

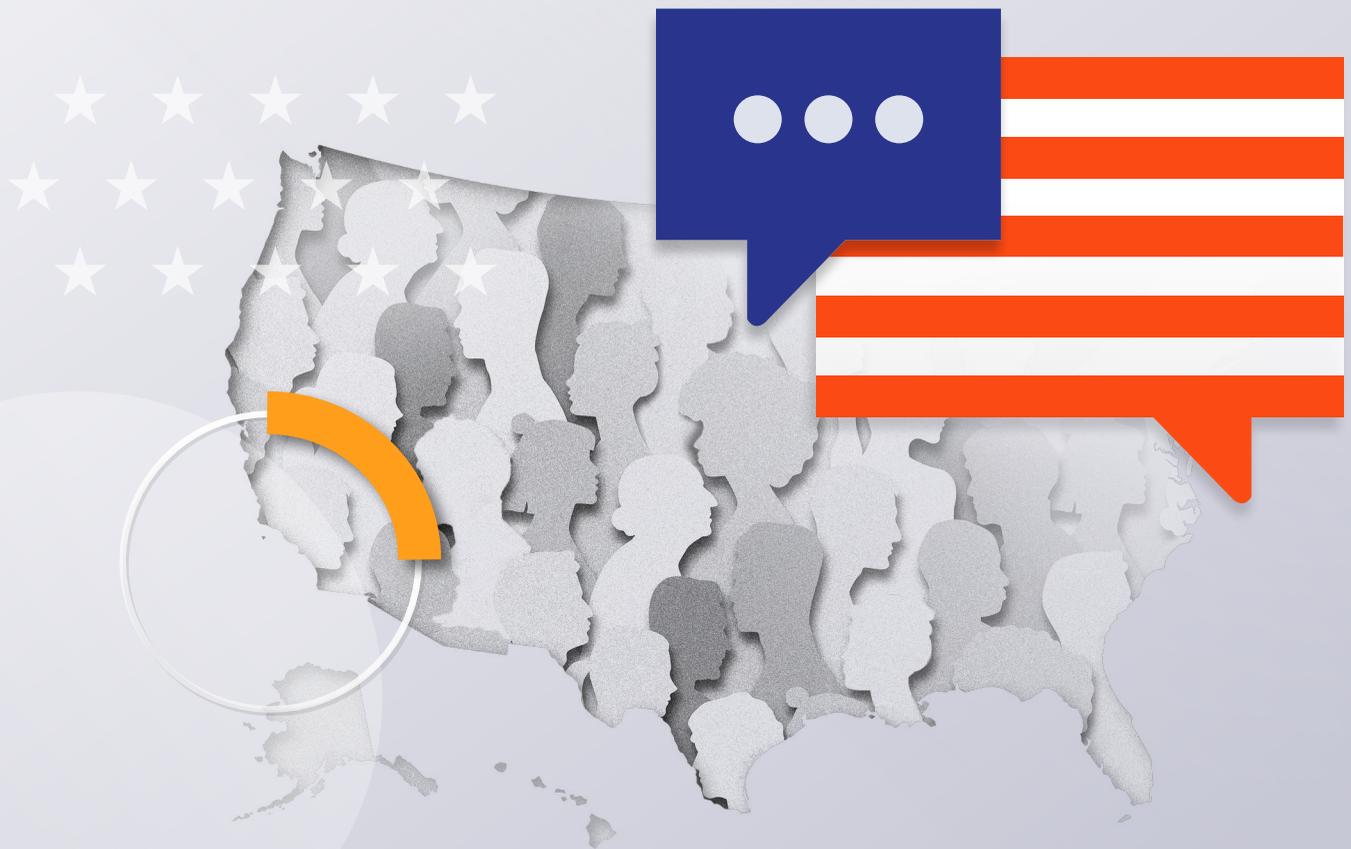
GALLUP®



Democracy for All Project

The People's Role in American Democracy

MARCH 2026



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Introduction

The Democracy for All Project, a collaboration between the Charles F. Kettering Foundation and Gallup, is the most extensive annual study of how Americans experience democracy. The [first report from the project](#) explored how Americans view democracy, both as an ideal and its current performance. This second report concentrates on the role of the American public in the democratic system. Both reports feature insights from a survey of more than 20,000 Americans conducted July 7-Aug. 21, 2025.

This second report finds that most Americans do not believe the people's role in the democratic process is working well. However, when people get involved in their community and have meaningful civic education, they feel more empowered to create change in the nation. Social media has become a common way for people to connect with democracy and their community, but its influence is mixed – supportive of civic involvement in some ways and problematic in others.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS REPORT:

- 1 Only 25% of U.S. adults say the people's role in the democratic process is working well. About one-third (35%) believe ordinary citizens have at least a moderate amount of power to create change in the nation, while nearly as many (33%) say they have very little or almost none.
- 2 A majority of Americans (61%) report paying at least a moderate level of attention to government and political matters. Three in 10 (31%) have actively participated in organizations or groups aimed at improving community conditions in the past year; another 36% indicate they haven't participated but have wanted to do so.
- 3 Most Americans (74%) report multiple barriers to getting involved in issues or causes they care about. Work or family obligations are the most common obstacle Americans cite for not getting involved in community affairs, but lack of awareness of how to participate and not being encouraged by others to do so rank nearly as high.
- 4 Heavy social media use is linked to more positive perceptions of representation and citizen power – but also to greater feelings of information overload and weaker endorsement of core democratic ideals.
- 5 Americans with more exposure to civic education – either formal (in school) or informal (from parents or other adults) – are more likely to believe in the power of ordinary citizens and to be civically involved, regardless of education level. This is especially the case if they have had substantial exposure to both formal and informal civic education.



Is Democracy Working?

Findings From the First Democracy for All Project Report

The [first report](#) on the Democracy for All Project dataset, released in November 2025, focused on how the public views American democracy as a whole.

Highlights from the first report include:

- Two-thirds of Americans agree that democracy is the best form of government.
- Most Americans share many fundamental democratic values, including that all citizens should have the right to vote and that elected leaders should attempt to compromise to get things done.
- Half of Americans say that U.S. democracy is currently performing poorly.
- No more than one-third say any of the various institutions, processes or systems that support U.S. democracy are performing well.
- Evaluations of U.S. democracy are strongly linked to people's assessments of their own financial situation.

The sections that follow examine Americans' views on the public's role in democracy and key insights for strengthening participation. Fully engaging in democratic life requires information about government and public affairs, a belief that one's actions can make a difference, opportunities to participate, and community involvement. All of these elements can be reinforced through civic education.





SECTION 1

Americans' Views of the People's Role in Democracy

Key Findings:

- Only a quarter of U.S. adults believe the people's role in the democratic process is working well.
- Americans divide evenly as to whether ordinary citizens have considerable power to create change in this country or very little power.
- While about a third of Americans say they have volunteered time to improve conditions in their community, another third say they haven't participated but have wanted to do so.

People can take part in democracy in numerous ways, including by voting, volunteering, and participating in local decision-making. It can also happen in many different forums, including in communities, schools, religious organizations, and clubs. This report focuses on citizen involvement in community affairs and aims to influence government action.

More U.S. adults view "the people's role" as working poorly rather than well, their opinions on citizen power to create change are split, and they are skeptical of the impact that citizen action beyond voting can have. While most express a desire to get involved in local affairs, most have not done so. Those who actively participate, however, are more positive about the impact that citizen involvement can have.

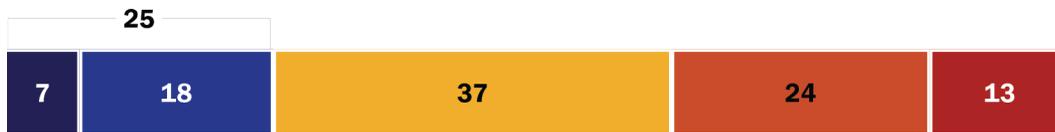
Americans Do Not See the People’s Role in the Democratic Process Performing Well

Twenty-five percent of U.S. adults believe that “the people’s role in the democratic process” is working either very well or moderately well, while more, 37%, say it is working very poorly or moderately poorly. The remainder choose the middle option, saying it is doing “okay.”

