

Polarization in America: Survey of Local Government

December 2025

This report is the third in a series.



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About This Report

This CivicPulse report is the third installment in a series commissioned by the philanthropic foundation Carnegie Corporation of New York to assess political polarization as experienced by local government officials, find solutions that reduce division, and share these findings to help strengthen communities.

About CivicPulse

CivicPulse is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to enhancing local and state government in the US by conducting representative surveys of public officials, producing actionable research, and facilitating practitioner-researcher dialogue.

About Carnegie Corporation of New York

Carnegie Corporation of New York was established by Andrew Carnegie in 1911 to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding. Today the foundation works to reduce political polarization through philanthropic support for the issues that Carnegie considered most important: education, democracy, and peace.

More Information

More about the CivicPulse-Carnegie Polarization in America series can be found [here](#). Media inquiries can be sent to Nathan Lee, Managing Director, at nathanlee@civimpulse.org. Requests for the data associated with this report and any other questions can be directed to info@civimpulse.org.

Executive Summary

This report marks the third installment in CivicPulse's *Polarization in America: Survey of Local Government* series supported by the philanthropic foundation Carnegie Corporation of New York. This series is based on three nationally representative surveys of municipal, county, and school board officials in America conducted in August 2024, January 2025, and September 2025.

The most recent survey demonstrates an enduring gap between how local leaders view national and local polarization. On the one hand, a high and growing percentage of local officials (89%) express concern about the negative effects of polarization nationally. On the other hand, a relatively modest number (31%) are concerned over the negative effects of polarization in their own communities, a finding that has remained steady across the three surveys. The data shows that officials who represent populations of more than 50,000 residents are more likely to report negative effects from polarization in their communities (41%), a finding that remains consistent.

The September 2025 survey offers lessons for how programs and activities intended to reduce polarization through improved civic participation might be scaled effectively. A top finding that emerged was the importance of leveraging local public institutions where participation from residents—both adults and children—is already strong and the infrastructure already exists. Compared with the other local institutions presented, K-12 schools (83%) and sports leagues (70%) are the ones the most local leaders say have a positive impact on civic participation.

The survey identified opportunities to improve civic participation across America through greater access to youth civics programming. While the data show a widespread belief among local officials in the effectiveness of youth civics programming, only a minority of local communities in America have such programming available. For example: 80% perceive a positive impact from youth election volunteering yet only 18% have this opportunity available in their communities.

The findings also underscore a digital divide that impedes civic participation in some communities. Despite most local officials agreeing on the value of deploying basic digital tools for resident engagement, such as online calendars (80%), board meeting recordings (75%), and livestreaming (74%), these services remain unavailable in many communities. Local officials are in less agreement on the value of more complex digital tools, including artificial intelligence.

STATE OF POLARIZATION IN AMERICA: SEPTEMBER 2025 UPDATE

The findings in the first section benchmark polarization over time by comparing the latest survey in September 2025 to the preceding surveys in January 2025 and August 2024.

1. Perceived National Strife Worsening. The September 2025 survey finds that 89% of officeholders perceive substantial negative effects of polarization nationally. This rate is higher than the previous two surveys (83% in January 2025 and 87% in August 2024).
2. Local Polarization Remains Moderate. Local polarization remains significantly more moderate than at the national level and stable over the last 12 months, with 30% of officials perceiving substantial negative effects of polarization in their localities (31% in January 2025 and August 2024).
3. Larger Localities Perceive Worse Polarization. Among officials who represent communities of more than 50,000 residents, 41% reported substantial negative effects from polarization, a significantly higher rate than in smaller localities but still far lower than national perceptions. This pattern has remained consistent across all three surveys.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

In this survey, local officeholders were asked to evaluate how important different local public institutions were for fostering civic participation. The eight institutions considered were colleges and universities, K-12 schools, hospitals, museums and cultural centers, parks, police departments, public libraries, and recreational sports leagues. The findings:

4. K-12 Schools Most Important Civic Institution. While a majority of officeholders rated all listed institutions as fostering “a great deal,” “a lot,” or a “moderate amount” of civic participation, K-12 schools led the way with 83% of officeholders indicating so. Local officials observed that schools can enhance civic participation for both children and adults.
5. The Promise of Recreational Sports Leagues. 70% of local leaders say that recreational sports leagues foster civic participation in their communities, second only to K-12 schools. Again, local leaders saw such leagues as providing positive impact for both adults and children.
6. Equal Ratings for Police, Libraries, and Parks. The same percentage of leaders (64%) reported that law enforcement, public libraries, and public parks had a positive impact on civic participation.
7. Colleges and Universities Perceived Differently Depending on Population Size. Overall, colleges and universities came in fourth with 62% of respondents perceiving them as having a positive impact on civic participation. Among officeholders in communities of 50,000 or more, 72% thought they had a positive impact while 60% of their counterparts in smaller communities said the same.

LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS POLARIZATION

In the past two reports, CivicPulse has demonstrated the critical role of civic participation in fostering local resilience to polarization. Building on this work, this report shares findings on actionable local interventions to decrease polarization through greater civic participation. These findings center around youth civics programming and the use of digital technologies for directly communicating with residents.

Youth Civics Programming

8. Youth Civics Programming Viewed as Effective. Local officeholders were optimistic about the positive impact youth civics programming could have on getting young people more engaged. Although all activities scored highly, the top three—in terms of percentage of officeholders who said they thought the experience would be “very positive” or “somewhat positive” for civic participation—were attending a local government meeting (87%), youth volunteering during elections (80%), and youth representation in local governance (80%).
9. Barriers Exist to Wider Adoption of Youth Civics Programming. Despite public officials scoring a wide range of experiential youth civics programs as highly effective, half (50%) of localities do not offer any such programming. Barriers to further adoption include funding, transportation, and dependence on a volunteer cohort of local leaders to initiate such activities on top of their standard government responsibilities.

Digital Resident Engagement

10. Established Digital Tools for Engaging Residents. The top three rated digital tools in terms of perceived effectiveness are digital calendars (with 80% of officeholders scoring them as effective), board meeting recordings (75%), and live-streaming (74%). These tools are also the most established, with adoption between 60% and 68% of local governments. However, a significant minority of governments don't have them, reflecting a digital divide.
11. Distrust of Digital Tools and Lack of Internal Expertise Impede Adoption. Less than one in three local officials (31%) reported using other digital tools for resident engagement like data dashboards and online surveys. They reported in the CivicPulse survey and in follow-up interviews a range of barriers to further adoption, including internet connectivity issues, distrust from residents, and lack of internal expertise.
12. Low Confidence in Use of AI. Less than one in four local officials (22%) currently

believe that AI tools for resident engagement, such as chatbots and agents, are effective. However, this low rating may be, in part, due to lack of experience: just 3% of officials report currently using them as part of their resident engagement workflow.

