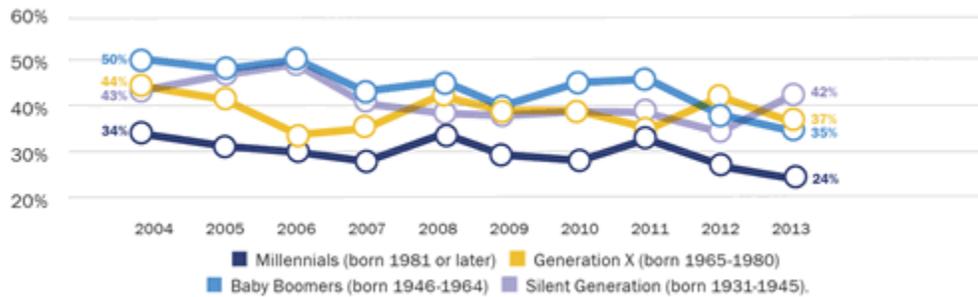
Last month we looked at the strengths of Nebraska communities. In general, the data show Nebraska enjoys particularly strong social connectedness and high confidence in public institutions. This month we look at areas of civic health where Nebraska falls to the middle of the road and even the back of the pack when compared to other states and the District of Columbia.

## Community Engagement

Many indicators of civic health measure how active Nebraskans are in their communities. Volunteering, donating to charitable organizations, working with neighbors, attending public meetings, and belonging to groups are all ways to engage in communities. Each of these activities is a muscle in the community engagement system and contributes to strong community health.

The current state of community engagement in Nebraska is neither one defined by strength nor weakness. On most indicators of community engagement, Nebraska is above average compared to other states and the District of Columbia but does not rank in the top ten nationally. Moreover, the data show that the youngest Nebraskans participate the least. This is an important weakness—in order for Nebraska to preserve its above-average strengths and develop outstanding civic health in other areas, young people must be involved now and into the future.

## Volunteering



In 2013, 32.8 percent of Nebraskans volunteered. This means two-thirds of Nebraskans did not indicate any volunteer activity. Volunteers invest critical social and economic resources in communities. Through volunteering, communities solve problems, improve and transform lives, and connect individuals. Research shows that volunteering influences physical health and is associated with lower mortality rates, particularly among older adults. It is associated with a greater sense of purpose, which influences mental health. Volunteering also builds social capital and developed networks of invested community members who contribute to the attractiveness of a community.

Volunteering provides significant economic benefits to communities. In 2013 the estimated value of an hour of volunteer service in Nebraska was \$20.13. That same year, Nebraskans served 58.5 million hours of volunteer work, totaling \$1.3 billion of service contributed to communities throughout the state.

Although volunteering rates in Nebraska have consistently been above the national average in the past decade (and in 2013 Nebraska was ranked eleventh), there are key demographics that, if activated to volunteer, would help to achieve higher levels of volunteerism across the state. While rates of volunteering have been decreasing among all age demographics in the past decade, Millennials (born 1981 or later) have consistently been volunteering the least. Developing a habit of service among young people could lead to decades of more invested volunteers.

## Charitable Giving

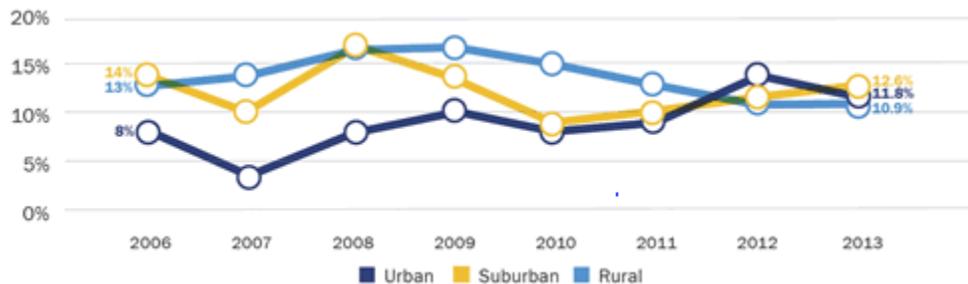
Charitable giving is a personal and powerful way Nebraskans contribute to tackling some of society's largest issues. In 2013, 54.5 percent of Nebraskans reported giving twenty-five dollars or more to nonprofit organizations, resulting in Nebraska ranking seventeenth in the nation in this type of giving. Giving to nonprofit organizations is important because such organizations are driven by a mission-based bottom line and contribute to communities across the state. In fact, one in eleven employees in Nebraska works for a nonprofit organization. These organizations provide services impacting human services, health, arts, culture and humanities, education, the environment, animals, religious organizations, and others.