FIGURE 1

How Americans Believe the People’s Role in the Democratic Process Is Performing

■ % Very well ■ % Moderately well ■ % Okay ■ % Moderately poorly ■ % Very poorly



Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of DK/REF responses.

The 25% of Americans evaluating the people’s role in the democratic process positively is about average compared with their ratings of other democratic institutions (e.g., Congress, the Supreme Court, the criminal justice system) and democratic processes (e.g., separation of powers, election administration, equal treatment under the law), as reported in the [first Kettering Foundation-Gallup *Democracy for All* report](#). Americans rate the performance of all of the democratic institutions and processes included in the survey negatively.

Americans Are Split in Their Views of Citizen Power in Democracy

Democracy depends on citizens having a meaningful say in the decisions that shape their community and country. For the system to endure, it is also important that Americans believe their voice matters. However, only about a third think this is the case, saying that ordinary citizens have a great deal (15%) or moderate amount (20%) of power to create change in our nation, with 31% saying they have some power and 33% saying they have either very little or almost none.

FIGURE 2

How Much Power Do Americans Believe Ordinary Citizens Have to Create Change in Our Nation?

■ % A great deal ■ % A moderate amount ■ % Some ■ % Very little ■ % Almost none

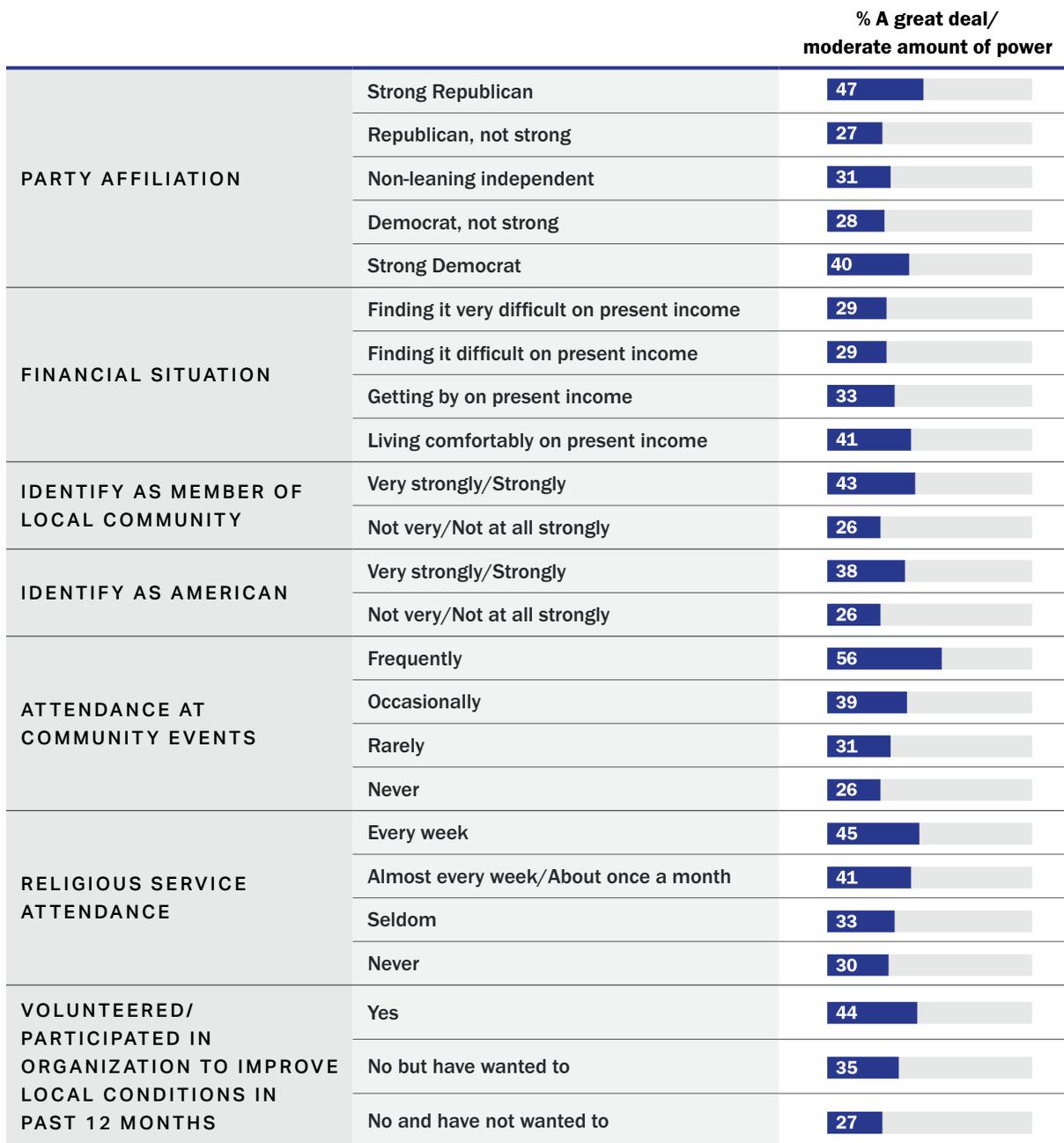


Note: Values shown may not total 100% due to rounding and exclusion of DK/REF responses.

Black and Hispanic Americans are somewhat more likely than those from other racial/ethnic backgrounds to see citizens as having considerable power. Otherwise, perceptions of citizens’ democratic power don’t tend to vary much by demographic group, including by age, gender and educational attainment.

There tend to be larger subgroup differences according to people’s attitudes, behaviors or personal situations. Specifically, people who have a strong connection to their community, who identify strongly with a political party, or who are doing well financially are more likely to hold positive views of citizen power.

FIGURE 3
Perceptions of Citizen Power to Create Change in Our Nation, by Subgroup



Americans Believe Some Methods of Participation Are More Effective Than Others

Americans have mixed views on the effectiveness of various forms of participation in influencing government action. Most (81%) see voting as moderately or very effective, and majorities see campaigning (61%) and attending town hall meetings (60%) the same way. Americans are somewhat less confident in other actions, like contacting elected officials, protests and demonstrations, and donating money to candidates or causes.

FIGURE 4
Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Civic Actions

How effective do you think each of the following forms of participation can be in influencing government action?

	% Very effective	% Very/Moderately effective
Voting	44	81
Campaigning for political candidates or issues	14	61
Attending town hall meetings	15	60
Donating money to candidates or causes	14	54
Nonviolent protests and demonstrations	15	52
Contacting elected officials by letter, email or phone	12	50

Perceptions of what constitutes effective action vary significantly by age, education, income and political affiliation. Younger adults are less likely than older adults to see voting (74% of those aged 18 to 29 vs. 89% of those aged 65 and older) and contacting elected officials (45% vs. 57%) as effective means of participation but are slightly more likely to say protests and demonstrations are effective (58% vs. 49%).

Political independents, those without a four-year college education, and those who are finding it difficult or very difficult to get by on their present income are less likely than their peers to see these three methods of civic participation as being effective.

As might be expected, nonvoting Americans, defined here as those not registered to vote, express substantially less confidence than registered voters in the effectiveness of core political activities such as voting, campaigning and contacting elected officials. However, they share with registered voters a relatively negative view of ordinary citizens’ ability to create change in the nation. Getting nonvoters involved in democracy in some way may help to break a cycle that reinforces their pessimism about civic matters.

FIGURE 5
Perceptions of Participation, by Voter Registration

How effective do you think each of the following forms of participation can be in influencing government action?

% Very/Moderately effective

	Registered to vote	Not registered
Voting	84	59
Campaigning for political candidates or issues	63	48
Attending town hall meetings	61	46
Donating money to candidates or causes	55	45
Nonviolent protests and demonstrations	53	48
Contacting elected officials by letter, email or phone	50	38

FIGURE 6
Perceptions of Citizen Power, by Voter Registration

How much power do ordinary citizens have to create change in our nation?