Introduction

This report is based on a national survey of local government leaders and is the third in a series supported by the philanthropic organization Carnegie Corporation of New York. The purpose of the series is to benchmark polarization in America, identify local solutions, and explore opportunities to scale these solutions.

The first survey in August 2024 found that polarization is perceived to be far less divisive locally than it is nationally, though it is worse in localities with communities of 50,000 or more ([CivicPulse 2024](#)). The January 2025 survey focused on the role of different types of programs and approaches that local leaders perceived as leading to positive civic participation and, in turn, reducing the negative effects of polarization ([CivicPulse 2025](#)).

This report draws on a third survey of local government leaders conducted in September 2025. It provides key updates to the state of polarization in America, as well as a new assessment on the role of different local public institutions in facilitating civic participation and depolarization. It also builds on earlier findings by asking about different programs and tools that would be most likely to scale to other local communities. These findings center around youth civics programming and the use of digital tools for directly communicating with residents.

Key Terms Defined

Key terms used in the report are defined below.

- **Civic participation:** Residents getting involved in public activities that benefit the community.
- **Polarization:** Divisions between more liberal and more conservative individuals or groups.
- **Resident engagement:** Government officials sharing information with community residents.
- **Experiential learning:** Learning through direct experiences rather than traditional teaching.

State of Polarization: Fall 2025 Update

This section benchmarks polarization over time by comparing results from the latest September 2025 survey to those from January 2025 and August 2024. Local government officials were asked in each of these three surveys to assess how much polarization has been negatively impacting both the country as a whole, and their own communities, respectively (wording and overall results below).

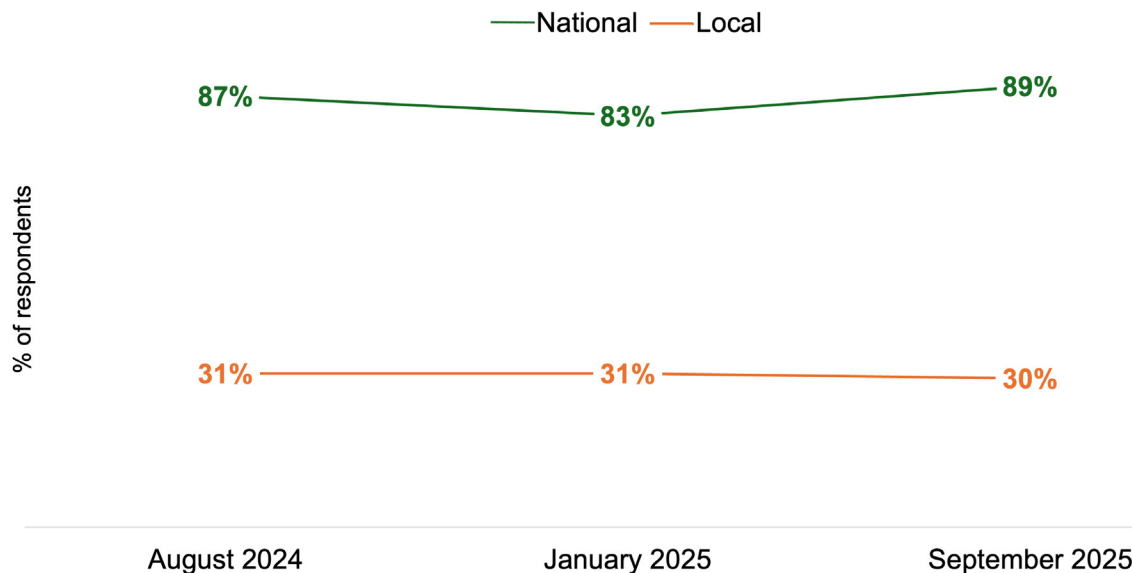
In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting...

our country?

your local community?

(Not at all <--> A great deal)

Figure 1. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization Over Time, National vs. Local



Note: Percentage of local government leaders who said political polarization is negatively affecting the country (green) or their local community (orange) "a lot" or "a great deal." Results are based on national CivicPulse surveys of local government officials conducted in August 2024 (n = 1,412), January 2025 (n = 1,274), and September 2025 (n = 1,399). Margins of error (based on 95% confidence level) are as follows: National - ±2%, ±2%, ±2%; Local - ±2%, ±3%, ±2%.

Finding 1: National Strife Worsening

The results of the September 2025 survey of local government leaders (Figure 1) show that the perceived negative effects of polarization at the national level are worse than any other time in the 12-month period covered by this report series. In the September 2025 survey, 89% of officeholders viewed polarization as having a “great deal” or “a lot” of negative effects on the country. This means local officeholders perceive polarization to be even worse now than compared with the height of the presidential election when the August 2024 survey took place (87%), and substantially worse than in the January 2025 survey (83%).

Local officeholders perceived negative effects of polarization on America to be worse than any other time in the 12-month period covered by this report series.

One school board member representing a small district in New Jersey expressed concern, stating, “The US has become less of a civil society. People act out like they have a right to be offensive and aggressive. Adults and children act with an attitude of entitlement.” Similarly, a mayor for a small city¹ in Oregon said, “The polarization at the state and federal level is very damaging to democracy.”

Perceptions of Polarization Before and After Charlie Kirk Assassination

On September 10, during the course of survey fielding, Charlie Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA, was assassinated at Utah Valley University. Responses were segmented between the approximately 40% that were submitted prior to the event and the remainder that were submitted afterward (See Figure A3). While such an analysis cannot provide causal attribution, the data reveals a 3% increase in perceptions of national polarization before the event (87%) and following the event (90%).

When quoting from survey responses or follow-up interviews, “small” refers to localities with populations under 10,000, “medium” or “mid-sized” refers to populations between 10,000 and 50,000, and “large” refers to communities of 50,000 or more.

Finding 2: Local Polarization Remains Moderate

In the September 2025 survey, 30% of local officeholders perceived a “great deal” or “a lot” of negative effects of polarization in their own communities (Figure 1). This rate is roughly 60% lower than the rate at which the same officials perceive negative effects at a national level (90%).