## Working with Neighbors and Groups

AGE GROUP	WORKING WITH NEIGHBORS		GROUP PARTICIPATION		GROUP LEADERSHIP*		ATTENDED A PUBLIC MEETING	
	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
18-24	4.4%	7th	31.6%	7th	9.5%	6th	3.4%	7th
25-34	7.4%	6th	40.4%	6th	8.9%	7th	10.0%	5th
35-44	11.1%	4th	48.3%	2nd	17.2%	5th	<b>13.3%</b>	<b>1st</b>
45-54	9.0%	5th	45.5%	4th	19.3%	2nd	9.5%	6th
55-64	13.7%	2nd	47.8%	3rd	<b>19.4%</b>	<b>1st</b>	12.9%	2nd
65-74	<b>14.8%</b>	<b>1st</b>	45.5%	4th	17.5%	4th	12.6%	3rd
75+	13.7%	2nd	<b>54.2%</b>	<b>1st</b>	18.9%	3rd	10.8%	4th

Compared to the rest of the nation, Nebraskans do reasonably well in working with neighbors and participating in formal groups. In 2013, 10.3 percent of Nebraskans reported working with neighbors to fix or improve something in their community. This is above the national average of 7.6 percent and results in Nebraska ranking twelfth out of the fifty states and the District of Columbia. Also, 42.5 percent of Nebraskans report belonging to a formal group and 14.6 percent holding a leadership position in an organization. Both of these indicators are above the national averages of 36.3 percent and 9.7 percent, respectively (and correspond to rankings of fifteenth and ninth compared to other states and the District of Columbia). However, Nebraska’s numbers have been declining on these indicators: in 2011, 45.4 percent of Nebraskans belonged to at least one type of organization, while 16.4 percent had a leadership role.

### Attending Public Meetings



The lowest-performing community engagement indicator in Nebraska is that of attending a public meeting—in 2013 only 10.3 percent of Nebraskans participated in this sort of engagement, resulting in Nebraska being ranked twentieth nationally. Public meetings are defined as meetings where political issues are discussed; taking part in a march, rally, protest, or demonstration; or attending an event in support of a candidate or party. The most recent data shows that—although rural, suburban, and urban participation used to differ—recently Nebraskans have converged on similar levels of involvement in public meetings. This convergence reflects a dip in long-term engagement from rural communities, as well as a dip in

engagement from urban communities. Meanwhile, there has been a steady increase in recent years of the engagement of suburban communities. Nonetheless, Nebraskans in every community could engage more fully in public meetings.

## **How Can We Get Stronger?**

Communities can strengthen participation in these indicators by attracting more Nebraskans, particularly young Nebraskans, to community engagement events like volunteering and public meetings. Providing flexible ways of interacting at such meetings will allow more individuals of all generations to increase this type of engagement. Recent research shows that there is no such thing as a prototypical family structure today. Families are increasingly diverse in terms of which family members live in the same household, which family members work, and how many jobs they hold. The diversity of family and work structures sometimes makes it difficult for individuals to effectively participate in public meetings and necessitates multiple options for engagement.

Volunteering, attending community meetings, and even working with neighbors looks different today than in prior decades. Not only are community members increasingly accessible via social media, many go online to search for news, entertainment, and activities. Communities need to embrace cultural changes and adopt strategies to create inviting opportunities for twenty-first-century participation. This means putting in place technologies and messaging platforms that enable utilization of powerful online social media resources. These resources can then be used to target community members for civic activities. But this is just the first step.