% A great deal/moderate amount



Volunteering and Community Involvement Tied to More Positive Views of Democracy

Outside of attempts to influence elected officials, democracy can involve individual or collective action to address problems or conditions in one’s local community. Thirty-one percent of Americans report having volunteered or participated in organizations or groups designed to improve conditions in their community in the past 12 months. Another 36% say they have not volunteered but have wanted to, while 32% say they have not participated and have not wanted to.

Higher education is a strong predictor of volunteering (43% of those with a four-year degree vs. 25% of those without a college degree have volunteered), as is financial wellbeing (41% of those living comfortably, 29% of those getting by, 23% of those finding it difficult to get by, and 17% of those finding it very difficult to get by have volunteered).

Among those who have not volunteered, larger proportions of young adults – nearly half – say they have wanted to. In contrast, older adults who haven’t volunteered are more likely to say they have not wanted to. The percentages of people who do volunteer are similar by age.

FIGURE 7
Volunteer Participation and Desire, by Age, Education and Voter Registration

		% Have volunteered	% Have not volunteered but have wanted to	% Have not volunteered and have not wanted to
OVERALL	U.S. adults	31	36	32
EDUCATION	College graduate	43	32	24
	Not a college graduate	25	38	36
AGE	18-29 years	30	46	23
	30-49 years	35	38	27
	50-64 years	31	34	35
	65+ years	28	26	46
VOTER REGISTRATION	Registered to vote	33	35	31
	Not registered	17	41	42

Other forms of community involvement beyond volunteerism have strong relationships with positive views of democracy and citizen power. Slightly more than half of Americans say they frequently (8%) or occasionally (43%) attend community events such as festivals, town halls and arts performances.

Attending community events is one of the strongest predictors of whether people think ordinary citizens can create change in a democracy.

Fifty-six percent of U.S. adults who frequently attend community events view ordinary citizens as powerful, compared with 26% who never attend local events.

Those who volunteer, express a strong attachment to their local community, believe ordinary citizens have the power to create change, and frequently attend community events are much more inclined than those who don’t to agree that democracy is the best form of government and to say that U.S. democracy is performing well right now. While it’s not clear whether these beliefs and activities lead to community involvement or result from it, fostering these attitudes and behaviors could be a promising avenue for strengthening democratic commitment.

FIGURE 8
Perceptions of Democracy Linked to Community Involvement and Beliefs

		% Agree democracy is the best form of government	% Think U.S. democracy is doing very/moderately well
ATTENDANCE AT COMMUNITY EVENTS	Frequently	76	37
	Occasionally	70	25
	Rarely	65	21
	Never	58	18
VOLUNTEERED PAST 12 MONTHS	Yes	74	30
	No but have wanted to	64	18
	No and have not wanted to	63	23
IDENTIFY AS MEMBER OF LOCAL COMMUNITY	Very strongly/Strongly	72	30
	Not very strongly/Not at all strongly	60	15
BELIEF IN HOW MUCH POWER ORDINARY CITIZENS HAVE TO CREATE CHANGE	A great deal/moderate amount	72	37
	Some	66	20
	Very little	65	14
	Almost none	56	9



SECTION 2

Barriers to Community Involvement

Key Findings:

- Work or family obligations are the most common obstacle Americans give for not getting involved in community affairs, but lack of awareness of how to participate and not being encouraged by others rank nearly as high.
- Most Americans (74%) report multiple barriers to getting involved in issues or causes they care about. Barriers to participation are even greater among Americans who are detached from their community or the political system and are struggling financially.

Community involvement in the form of volunteering, attending community events or simply having a strong attachment to one's community is associated with having positive views of citizen power. With more than a third of U.S. adults expressing a desire to get involved in their community but not having done so, the question is how to get those people involved. This section shows that many Americans report barriers to community involvement and explores ways those barriers may be overcome.

Most Americans Face Significant Obstacles to Civic Involvement

The survey asked people whether they face each of nine possible obstacles to civic participation. Of these, work or family obligations are most often mentioned, by 47% of U.S. adults. However, nearly as many report that they have not been invited or encouraged to participate (43%), are unsure how to get involved (42%), or don’t know enough about the issues (42%). About one in three say they feel unwelcome or out of place when participating, and 38% do not believe their participation will make a difference.

Among the subset of U.S. adults who haven’t volunteered but say they would like to, a majority say they are unsure how to get involved (54%) or haven’t been asked to (51%). These factors are on par with work and family obligations (52%) as the leading barriers preventing these would-be volunteers from engaging in the community. Demographically, would-be volunteers tend to be younger but also lower-income, Black or Hispanic.

FIGURE 9

Perceived Barriers to Involvement

Do any of the following prevent you from getting involved in activities that help support issues or causes you care about?

	% Yes, among U.S. adults	% Yes, among those who have not volunteered but have wanted to
Your work or family obligations	47	52
You have not been invited or encouraged to participate	43	51
You are unsure how to get involved	42	54
Not knowing enough about the issues	42	48
You have no desire to get involved	42	33
You don’t believe it will make a difference	38	40
Your physical or mental health	37	43
Feeling unwelcome or out of place when participating	34	41
You fear judgment or retaliation from others	29	35

More generally, young adults (aged 18 to 29) are more likely to report facing each of the nine barriers to participation measured in the survey, except for not having a desire to get involved in supporting issues or causes they care about. This is consistent with young adults being the subgroup most inclined to say they haven’t volunteered but have wanted to.

Most Americans report facing at least some barriers to participation, with just 13% listing no barriers to getting involved. In contrast, three-quarters report two or more barriers, including 48% who report four or more obstacles to participation.

Some groups face greater challenges to involvement. Financial situation shows the largest divide, with lower-income individuals and those who are finding it difficult or very difficult to get by reporting far more barriers than those with greater financial resources. Those with poorer life evaluations are more likely to report barriers to civic involvement as well.

FIGURE 10

Subgroups in Which Participation Barriers Are Associated With Lower Rates of Community Participation

		% With four or more barriers to participation	% Have volunteered	% Frequently/ Occasionally attend community events
OVERALL	U.S. adults	48	31	51
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME	Less than \$36,000	54	20	35
	\$36,000 to less than \$60,000	49	24	46
	\$60,000 to less than \$120,000	47	32	54
	\$120,000 or more	45	42	60
FINANCIAL SITUATION	Finding it very difficult on present income	67	17	32
	Finding it difficult on present income	59	23	43
	Getting by on present income	50	29	49
	Living comfortably on present income	37	41	59
OVERALL LIFE EVALUATION	Negative/"Suffering"	63	16	27
	Neutral/"Struggling"	55	26	45
	Positive/"Thriving"	38	40	60
PARTISANSHIP STRENGTH	Strong partisan	46	36	56
	Weak partisan	56	28	47
IDENTIFY AS MEMBER OF LOCAL COMMUNITY	Very strongly/Strongly	39	42	63
	Not very/Not at all strongly	60	18	35
IDENTIFY AS AMERICAN	Very strongly/Strongly	44	32	52
	Not very/Not at all strongly	61	27	43
HOW OFTEN FEEL LONELY	Always/Often	74	26	40
	Sometimes	57	29	51
	Rarely/Never	32	36	54

Some subgroups report facing multiple barriers to participation yet volunteer and attend community events at rates comparable to — or even higher than — other U.S. adults.

It’s unclear whether these people are successfully overcoming the barriers they face or simply finding opportunities to participate in areas where barriers are minimal, while still encountering obstacles to other activities they would like to pursue.

Adults under age 30, LGBT adults, and those who are concerned about crime or violence in their local community are among the groups who report significant barriers to participation yet are involved in their community at similar rates to other people. Individuals facing these barriers are also more likely to report feeling targeted or excluded because of their race, gender or another personal characteristic. Feeling targeted is strongly associated with citing a greater number of barriers to participation but makes little difference in how often someone volunteers or attends community events.