Negative effects of polarization at the local level remain significantly more moderate than at the national level.

Perceptions of local polarization have remained remarkably consistent over the course of this report series, with 31% of officials saying the same in January 2025 and August 2024. For many local officials, the negative effects of polarization are not as visible in their communities as they are at the state and federal levels. A councilmember representing a mid-sized city in Maine explained, “There is a big difference between the level of polarization at the national level and what we have in our local government. I am glad that local officials in Maine do not run according to political party and are not listed by party on the ballot.”

Other officials pointed out that even when local issues are divisive, they often don’t map to national party politics. For example, according to one councilmember of a mid-sized city in Colorado, “Our local polarization is over development and density while our national politics are polarized over party, which means some people who agree on national issues do not agree on local issues and vice-versa.”

“Our local polarization is over development and density while our national politics are polarized over party.”

- Councilmember of mid-sized city in Colorado

Finding 3: Larger Localities Face Worse Polarization

Across all three surveys of local officeholders we conducted, the population size of a community has remained a critical factor in distinguishing where the negative effects of polarization are most strongly felt.

Local officials representing communities with more than 50,000 residents are much more likely to report a “great deal” or “a lot” of local negative effects of polarization than those representing smaller communities.

Elected officials report worse negative effects of political polarization in higher-population communities (>50,000 residents).

While this difference was most pronounced in the August 2024 survey, it has endured over the course of the survey series (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization Over Time, by Population Size



Note: Percentage of local government leaders who said political polarization is negatively affecting their local community "a lot" or "a great deal," segmented by population size of the community (<50k residents vs >50k residents). Results are based on national CivicPulse surveys of local government officials conducted in August 2024 (n = 1,412), January 2025 (n = 1,274), and September 2025 (n = 1,399). Margins of error (based on 95% confidence level) are as follows: <50k residents - ±3%, ±3%, ±3%; >50k residents - ±6%, ±7%, ±7%.

One factor is that politics in larger cities and counties tends to take on a more national character, with higher campaign spending and increased attention from state and national actors. As one county supervisor in a large-population county in Wisconsin said, “Our local elections are getting out of control with the amount of money being spent on divisive campaigns.”

Importance of Local Public Institutions

In the previous CivicPulse survey in January 2025, local government officials pointed to community events, volunteering, and civics education as effective ways of reducing the negative effects of polarization in their communities through improved civic participation. Critically, such activities usually happen in partnership with other local public institutions. In this survey, local officeholders were asked to evaluate how important eight different institutions are for fostering civic participation.

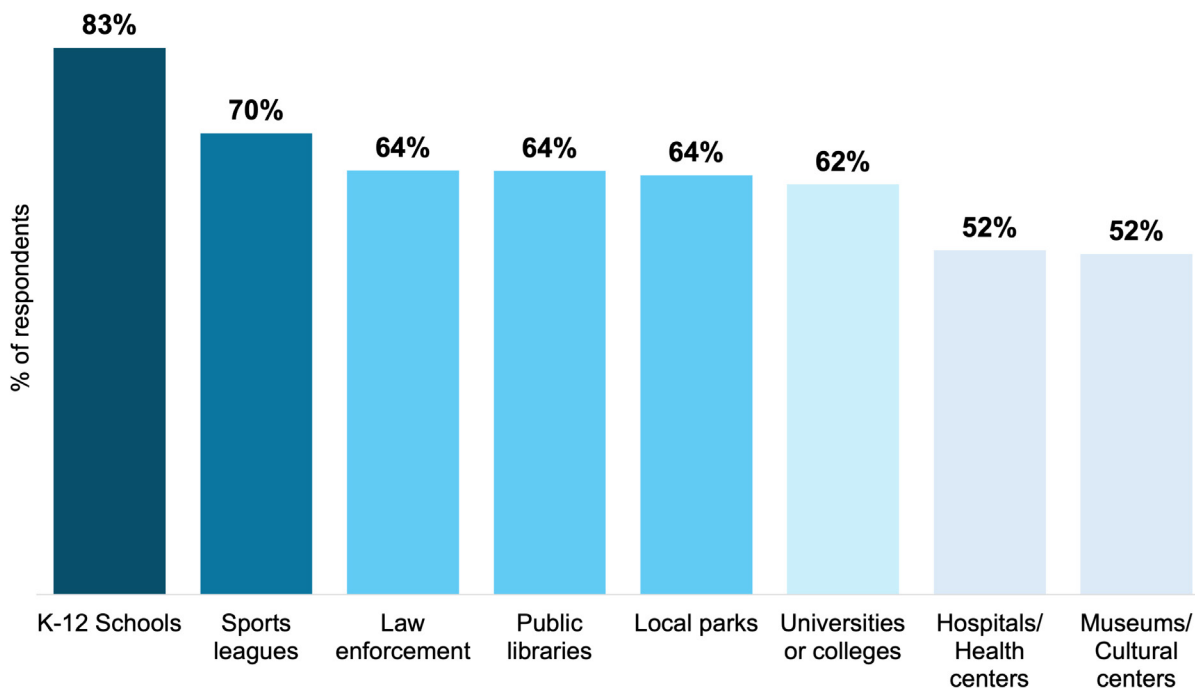
The eight institutions are described below, along with the basis for their selection:

- **Hospitals or healthcare centers.** Interaction with the local healthcare system is a nearly universal experience for residents ([U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024](#)). Although healthcare can be negatively impacted by polarization ([Van Bavel et al. 2024](#)), there is also promising evidence that primary care settings ([CivicPulse 2025](#)) can provide arenas for productive civic engagement ([Habib et al. 2023](#)).
- **Law enforcement.** Interaction with the police force is a primary way in which residents interact with government ([Tapp et al. 2022](#)), and the police has historically been one of the most trusted institutions in America ([Gallup 2024](#)). Positive interactions between residents and police can have positive effects on civic participation ([Peyton et al. 2019](#)), and negative interactions can have the opposite effect ([Desmond et al. 2016](#)).
- **Local parks.** Local parks have long been celebrated as sites for community participation among a diversity of people ([American Planning Association 2002](#)). More recent research shows that cities with a higher “ParkScore”—a composite of 15 measures related to acreage, investment, amenities, access, and equity—are more likely to have engaged residents ([Trust for Public Land 2024](#)).
- **Local universities or colleges.** Universities and colleges have for a long time been vehicles for civic participation ([Brand 2010](#)). However, recent years have led to a decline in public trust of these institutions ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)), and growing partisan divides among public attitudes toward universities ([Pew Research Center 2019](#)).
- **K-12 schools.** K-12 schools provide one of the key pathways through which young people become socialized into civic life ([Hillygus 2023](#)). In addition, they provide a venue through which many adults across backgrounds come into contact with each other ([Jacobson 2016](#)).