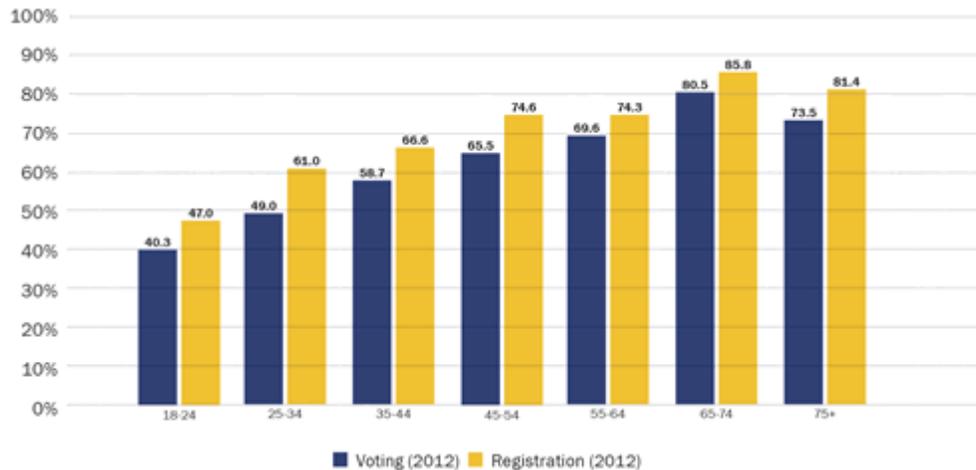
Successful communities will use new channels for engagement to create and design programs with twenty-first-century Nebraskans, not just for them. This includes using new and innovative strategies to encourage active participation of young and diverse groups, and then listening to what they have to say. The ultimate goal is to promote leadership, service, and transformational opportunities for emerging generations to create the communities of their dreams—communities that also will attract and retain young people for generations to come.

## **Political Involvement**

Political involvement is the category of civic health in which Nebraska shows the most concentrated weakness. Nebraskans who are involved in formal civic participation—like voting, registering to vote, and contacting public officials—are principally responsible for promoting democracy in the state and holding government accountable.

At the heart of a conversation about political engagement and representative democracy is the need to not only increase participation among Nebraskans as a whole but to engage traditionally marginalized community members. Specifically targeting Nebraskans who are less likely to engage will make Nebraska's government more representative of the broader population and also increase participation rates statewide.

## **Voting**



In the 2012 presidential election, 69.5 percent of Nebraskans eighteen and older were registered to vote and 61.6 percent actually turned out to the polls. Rates of both registration and voting were below the national average of 71.2 percent and 61.8 percent, resulting in the state ranking thirty-sixth and thirty-second in registration and voting, respectively.

From a ranking standpoint, Nebraska fared somewhat better in engagement in local elections. In 2013, 65 percent of Nebraskans reported that they “sometimes” or “always” vote in local elections, and the state ranked sixteenth compared to other states. Also, Nebraskans rank first in percentage of persons (42.9 percent) reporting that they “always” vote in local elections. Local elections are a great way to participate in direct democracy. Local elections involve a smaller set of voters and, therefore, individual votes have an important influence on selection of representatives for offices like mayor, school board, or state legislature.

## Contacting Public Officials

Holding government officials accountable post-election is critical to the civic health of a community. Interacting with elected officials is one of the most direct ways Nebraskans can hold representatives accountable and is a great way to participate in the political process. However, in 2013 only 12.2 percent of Nebraskans reported interacting with a public official, ranking twenty-seventh among the other states. In 2011 Nebraskans reported contacting government officials at a rate of 17.8 percent, suggesting that this form of participation may be in decline in Nebraska.

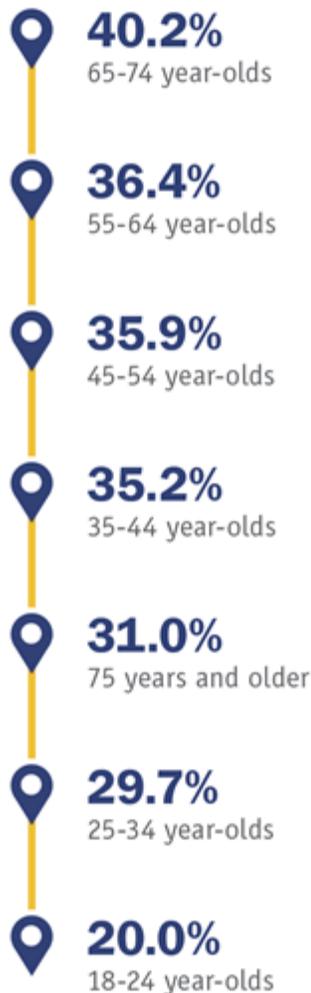
## Buying or Boycotting Goods or Services