FIGURE 11

Subgroups in Which Participation Barriers Are Not Associated With Lower Rates of Community Participation

		% With four or more barriers to participation	% Have volunteered	% Frequently/Occasionally attend community events
AGE	18-29 years	67	30	47
	30-49 years	53	35	56
	50-64 years	42	31	52
	65+ years	30	28	47
LGBT STATUS	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender	66	31	52
CONCERNED ABOUT CRIME/VIOLENCE WHERE YOU LIVE	Very/Moderately concerned	58	32	52
	Not very/Not concerned	43	31	49
FEEL TARGETED/ EXCLUDED DUE TO RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY OR OTHER CHARACTERISTIC	Yes	73	36	52
	No	42	30	51

Fostering Community Ties Can Promote Citizen Involvement

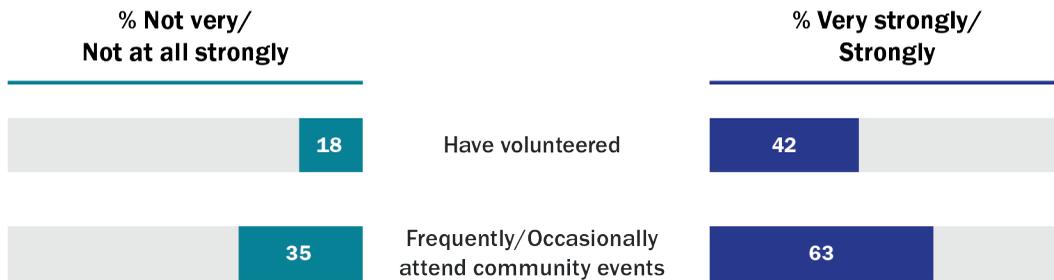
Stronger community ties appear to lessen barriers to community involvement. Participation in local activities is much higher among the 56% of Americans who identify strongly (40%) or very strongly (16%) with their local community compared with the 44% who do not.

Those with a strong community attachment are over twice as likely to volunteer as those without a strong attachment and nearly twice as likely to attend community events.

FIGURE 12

Volunteer Participation and Civic Involvement, by Community Attachment

How strongly do you identify as ... a member of your local community?



Importantly, participation in local activities is strongly correlated with greater attachment to the community and may help unlock a positive cycle of engagement that reinforces social connection and strengthens democracy.



SECTION 3

Information Patterns Linked to Both Civic Involvement and Overload

Key Findings:

- A majority of Americans (61%) say they pay a moderate amount or great deal of attention to government and political issues.
- Most Americans (77%) view family, friends and neighbors as important sources of information on issues that matter to them, while fewer place similar trust in local leaders.
- Heavy social media users report feeling more empowered and civically effective, yet they are less likely to agree that democracy is the best form of government and tend to hold more extreme beliefs.
- Social media users experience higher levels of information overload, which is associated with less confidence in participating in democratic processes.

As detailed in previous sections of this report, community involvement is a vital way that Americans actively shape democracy. It is strongly linked to feelings of empowerment, including confidence in the ability of everyday citizens to drive change in the nation.

These attitudes are also evident among Americans who stay attuned to government and political matters and rely on local social networks for information on issues that matter to them. However, when information feels overwhelming, it can hinder civic involvement – a pattern more common among heavy social media users.

Most Americans Pay Attention to Civic Matters – but Some Disconnect

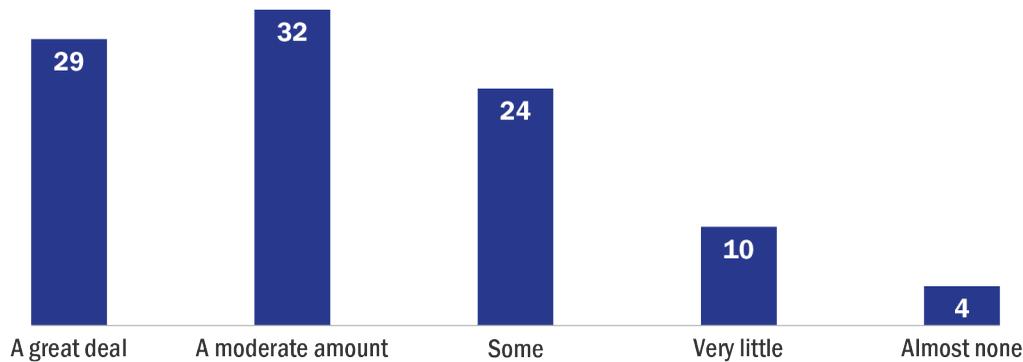
Six in 10 Americans say they pay a great deal (29%) or moderate amount (32%) of attention to government and political matters. Another 24% report paying some attention, while 14% say they pay very little or almost none.

FIGURE 13

Public Attention to Government and Politics

How much attention do you pay to government and political matters?

% Selected

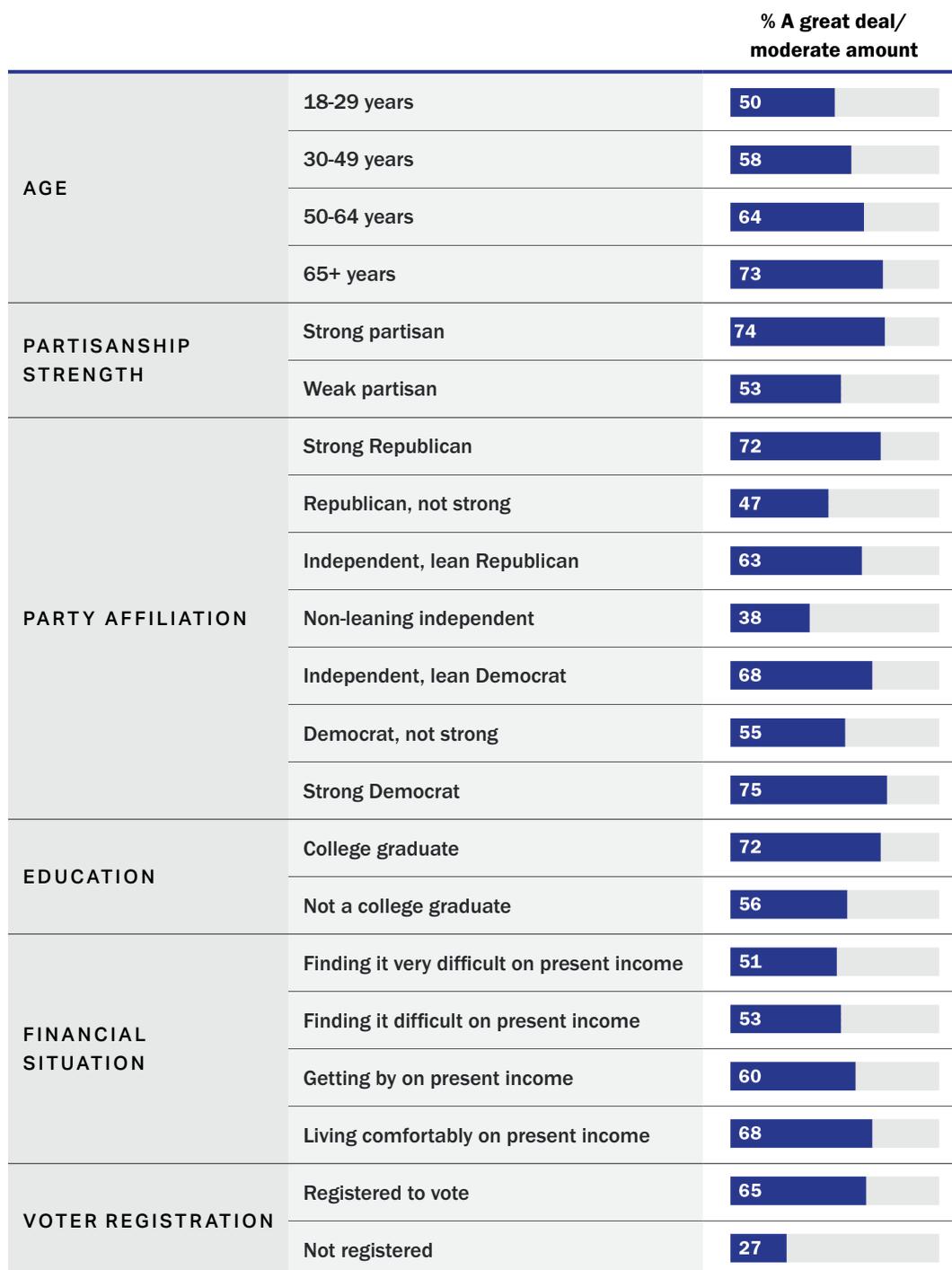


Yet, awareness gaps related to people's economic and other life circumstances are also evident. For example, Americans with lower levels of educational attainment and those struggling financially are less likely to report paying at least a moderate amount of attention to government and political matters. Age differences are also stark: Just 50% of young adults aged 18 to 29 say they pay a moderate amount or great deal of attention, compared with 73% of those aged 65 and older.