- **Museums or cultural centers.** Museums offer both direct educational opportunities for residents as well as convening spaces for other activities ([Jones 2021](#)). Likewise, cultural centers in America have long been an important medium for intergenerational exchange as well as connecting across socioeconomic class and education ([Kaplan et al. 2020](#)).
- **Public libraries.** In his popular book *Palaces for the People*, Eric Klinenberg describes how libraries provide places for diverse populations to mix, free programming from job training to children's activities, internet access, and social connections that combat isolation ([Klinenberg 2018](#)).
- **Recreational sports leagues.** In his landmark book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam pointed to the demise of sports leagues as emblematic of the broader decay in civic associations in America ([Putnam 2000](#)). However, evidence suggests that sports leagues have witnessed a resurgence in America in recent years ([CivicScience 2025](#)).

For each institution, officeholders were asked to answer how much they thought the entity facilitated civic participation in their community. The percentage of respondents who said “a great deal,” “a lot,” or a “moderate amount” were calculated for each one. The results are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Perceived Impact of Local Institutions on Civic Participation



Note: For each institution, percentage of local government leaders indicating they think it fosters civic participation in their community “a great deal,” “a lot,” or “a moderate amount.” Results are based on a national CivicPulse survey of 1,399 local government officials conducted in September 2025. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from left to right: ±2%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%.

Finding 4: K-12 Schools Most Important Civic Institution

While all institutions presented were rated as having a positive impact on civic participation—that is, fostering “a great deal,” “a lot,” or a “moderate amount” of civic participation—K-12 schools led the way with 83% of officeholders indicating a significant positive impact (Figure 3).

Public schools remain a key gateway through which most children become exposed to civic society. While attendance at private schools has risen in recent years, 90% of children still attend public schools ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)). The January 2025 survey pointed to the value of civics education within the classroom for helping youth more productively engage with political polarization ([CivicPulse 2025](#)).

K-12 schools can also offer a venue for civic participation for adults. For example, participating in school governance can offer opportunities for adults from different backgrounds who might otherwise not interact to work together in support of common interests. One board member of a large school district in Wisconsin said, “While polarized and politicized crises have occurred, our strong public engagement to rally around our schools has allowed them to focus on the students rather than the politics more effectively.”

Local leaders view K-12 schools as a focal point for civic participation for both youth and adults.

And parents who get directly involved in governance sometimes go on to serve the community in other ways. The first selectperson for a smaller township in Connecticut shared, “Parents of children often start serving in the community in the broader sense after being involved in the PTO and other social groups the schools foster.”

“Parents of children often start serving in the community in the broader sense after being involved in the PTO and other social groups the schools foster.”

- First selectperson of a small Connecticut town

Finding 5: The Promise of Recreational Sports Leagues

Sports leagues have long been a central vehicle for both building and maintaining social cohesion in different societies. In his landmark work on the decline of social capital in postwar America, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam used the dramatic decline of bowling leagues following the introduction of the television to illustrate the broader problem of the collapse of organized civic engagement.

A quarter of a century later, researchers are witnessing an increased desire to participate in recreational sports again among Americans ([CivicScience 2025](#)). Consistent with this evidence, 70% of local officeholders in this survey thought sports leagues were effective at fostering civic participation in their communities, above all other local institutions except K-12 schools.

70% of local officeholders in our survey thought sports leagues effectively fostered civic participation in their communities, putting them above all other local institutions except K-12 schools.

For many, sports are an important source of local pride and a venue through which people across generations interact. According to a councilmember for one mid-sized Utah town, “A great deal of the population is involved in recreational sports because our community is very family-oriented with multiple children. Listening to the national anthem, doing community fund raisers and encouraging service are generally included in these programs.”

Other officeholders highlighted positive impacts on civic participation more generally. A school board member for a mid-sized borough in New Jersey explained, “I’ve certainly noticed that the families involved in recreational sports are more present in other decision-making aspects of the community, such as use of parks and open spaces, serving diverse families, building relationships, and considering how public funds are used.”

Finding 6: Equal Ratings for Police, Libraries, and Parks

Law enforcement, public libraries, and local parks ranked just below K-12 schools and sports leagues in perceived impact on civic participation.

64% of respondents reported that law enforcement, public libraries, and public parks played a positive role in civic participation, respectively.

A number of researchers have examined how public libraries can and do provide important gathering spaces for a wide range of activities ([Klinenberg 2018](#)), including some that are specifically oriented toward civics ([Kranich 2024](#)). As a council member for a mid-sized town in Maine shared, “The library is a hub of the community and hosts many civic-minded organizations in the public room.”

Local public parks receive similarly high ranking for the positive impact they can have on civic participation. For many towns across America, small “urban” parks offer the central meeting place for a wide range of public events. A school board member for a mid-sized district in Colorado explained, “Our public town park is the site of all public protests, public concerts, art fairs, public festivals and a hub of civic engagement. Really kinda like the old town square of the past.”

“Our public town park is...like the old town square of the past.”

- Board member of a mid-sized school district in Colorado

For other communities, the outdoors itself is the appeal, along with the opportunity to preserve access to natural beauty nearby. A councilmember for a mid-sized town in Pennsylvania explained, “Local parks are a visual indication of what the community offers and motivate people to get involved, to either help clean them up or to join boards to help decide on their fate.”

Finally, law enforcement received the same ranking as libraries and parks in terms of its impact on civic participation. Public participation is essential for effective policing ([National Policing Institute 2024](#)), and many local governments have launched efforts to improve community relations in the last decade. In one large city in California, a council

member told us about a range of activities underway, including a citizen oversight committee, a “Night Out” event each year, and a “Police Academy” for educating residents on police policies and procedures. “We also have individual officers assigned to small districts,” he elaborated. “They hold meetings and send out newsletters to that district.”

One board member of a small district in Oregon shared how effectively their police department is using their Facebook page to help residents see the range of help they offer beyond standard policing activities, from “rescuing pets or removing snakes, serving as the target for dunk tanks at community events and even showcasing local restaurants where they are getting lunch that day.”