Buying or boycotting products or services because of a social or political reason is a way to engage economically with political actors. Nebraska ranked thirty-second in this indicator in 2013, when 11.9 percent of individuals bought or boycotted products or services. This is even less than in 2011, when 13.9 percent of Nebraskans participated in this type of engagement. Nebraskans are the second least likely to buy or boycott in comparison to neighboring states Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

## Discussing Politics with Family and Friends

One of the more informal forms of engagement is discussing politics with family and friends. In 2013, 30.8 percent of Nebraskans talked about politics at least a few times a week. Nationally, Nebraskans rank fifteenth on this indicator. Once again, however, Nebraskans have fallen since 2011, when 34.1 percent of Nebraskans indicated they discussed politics at least a few times each week with family and friends.

### How Can We Get Stronger?



To strengthen statewide weaknesses in political involvement, the Nebraska Civic Health Partnership proposes three action steps targeting voting, interaction with public officials, and education that leads to civic action.

**Action Step: Increase voter registration and voting rates in both local and national elections, primarily in groups that are currently participating the least.** One step to strengthen political involvement is to involve more Nebraskans in the democratic process. By using modern processes and encouraging all eligible voters to register and vote in both local and national elections, Nebraska's rates of voter participation will grow healthier. This means following the trend of adopting and implementing modern processes of voter registration, like the Secretary of State's implementation of online voter registration coming this year. In order to

move the dial the most in Nebraska, we can target groups that have the most to improve. According to data in the 2015 Nebraska Civic Health Index, the youngest eligible voters in Nebraska are the least likely to vote. As a state, raising rates of voting and registration among all Nebraskans and particularly among the youngest voters will strengthen civic health.

**Action Step: Public officials should provide electronic and in-person means of connecting with other Nebraskans.** Just as family and individual schedules can be barriers to Nebraskans attending and participating in community engagement, those restrictions can limit their access to public officials. Being accessible online and using social media to promote in-person interaction will increase community members' ability to interact with public officials.

**Action Step: Provide civic education opportunities that engage all students with civic participation and supply them with the tools to continue to participate into the future.** Many indicators of civic health, especially those of political involvement and community engagement, require knowledge of the power of citizens in a democracy. The data show that educational attainment is a predictor of higher rates of participation in a number of indicators of civic health, suggesting education powerfully influences a person's willingness to engage in civic life. Providing civic education that leads to civic action in K–12 and higher education settings should provide civic education opportunities that engage all students with civic participation and supply them with the tools to continue to participate into the future. Nebraska has started to promote this kind of teaching and learning. In 2012 the state adopted new social studies standards that require civic action in some grade levels. Helping teachers implement meaningful civic action in and outside the classroom will help empower students to be civically active into the future. Nebraska schools and state leaders should continue to prioritize this type of active and participatory civic learning.

Nebraska's current state of civic health shows clear strengths in social connectedness and confidence in institutions. We also have areas we need to improve, particularly to strengthen community engagement and political involvement. Through exercising civic actions like the right to vote, investments through volunteering, voicing opinions by contacting public officials, and attending public meetings, civic health in the state will grow stronger.

*Find the full 2015 Nebraska Civic Health Index at [www.nereform.org/nebraska-civic-health](http://www.nereform.org/nebraska-civic-health).*

*The Nebraska Civic Health Partnership is dedicated to strengthening civic health throughout Nebraska. Contact partnership manager Kelsey Arends for ways to get involved: [kelsey.arends\[at\]nereform.org](mailto:kelsey.arends@nereform.org) or (402) 904-5191.*

*The Nebraska Civic Health Partnership is a group of nonprofits, foundations, and educational institutions spearheaded by Nebraskans for Civic Reform. The partnership is committed to strengthening civic health throughout the state of Nebraska through data-based action steps.*

*Learn more at [www.nereform.org](http://www.nereform.org).*