Strong partisanship, regardless of whether a person identifies as a Republican or Democrat, is also linked to staying informed. Americans who strongly identify with either the Republican or Democratic Party are substantially more likely to pay attention (74%) than those who are not strong partisans (53%), while non-leaning independents are the least likely to follow government and political matters (38%).

FIGURE 14
Demographic Differences in Political Attention

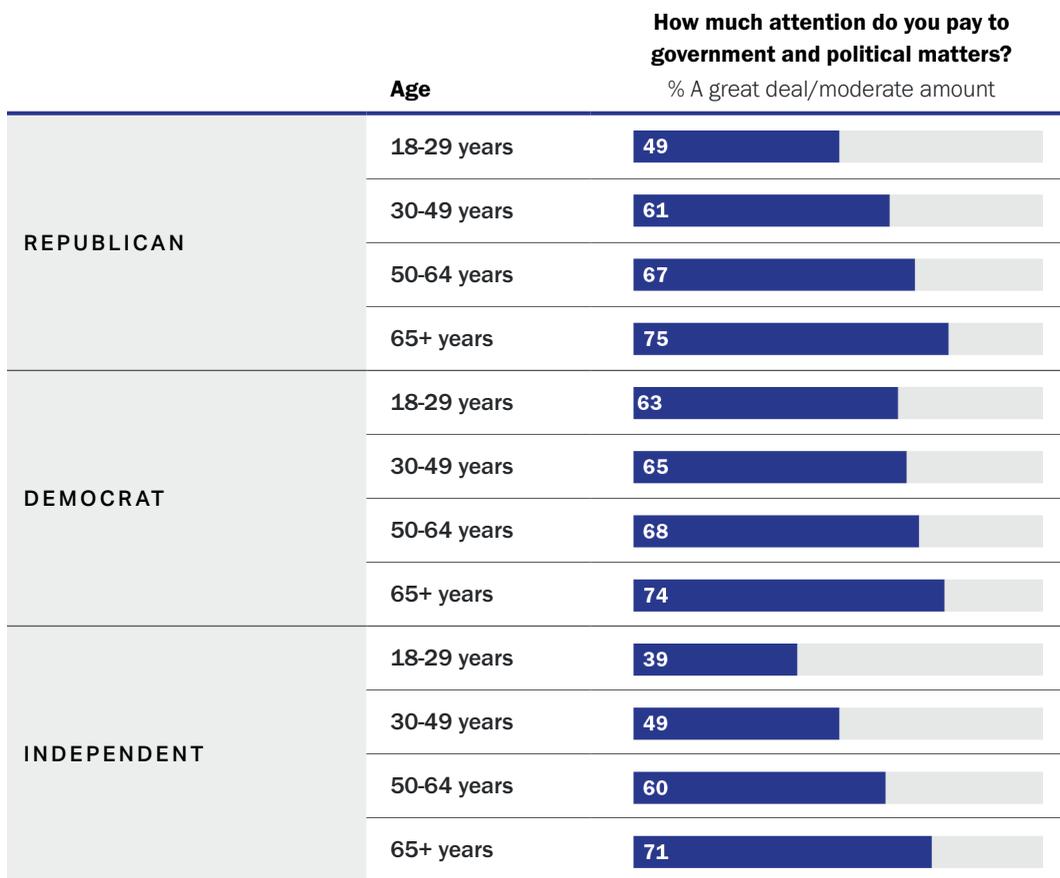
How much attention do you pay to government and political matters?



Age differences in attention to government and political matters are seen among all party groups but are especially pronounced among Republicans and independents. Older adults in all party groups pay similar amounts of attention, while substantial gaps are evident among adults aged 18 to 29, with younger Democrats (63%) more likely than younger Republicans (49%) and independents (39%) to report paying attention.

Gallup trends indicate that paying less attention to political matters is common among younger adults. However, once U.S. adults reach middle age, their attention levels tend to increase, suggesting that attention to civic matters is influenced by life stage.

FIGURE 15
Political Attention, by Age and Party Affiliation



Critical Links Between Staying Informed and Staying Engaged

When Americans follow government and political matters closely, they’re more likely to feel they have real opportunities to participate in democracy. Those who pay at least a moderate amount of attention express a stronger belief in the power of ordinary citizens, greater awareness of opportunities to voice concerns, and greater involvement in efforts to improve their local community. Attentive Americans are also significantly more likely to feel comfortable expressing political opinions (58%) compared with those who pay only some attention (44%) or very little to none (37%), underscoring the critical role of information in sustaining civic discourse.

In contrast, inattentiveness to government and political matters often reflects a broader pattern of democratic disengagement. More than half of Americans (53%) who pay little or no attention say they have no desire to get involved in activities that help support causes or issues they care about, compared with 37% of those who pay at least a moderate amount of attention. Support for democracy is also markedly lower among the inattentive group: Only 46% agree that democracy is the best form of government, nearly 30 percentage points below the 75% of those who follow government and political matters closely.

FIGURE 16

Democratic Attitudes and Behaviors, by Level of Political Attention

	How much attention do you pay to government or political matters?		
	Very little/ Almost none	Some	A great deal/ moderate amount
How much power do ordinary citizens have to create change in our nation? (% A great deal/moderate amount)	26	25	41
If I had a concern, I know how to share it with my elected officials (local, state and federal). (% Strongly agree/Agree)	32	41	65
I would feel comfortable openly expressing my opinions about the government and laws in this country, even if they are unpopular or controversial. (% Strongly agree/Agree)	37	44	58
In the past 12 months, have you volunteered or actively participated in organizations or groups that are designed to improve conditions in your community? (% Yes)	21	22	38
Democracy is the best form of government. (% Strongly agree/Agree)	46	58	75

The Promise and Perils of Social Media for Civic Life

Social media offers unprecedented access to information and networking, creating new opportunities to raise awareness, engage in dialogue, and mobilize individuals for causes, protests or votes. These platforms allow users to share ideas instantly, connect with like-minded communities, and amplify messages that might otherwise remain localized or unheard. By lowering barriers to participation and providing real-time channels for organizing, social media can transform how citizens interact with democratic processes. Many of these benefits are evident among Americans who regularly use social media.

For example, Americans who spend more time on social media are more likely to feel that their voices matter. Forty-two percent of heavy social media users (those averaging five or more hours daily) agree that the experiences and beliefs of people like them are valued and respected, compared with 31% of non-users and 33% of minimal users (less than an hour a day). Heavy social media users are also twice as likely as non-users to believe the government is sensitive to the interests of people like them when making decisions (31% vs. 15%, respectively).

FIGURE 17
Social Media Usage Linked to Feeling Valued and Represented

	On average, how much time PER DAY do you spend actively using social media?				
	Don't use social media	<1 hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5+ hours
The experiences and beliefs of people like me are valued and respected by other people in this country. (% Strongly agree/Agree)	31	33	34	38	42
Government is sensitive to the interests of people like me when making decisions. (% Strongly agree/Agree)	15	18	19	26	31

Americans who spend more time on social media also tend to feel more empowered and optimistic about civic participation. Among those who do not use social media, 30% believe ordinary citizens have a great deal or moderate amount of power to create change in the nation. This figure rises steadily among more frequent users, reaching 44% among those who spend five or more hours per day on social platforms, a pattern that holds consistently across all age groups.

Heavy social media use is linked to stronger beliefs in the power of civic participation to shape government action. For example, 60% of heavy users (five or more hours daily) say nonviolent protests are moderately or very effective, compared with 45% of non-users. Similar patterns emerge for campaigning (66% vs. 55%, respectively), donating to candidates or causes (59% vs. 49%), and attending town hall meetings (61% vs. 52%).