Finding 7: Colleges/Universities Perceived Differently Depending on Population Size

Throughout American history, universities and colleges have provided an environment for civic engagement ([Cooper 2024](#)). This is true for the students, faculty, and staff that comprise universities and colleges and the broader community that attends events or otherwise benefits from the cultural, social, and professional opportunities these institutions offer.

Furthermore, smaller towns that might otherwise face depopulation and economic stagnation are often buoyed by both the economic and cultural capital that a local university or college brings the community ([Norris et al. 2023](#)). Universities and colleges attract people from outside the community, facilitate interactions among individuals of different backgrounds, and support greater awareness of what it means to live in a pluralistic society.

While majorities of officeholders viewed universities and colleges positively across population sizes, they were much more likely to do so in communities over 50,000.

While majorities of officeholders viewed universities and colleges positively across all population sizes, they were more likely to do so in communities with more than 50,000 residents. Overall, 62% of officeholders with universities or colleges in their communities reported that these institutions positively affect civic participation. However, the difference in response pattern across population sizes is notable. 60% of respondents in local communities with fewer than 50,000 residents indicated benefits from universities and colleges, while 72% of officeholders representing communities of more than 50,000 residents said the same.

Two possible reasons for this difference emerge from the open-ended responses and interviews conducted after the survey. The first is that many of the funding cuts in recent years—and the broader upheaval that is occurring across higher education—have disproportionately hurt smaller colleges and universities, which also tend to be in smaller towns ([Marcus 2022](#)). Consequently, the civic benefits to smaller communities may not be what they were twenty to thirty years ago.

The second is due to recent polarization around campus life. Local officeholders representing smaller communities—which tend to be more conservative than larger cities ([Johnson et al. 2020](#))—were more likely to point out the “radicalization” of students at universities, and what they view as prejudice and dogmatism coming from “liberal bubbles” on campus. Conversely, local officeholders from larger localities were more likely to celebrate the civic engagement that these institutions provide and view them as vehicles for bringing people together.

Table 1. Perceived Impact of Local Institutions on Civic Participation, by Population Size

	<50k	>50k	Difference
K-12 schools	83%	84%	+1%
Sports leagues	71%	66%	-5%
Law enforcement	64%	66%	+2%
Public libraries	63%	70%	+7%
Local parks	63%	68%	+5%
Universities or colleges	60%	72%	+12%
Hospitals/Health centers	52%	54%	+2%
Museums/Cultural centers	51%	55%	+4%

Note: For each institution, percentage of local government leaders indicating they think it fosters civic participation in their community “a great deal,” “a lot,” or “a moderate amount,” segmented by population size of the community. Results are based on a national CivicPulse survey of 1,399 local government officials conducted in September 2025. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: <50k residents - $\pm 2\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$; >50k residents - $\pm 5\%$, $\pm 7\%$, $\pm 7\%$, $\pm 6\%$, $\pm 7\%$, $\pm 6\%$, $\pm 7\%$, $\pm 7\%$.

Youth Civics Programming

Youth civics programming was examined in this survey to evaluate both local officials' perceptions of their effectiveness and to measure their availability in local communities. This investigation builds on the findings from the January 2025 survey that civics classes can provide a pathway for mitigating polarization through increased youth political participation ([CivicPulse 2025](#)). In this survey, questions focused on civics programming beyond traditional civics classes. Such programming might occur inside or outside a school setting.

However, changes to classroom curricula generally require involvement of higher levels of government ([Bowman et al. 2022](#)). Consequently, this inquiry focused on civics programming outside the classroom because it presents opportunities for action that is not contingent on policy changes at state or federal levels of government.

Youth civics programming also relates to another theme that surfaced from the previous survey around volunteering and community service. Youth civics programming usually depends on an investment of time from volunteers, both youth and adults. In the January 2025 survey, the data showed that many local officials view long-term volunteering as an effective vehicle for improving civic participation and reducing the negative effects of political polarization ([CivicPulse 2025](#)).

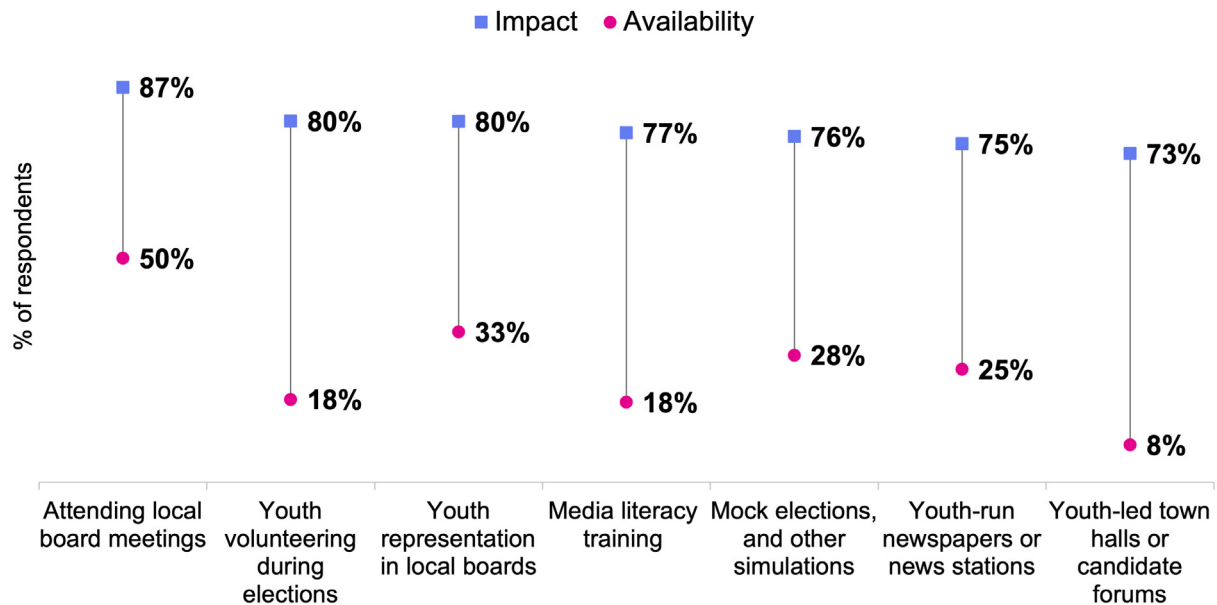
The youth civics programming options that were selected were based primarily on (1) a review of experiential civics programming in the United States ([Task Force On The Value Of Experiential Civic Learning 2025](#)); (2) a survey on attitudes toward the current state of civics education ([Saavedra et al. 2025](#)); and (3) a study on the effect of different types of civics education on political participation ([Willeck and Mendelberg 2022](#)).