FIGURE 18
Social Media Usage Linked to Perceptions of Civic Efficacy

		On average, how much time PER DAY do you spend actively using social media?				
		Don't use social media	<1 hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5+ hours
How much power do ordinary citizens have to create change in our nation? (% A great deal/moderate amount)		30	30	34	40	44
How effective do you think each of the following forms of participation can be in influencing government action? (% Very/Moderately effective)	Nonviolent protests and demonstrations	45	46	52	57	60
	Campaigning for political candidates or issues	55	58	62	65	66
	Donating money to candidates or causes	49	50	53	58	59
	Attending town hall meetings	52	56	59	64	61

Heavy social media users report similar – and in some cases, slightly higher – rates of community involvement compared with light users, including attending local events and volunteering. They also view local social connections such as friends, family, neighbors and community leaders as important sources of information on issues that matter to them.

Overall, the evidence paints a positive picture of democratic engagement among even the heaviest social media users – but it also reveals a paradox.

Although Americans who use social media more frequently feel more valued, represented and empowered to create change, they are less likely to agree that democracy is the best form of government.

This gap is particularly pronounced among political independents. A majority of all heavy social media users (57%) still believe democracy is the best form of government, but that percentage falls to 39% among political independents who use social media the most.

FIGURE 19
Perceptions of Democracy, by Daily Social Media Usage

Democracy is the best form of government.

% Strongly agree/Agree

	Don't use social media	Social media use (hours per day)			
		<1 hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5+ hours
U.S. adults	72	73	68	62	57
Republicans	75	75	69	65	66
Democrats	80	80	77	70	67
Independents	64	61	59	50	39

Social Media Usage Linked to Extreme Beliefs

Americans who spend more time on social media are more likely to endorse views that diverge from democratic norms. For example, among non-users, 14% say political leaders should stick to their beliefs even if little gets done; that figure rises to 24% among those on social platforms for five or more hours daily. Similarly, acceptance of political violence also increases sharply, from 8% among non-users to 22% among heavy users, while openness to government influence over news reporting rises from 12% to 32% and support for expanding presidential power grows from 17% to 30%.

FIGURE 20
Personal Beliefs, by Social Media Usage

Percentage who believe ...	Social media use (hours per day)				
	Don't use social media	<1 hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5+ hours
Political leaders should stick to their beliefs and avoid compromise even if little gets done.	14	16	17	20	24
I find it hard to get along well with people who do not share my beliefs and opinions.	20	21	24	28	29
“Facts” are just opinions and points of view.	9	7	9	13	16
It is sometimes okay for people to use violence as a way to achieve a political goal.	8	9	15	21	22
Wealthy individuals and businesses should be able to use their power to advance political candidates and causes they support.	12	13	15	19	22

Percentage who strongly agree/agree ...	Social media use (hours per day)				
	Don't use social media	<1 hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5+ hours
Every citizen should have the right to vote, even if they are uninformed or hold radical views.	78	80	78	73	69
The news media should take more direction from the government when reporting the news.	12	12	17	24	32
More power should be given to presidents and the executive branch to make the government more responsive, even if I often disagree with the president’s agenda.	17	14	19	25	30

Information Overload Can Be a Hurdle to Civic Involvement

While technological advancements offer Americans easy access to information about current events and opportunities to engage more actively in public debates, they also carry risks. In addition to exposing more people to viewpoints that oppose widely held democratic norms, the sheer volume of content can lead to information overload.

Roughly one in five adults (19%) report feeling overloaded by information frequently, while another 41% say they occasionally feel this way. Younger adults are particularly affected, with 27% saying they frequently feel overloaded.

FIGURE 21

Information Overload, by Age

How often do you feel overloaded by information?

	U.S. adults	18-29 years	30-49 years	50-64 years	65+ years
% Frequently	19	27	23	17	8
% Occasionally	41	48	44	41	33
% Rarely	30	21	26	32	41
% Never	9	4	7	10	17

When the volume of information becomes overwhelming, it can undermine the usual benefits of being well-informed. For example, even among those who report being attentive to government and political matters, those who report that they frequently feel overloaded by information are less confident in expressing political opinions and more likely to report that feeling uninformed prevents them from participating in causes they care about.

FIGURE 22

Civic Attitudes, by Frequency of Information Overload

Among those who pay a moderate or great deal of attention to government and political matters: *How often do you feel overloaded by information?*

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
If I had a concern, I know how to share it with my elected officials (local, state and federal). (% Strongly agree/Agree)	72	67	64	58
People like me can effectively share their opinions and experiences with public officials (local, state and federal). (% Strongly agree/Agree)	64	60	55	46
I would feel comfortable openly expressing my opinions about the government and laws in this country, even if they are unpopular or controversial. (% Strongly agree/Agree)	68	63	56	50
Do any of the following prevent you from getting involved in activities that help support issues or causes you care about? Not knowing enough about the issues (% Yes)	14	30	40	44
Democracy is the best form of government. (% Strongly agree/Agree)	80	78	74	70

Americans who use social media more frequently are substantially more likely to report feeling overloaded by information. However, people's reports of feeling overloaded are the same regardless of how closely they pay attention to politics, how many local information sources they rely on, or how varied the perspectives are in the information they consume. These patterns suggest that frequent social media use is linked to information overload in ways that greater reliance on other information sources is not.

Community Connections as Information Networks

Although many Americans turn to news outlets and social media for information, they also view people in their community as important sources of information when it comes to issues that matter most to them.

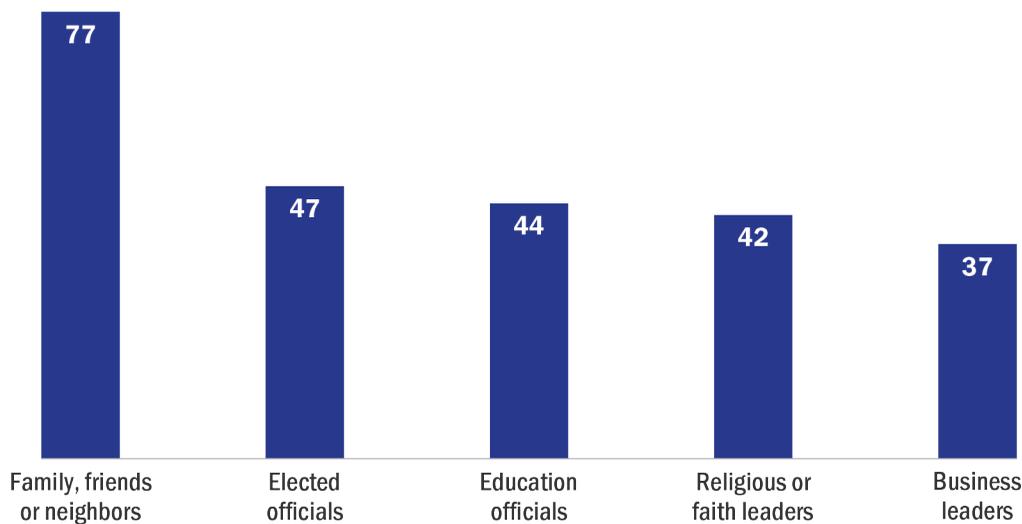
More than three-quarters of Americans (77%) say they consider family, friends and neighbors to be important sources of information. Nearly half, 47%, view elected officials as important sources of information on issues that matter to them, with fewer saying the same about education officials (44%), religious or faith leaders (42%), and business leaders (37%).

FIGURE 23

Important Local Information Sources

Do you consider each of the following people in your local community to be important sources of information for you on issues that matter to you, or not?

% Yes



Americans who view multiple local figures as important sources on issues that matter to them are significantly more likely to believe ordinary citizens have the power to create change at the national level. They are also more inclined to rate the public’s role in the democratic process as working moderately or very well.

It is unclear whether finding trusted community sources of information primarily builds these pro-democratic attitudes or whether people who already feel democratically empowered are the ones building local connections with leaders who help keep them informed.