Based on this review—and insights from follow-up interviews during the previous two surveys— seven programming activities were presented:

- Attending a local government meeting, or related experiences
- Youth representation in local government
- Volunteering in election administration
- Running youth-led candidate forums
- Media literacy training
- Youth mock elections, or related simulations
- Youth-run newspapers or news stations

For each of these seven activities, local leaders were asked (a) whether they were occurring in their communities and (b) how effective they perceived them to be in promoting youth civic participation. The results are displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Civics Programming Opportunities: Availability vs. Perceived Impact



Note: Blue squares show the percentage of local government leaders who said each civics programming opportunity would have a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” impact on civic participation. Pink circles show the percentage who said each opportunity is available in their community. Based on a national CivicPulse survey of 1,399 local government officials conducted in September 2025. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from left to right: Availability - ±3%, ±2%, ±3%, ±2%, ±3%, ±3%, ±2%; Impact - ±2%, ±2%, ±2%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%.

Finding 8: Youth Civics Programming Viewed as Effective

Across all seven activities, local officeholders were optimistic about the positive impact that youth civics programming could have on civic participation and, in turn, on reducing the negative effects of polarization. The highest-rated activity was attending a local government board meeting. In fact, 87% of local leaders indicated that participation in this activity would have a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” effect on civic participation.

Across all seven activities, local officeholders were optimistic about the positive impact that youth civics programming could have.

The next highest-ranked activities were volunteering in election administration (80%) and official student representation in local government (80%). Not far behind were media literacy training (77%), mock elections or other simulations (76%), youth-run newspapers or news stations (75%), and youth-run candidate forums (73%).

Notably, all activities were viewed as effective. Activities that ranked relatively lower appear to do so because of limited exposure among respondents. Perceptions of effectiveness correlated with the likelihood that the activity existed in the respondent's community. For example, youth-led candidate forums ranked last in effectiveness (73%) and had the lowest adoption rate (8%). Yet among those 8% of respondents who had such forums, 91% rated them as effective.

A clear throughline across these activities is their emphasis on "learning by doing." For some young people, attendance at local meetings can spark a lifelong commitment to civic participation. A mayor of a small town in North Carolina noted how one such program brought high school students into contact with their local government each year. "Several have pursued careers in city management and even ran for local offices."

"As a result, several have pursued careers in city management and even ran for local offices."

- Mayor of a small town in North Carolina

Similarly, an officeholder from a small city in Mississippi explained that their long-running "Mayor's Youth Council" has created a pipeline for future community and business leaders. Another school board official in a mid-sized district in Colorado reported that youth members on their board have been invaluable in bringing forward useful information, even elevating some issues to the state capitol.

Several local officials also emphasized the value youth candidate forums can have in the communities that offer them. In fact, a board member of a small school district in Massachusetts explained that the only place local candidates publicly answer questions is at their student-run candidate forum.

"Our [student-led] candidate forum is the only place candidates publicly answer questions before the election."

- Board member of a small Massachusetts school district

Finding 9: Barriers Exist to Wider Adoption of Youth Civics Programming

Another notable observation from Figure 3 is the gap between perceived effectiveness and adoption across the board. Although a majority of respondents viewed all seven activities as having a positive impact on youth civic participation, only half reported having youth attendance at local board meetings, and this activity was much more widespread than any of the others.

Why might this gap exist? Motivating youth to attend local government board meetings can be difficult. Day-to-day governance, like discussing capital improvement plans and tax rates, can feel obscure and hard to relate to. As one city councilmember from a large municipality in California shared, “The students are going, ‘Okay, where do I fit into all this?’”

Recruiting and maintaining youth committees or youth membership on boards is even more challenging. School board officials were more likely to report successfully establishing such programs (See Table A6), likely because the subject matter is more immediately relevant to students’ lives. However, even with school boards, setting up an environment where student representatives can effectively engage with the adult representatives is not an easy feat. Procedures must be established to ensure youth members are given space to express their ideas and not feel overwhelmed. One school board official in a large district in Wisconsin described substantial improvements after creating speaking slots for the student representatives, and allowing the representatives to decide among themselves who should speak on each item. This approach, the school board official explained, helped avoid “putting all of them on the spot.”

Multiple officials emphasized that the success of these programs depends heavily on adult representatives taking personal interest in the student representatives. For example, one official from a mid-sized school district in Colorado explained that, when they first entered office, the one student representative didn’t participate much. “I was just sitting next to this kid, he just sat there, he didn’t say anything,” the official noted. After this official launched an individualized mentorship program for student representatives, participation grew dramatically. “The growth in the kids is amazing... to watch a kid who interviews all shaky and nervous and by the end is, like, raising their hand and leading is amazing.” However, this kind of sustained mentorship requires significant and often uncompensated time from adult board members.

As for involving youth in election administration, the challenges are multi-faceted. For polling station volunteering, students may be limited by their school schedules or transportation. Additionally, eight states conduct elections primarily by mail ([National Conference of State Legislatures 2024](#)), while fourteen other states allow counties, small jurisdictions, or small elections to take place entirely by mail. While these practices can support voter turnout, they reduce opportunities for face-to-face experiences that polling place volunteering typically provides.

Youth-run newspapers, new stations, and candidate forums are perhaps the most challenging of all as they depend on a large investment of time and direct initiative from students. For example, one local official from a mid-sized California town described a high school student who launched an independent regional youth newspaper. “I think he saw a need to get out from under the governance or whatever constraints are at the high schools,” the official said.

But as several local officials noted in open-ended questions and during follow-up interviews, young people—and especially high school students—have an unending list of competing demands on their time. For them to participate in these activities, they must either see clear intrinsic value of such activities or believe that engaging in them would benefit their college or career prospects.

Digital Resident Engagement

Digital tools for resident engagement were assessed in this survey to evaluate both perceived impact on civic participation and rates of adoption. This inquiry was motivated, in part, by the question of what local governments can do to proactively improve access to information about their own operations, especially in communities with little or no local news coverage. The August 2024 survey showed that the decline of local journalism—which has led to a decrease in the quality of local information—can lead to issues of misinformation and, in turn, inflamed rhetoric ([CivicPulse 2024](#)).

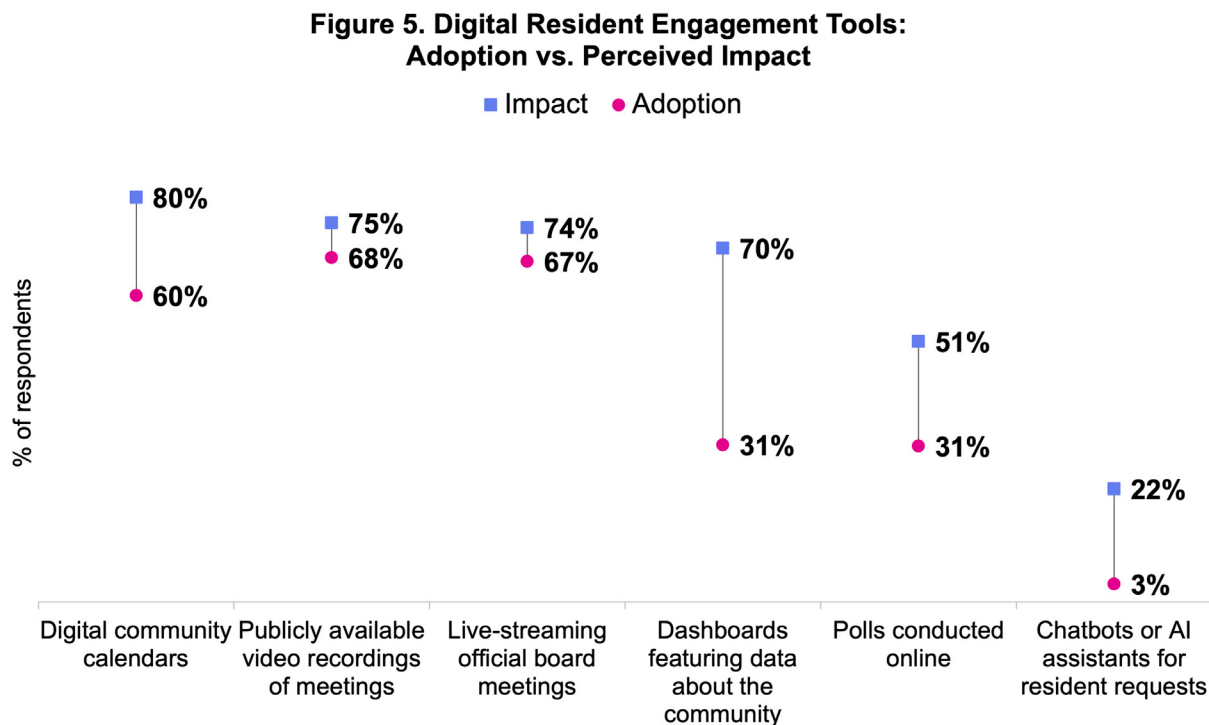
Potential scalability of the impact that digital tools can have on civic participation also motivated this inquiry. The January 2025 survey showed that in-person activities like community events can be effective vehicles for promoting civic participation ([CivicPulse 2025](#)), but each event depends on significant effort from individual local government leaders, and not all residents attend.

The selected digital tools that were presented were drawn from: (1) a meta-analysis of the use of digital information and communication technology for social cohesion ([Üblacker et al. 2024](#)); (2) a systematic analysis of the use of digital tools for citizen participation ([Shin et al. 2024](#)); and (3) a study focused on the role of public data in building transparency ([Mattheus et al. 2020](#)).

Based on this review—paired with insights from follow-up interviews during the previous two surveys— six digital tools were presented to survey respondents:

- Digital community calendars
- Recordings of board meetings
- Livestreaming of board meetings
- Data dashboards
- Online polls
- Artificial intelligence

For each of these six tools, local leaders were asked (a) whether they were using them in their communities and (b) how effective they perceived them to be in promoting civic participation. The results are displayed in Figure 5.



Note: Blue squares show the percentage of local government leaders who said each digital resident engagement tool would have a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” impact on civic participation. Pink circles show the percentage who said each digital tool has been adopted in their community. Based on a national CivicPulse survey of 1,399 local government officials conducted in September 2025. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from left to right: Adoption - ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%; Impact - ±2%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±3%, ±2%.

Finding 10: Established Digital Tools for Engaging Residents

Among the six tools presented, three stood out in terms of current effectiveness and adoption. The highest was digital calendars, with 80% of officeholders scoring them as “very” or “somewhat” positive for civic participation, and 60% saying that their local governments use them. The second was board meeting recordings (75% effectiveness and 68% adoption), and the third was livestreaming of board meetings (74% effectiveness and 67% adoption).

Digital calendars, livestreaming, and video recordings are widespread, but a significant minority of local governments still don't use them, reflecting a digital divide.

Local officials are fairly aligned in the values that they promote: efficiency, access, and trust. For example, a council member for one large county in Delaware said, “I often send out the link to our public meetings. This is very reassuring to constituents who believe that things happen behind closed doors. When they can see the meetings and make a public comment in person or online that is empowering for them.”

Calendars can provide a particularly useful function, especially when they allow for integration with residents' own digital personal calendars. A board member representing a small school district in Texas explained, “We have recently made the school calendar available digitally as a Google Calendar add-in and our community has responded well. We have high participation and less miscommunication about event start times, locations, and conflicts.”

“We have high participation and less miscommunication about event start times, locations, and conflicts.”

- Board member of small school district in Texas

However, adoption still lags even for these established digital tools. Taken together, anywhere between one-quarter and one-third of local governments still don't use one or more of these tools, reflecting an ongoing digital divide in America.

Finding 11: Distrust of Digital Tools and Lack of Internal Expertise Impede Adoption

Some local governments do not use even more established digital tools like livestreaming and recordings. Still others use them but find their impact on civic participation is limited. This is particularly the case in more rural parts of America, where broadband remains a pain point. As one school board official in a small district in a Massachusetts community observed, “I am not sure that many watch the publicly available video recordings, in part because not everyone has access to high-speed internet.”

Broadband internet and digital distrust impede the full potential of digital tools for civic participation.

Other tools like online surveys to help inform policy discussions present further challenges. 51% of officeholders thought resident surveys could promote civic participation, and only 31% report using them. Some of the challenges with resident polls are around growing digital distrust. One school board member for a mid-sized district in Pennsylvania said about their borough, “This is a very suspicious community.” The official described how their prior online surveys have been dismissed by one group or another as biased, usually based on concerns about how the survey instrument is distributed. One of the main challenges for them is the absence of a centralized email list of residents.