FIGURE 24

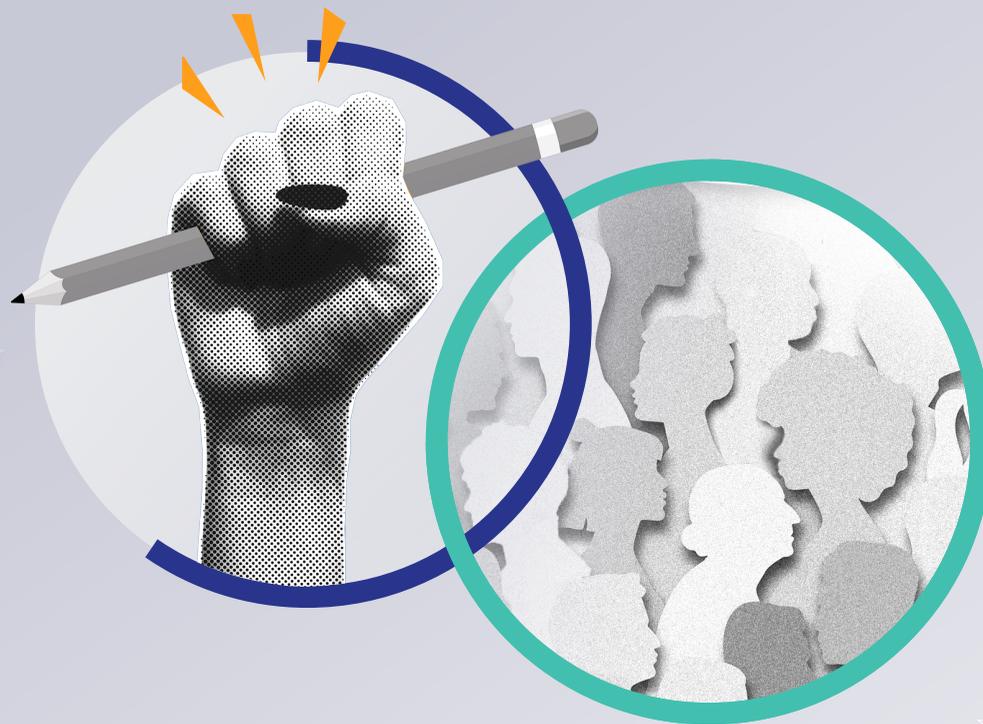
Number of Community Information Sources Linked to Civic Perceptions

Do you consider each of the following people in your local community to be important sources of information for you on issues that matter to you, or not?

(Number of sources selected as % Yes)

	0	1	2	3	4	5
How much power do ordinary citizens have to create change in our nation? (% A great deal/moderate amount)	25	26	33	38	39	53
Regardless of who is in power, how well do you think each of these institutions or processes are generally working in our democracy? The people’s role in the democratic process (% Very/Moderately well)	15	15	21	26	32	42

Those who view elected officials as important sources of information are especially likely to have positive perceptions of citizen power and the people’s role in the democratic process and to see more opportunities to share their concerns, experiences and opinions.



SECTION 4

Civic Education Linked to Greater Involvement in Democracy

Key Findings:

- Just over six in 10 Americans (63%) report receiving “a lot” or “some” civic education in school, and about half (51%) report receiving informal civic education from parents or other adults. However, one in four (25%) report little to no civic education of any kind.
- Civic involvement and pro-democratic attitudes are more common among those who have had formal or informal civic education, but having both types is especially helpful.
- Civic education appears to matter more than educational attainment in promoting civic involvement.
- People with more civic education are less likely to report knowledge gaps such as not knowing how to get involved or not knowing enough about the issues.

Civic education works to alleviate knowledge gaps in how to get involved in democracy and promote the efficacy of involvement. Many schools include civics lessons as part of their curriculum, which aim to promote positive views of democracy and underscore the importance of participation. Those pursuing higher education may encounter further learning opportunities about democracy, and parents or other adults can serve as models for civic participation through discussion of current events and involvement in public affairs. These various forms of civic education are an important way to encourage citizen involvement and bolster democracy.

Most Americans Receive Civic Education Through Formal or Informal Means

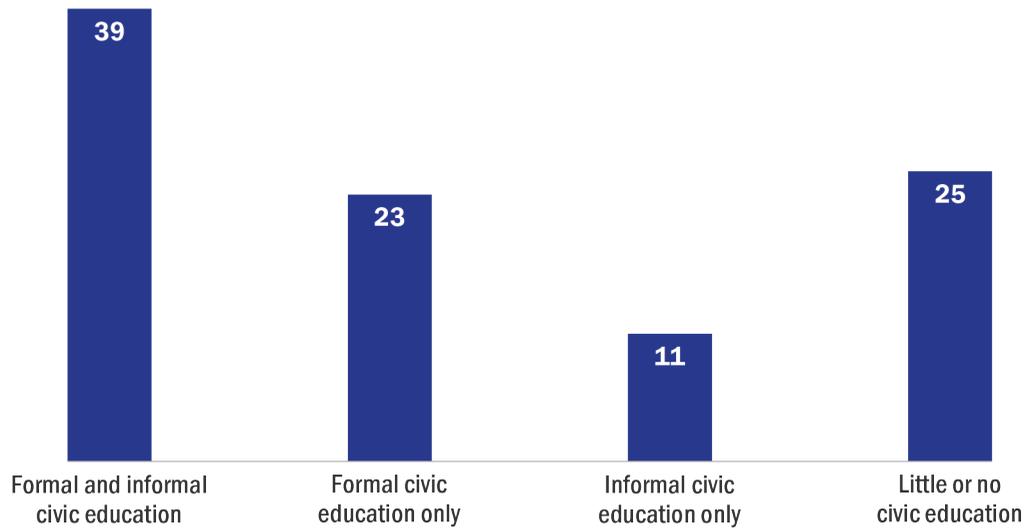
A majority of Americans (63%) report receiving a lot (19%) or some (44%) formal civic education during schooling, but civic education isn't limited only to classrooms. About half (51%) report receiving informal civic education, where parents or other adults discussed government or political issues with them often or very often (17%) or sometimes (34%) while growing up.

A substantial portion, 39% of Americans, report having had some or a lot of formal and informal civic education while growing up. Among the 34% who report receiving only one type of civic education, more indicate receiving it in school (23%) than outside of school (11%). The remaining 25% of Americans report receiving little to no civic education in the classroom or from parents or other adults.

FIGURE 25

Civic Education Among U.S. Adults

% Reporting each type of civic education



As might be expected, those with more years of schooling report having received more civic education. A majority of U.S. adults with a graduate degree say they have had significant exposure to civic education – both formal and informal – while only 12% say they have had little or none of either type of education. That contrasts with 42% of Americans without a high school diploma having had minimal exposure to both types.

FIGURE 26
Civic Education, by Education Level

		% Both formal and informal civic education	% Only one type of civic education	% Little or no civic education of either type
EDUCATION	Less than high school	23	29	42
	High school graduate	27	35	35
	Some college/Technical	37	36	26
	College graduate	49	32	18
	Graduate degree	57	31	12

Americans who have experienced civic education through both schooling and informal means are much more likely to be engaged in democratic activities and to hold pro-democracy attitudes than those with only one type or neither. For those with only one type of exposure, it makes little difference whether their civic education was through formal channels in school or informal channels through parents or other adults. There are, however, clear benefits to having both, providing the reinforcement that discussion with family and friends adds to the civic education learned in school.

Americans with both types of civic education (formal and informal) are much more likely than those with less civic education to volunteer, to agree they know how to contact local officials with concerns, to believe ordinary citizens can create change, and to believe democracy is performing well in the U.S. Differences in civic education are also associated with the perceived efficacy of a variety of actions such as attending town halls, contacting elected officials and campaigning.

FIGURE 27

More Civic Education Linked to Greater Civic Involvement and More Positive Attitudes About Democracy and Democratic Action

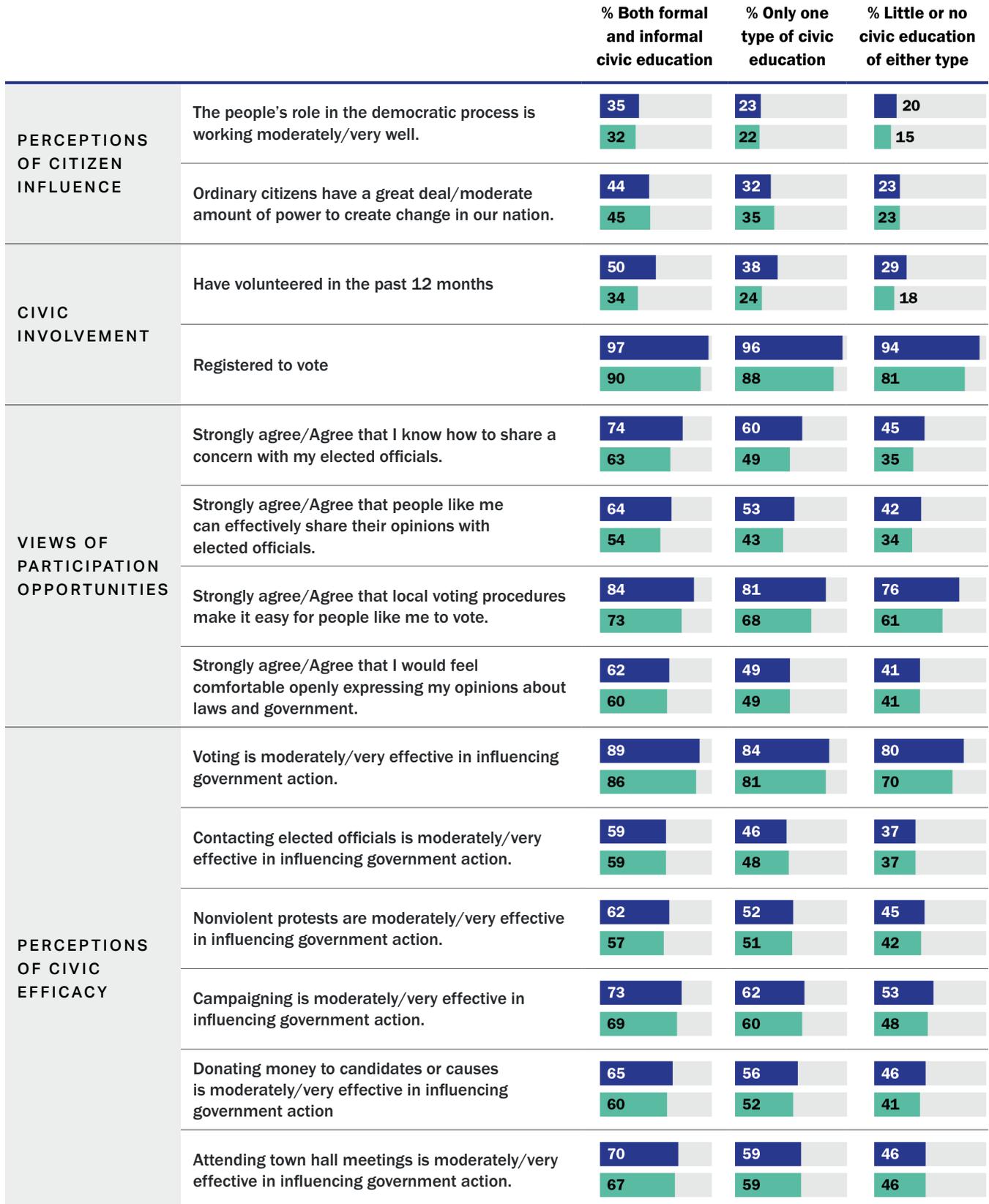
		% Both formal and informal civic education	% Only one type of civic education	% Little or no civic education of either type
PERCEPTIONS OF CITIZEN INFLUENCE	The people’s role in the democratic process is working moderately/very well.	33	22	16
	Ordinary citizens have a great deal/moderate amount of power to create change in our nation.	45	33	24
CIVIC INVOLVEMENT	Have volunteered in the past 12 months	42	29	20
	Registered to vote	93	90	84
VIEWS OF PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES	Strongly agree/Agree that I know how to share a concern with my elected officials.	68	51	36
	Strongly agree/Agree that people like me can effectively share their opinions with elected officials.	59	46	37
	Strongly agree/Agree that local voting procedures make it easy for people like me to vote.	79	72	64
	Strongly agree/Agree that I would feel comfortable openly expressing my opinions about laws and government.	61	49	41
PERCEPTIONS OF CIVIC EFFICACY	Voting is moderately/very effective in influencing government action.	87	82	72
	Contacting elected officials is moderately/very effective in influencing government action.	60	48	37
	Nonviolent protests are moderately/very effective in influencing government action.	59	52	43
	Campaigning is moderately/very effective in influencing government action.	71	60	49
	Donating money to candidates or causes is moderately/very effective in influencing government action.	62	53	42
	Attending town hall meetings is moderately/very effective in influencing government action.	68	59	46

Civic education appears more strongly related to civic participation and perceptions of civic efficacy than formal schooling alone does. Among college graduates and nongraduates alike, those who have had both formal and informal civic education are more likely to see the people’s role in democracy working well, to believe ordinary citizens have the power to create change, and to have volunteered, compared with those who have the same level of education but less civic knowledge.

FIGURE 28

Democratic Engagement, by Civic Education and Education Level

■ % College graduate ■ % Not a college graduate



Conclusion

When citizens see pathways to participation and believe their efforts matter, they are more likely to believe in democratic processes and affirm democracy as the best form of government.

Most Americans are involved in democratic life. A solid majority pay attention to government and political matters, about a third are active in their community, and most view methods of civic participation as at least somewhat effective forms of influence.

Yet, the findings point to a troubling cycle: Barriers to participation and lower confidence in institutions create conditions that can discourage civic involvement. At the same time, volunteering, attending community events and civic knowledge are associated with stronger perceptions of citizen power, promoting a positive feedback loop in which participation, education and confidence reinforce each other.

Socioeconomic divides emerge as one of the strongest and most consistent factors, though age differences and lack of awareness also limit involvement for many Americans. Addressing these gaps can transform inclination into action and ensure that democracy reflects the voices of all Americans — not just those with resources or connections.

Social media can offer new channels for civic involvement, which appears to both help and hinder democratic commitment. Heavy use is associated with both higher perceived efficacy of citizen action but also greater feelings of information overload and greater acceptance of views that diverge from democratic norms. Given the prevalence of social media nationwide, the question is how to leverage its benefits while mitigating its risks.

There are solutions within reach: expanding community events to strengthen local ties, improving civic education to equip citizens with knowledge and confidence, and fostering networks that invite participation. While strengthening engagement at the local level may hold promise for rebuilding trust nationally, lasting progress will also require broader systems and institutions to reduce structural barriers. Success will depend on practical strategies that address these obstacles while reinforcing the value of individual contributions to democracy.

Ultimately, sustaining a healthy democracy will require collective commitment — from institutions, civic leaders and ordinary people — to create accessible, practical pathways for participation that turn democratic ideals into everyday realities.

Survey Methodology

These results are based on a survey completed by 20,338 U.S. adults, aged 18 and older. The survey was conducted in English. The Gallup Panel™ recruited 9,157 respondents for the study and supplemented them with 11,181 respondents from a third-party sample provider. In total, 19,092 respondents completed the survey as a web survey between July 7, 2025, and Aug. 21, 2025, and 1,246 respondents completed the survey as a mail survey between July 7, 2025, and Aug. 25, 2025.

The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults whom Gallup selects using address-based sampling methods and random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones. Demographic targets were specified for the third-party sample provider to improve representativeness of the sample. Gallup uses a multistage weighting process to ensure samples are demographically representative of the U.S. adult population, using the most recent Current Population Survey figures; this process includes weighting data separately for each sample source before combining the sample.

For results based on this sample, the maximum margin of sampling error, which takes into account the design effect from weighting, is ± 0.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

ABOUT THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

The Charles F. Kettering Foundation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, operating foundation dedicated to advancing inclusive democracies. Through partnerships, research and strategic communications, the foundation fosters citizen engagement, promotes government accountability and counters authoritarianism.

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