“This is a very suspicious community.”

- School board member of a mid-sized district in Pennsylvania

Even if the desired data can be successfully collected through a resident opinion poll or third-party data sources, lack of staff capacity can impede dissemination of findings via data dashboards. One commissioner of a large county in Hawaii mentioned that they were still a “pen-and-paper” culture until about five years ago. However, bringing in a few new—often younger—staff helped to catalyze adoption.

Finding 12: Low Confidence in Use of Artificial Intelligence

Despite the potential of artificial intelligence to improve resident engagement in government—particularly through the use of chatbots and virtual assistants—only 22% of officials currently believe that such tools are effective, and only 3% of officials report using them in their governments.

Only 22% of officials believe that AI tools for resident engagement are effective, and only 3% report using them.

It is unclear whether the low efficacy rating from the survey is based on fundamental issues with the use of this technology or lack of experience with it.

As one school board official for a mid-sized district in Indiana said—putting themselves in the shoes of their constituents—“If I have to call the schools or the city about something, I want to talk to a human being.”

However, other research suggests there may be unmet demand for such tools from residents. For example, a study by researchers at the University at Albany found that a subset of citizens—particularly those comfortable with technology—often prefer *not* to engage with a person if a chatbot can effectively address their inquiries ([Chen et al. 2024](#)).

Other local leaders shared concerns about AI being used to advantage certain communities more than others, potentially leaving behind community members with greater needs.

“If I have to call the schools or the city about something I want to talk to a human being.”

- Board member of mid-sized school district in Indiana

Discussion and Conclusion

This report marks the third installment in CivicPulse’s series *Polarization in America: Survey of Local Government*, supported by the philanthropic foundation Carnegie Corporation of New York. This series is based on nationally representative surveys of municipal, county, township, and school board officials in America.

The surveys identified a large and persistent gap between officials' perceptions of national and local polarization. While local leaders' views of national strife have worsened during the period under study, concerns over polarization in their own communities has remained steady and moderate. Results from the August 2024 survey showed how local resilience is related to the fact that debates in local politics tend to be fairly practical. Officials were focused on managing and responding to issues such as infrastructure and emergency preparedness.

The January 2025 survey showed that local civic participation, according to community leaders, is critical to buffering the impact of national polarization. In that report, local leaders evaluated a range of activities they thought could enhance civic participation, as well as how available such activities were in their communities. One gap identified in this survey was between the large number of officials who thought long-term, paid community service would be effective and the small number of communities that have such opportunities. Another was the widespread support for civics education across age groups contrasted with the fact that less than half of communities have it in both K-8 and high school.

The third survey and report build on these insights, with particular emphasis on practical implementation of scalable solutions. Another substantial gap emerged from this survey between the high ratings that youth civics programming received and the low number of communities that have such programming. Local leaders were also asked to evaluate how important different local public institutions were for fostering civic participation to mitigate polarization. Highest among these were K-12 public schools and recreational sports leagues.

In closing, this body of research points to four key opportunities for both local government leaders and individual residents interested in reducing polarization in their communities.

1. **Elevate the Local Perspective.** These surveys and interviews consistently point to the fact that, despite the severity of US political polarization, elected officials and residents are successfully cooperating in local communities across America—even in “purple” communities with ideological diversity. At a time when political dysfunction in both Washington, D.C., and state capitals is widely covered in the headlines, the stories of these local communities can provide both inspiration and practical lessons for how to rebuild coalitional politics in America at all levels.
2. **Leverage Key Institutions as Civic Partners.** Local civic participation is mediated through a range of local public institutions. By working with these institutions, local leaders can engage with residents through preexisting community networks where residents—as parents, caregivers, or teammates—already share a common identity. Likewise, residents interested in getting

more involved in civic life can do so within the institutions where they already participate. For example, they could join the PTA/PTO of a school or coach a sports team.

3. **Invest in Youth Civics Programming.** There is near-universal agreement among officials that youth civics programs are effective. Yet, half of all localities offer none. While barriers of time and funding are real, leaders can start small and focus on direct learning opportunities. Individual residents can also show initiative by taking a group of young people to a local government board meeting or chaperoning them as volunteers during an election.
4. **Promote Volunteering Activities.** The January 2025 survey indicates that many local leaders see promise for the role that long-term, paid community service could play in reducing polarization, yet less than 10% of communities have such programs available. While scalable, long-term volunteering programs likely depend on new funding streams, local leaders and residents could find ways to create opportunities in their own communities around specific projects or topics to stimulate interest.

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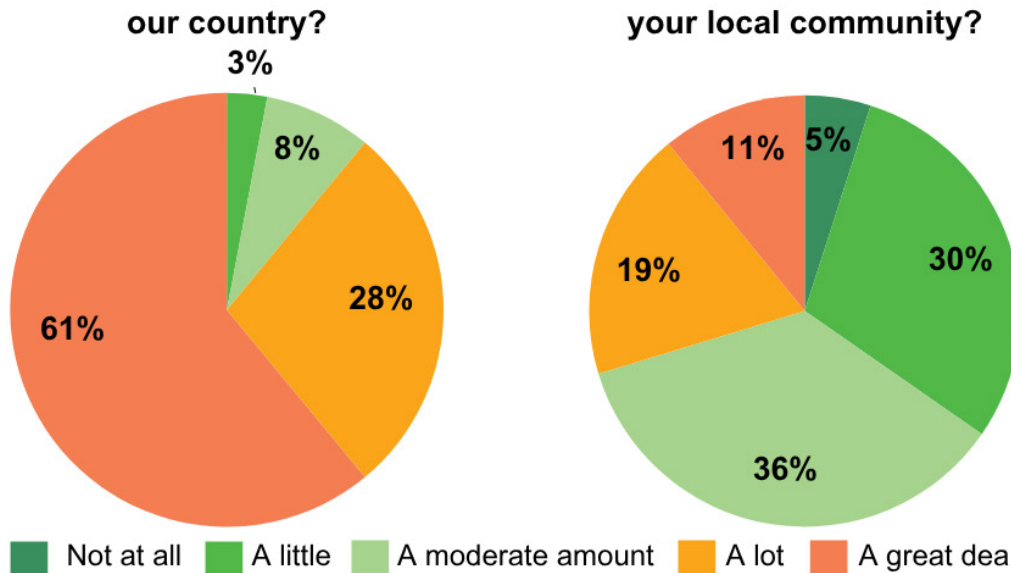
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Appendix

Additional Figures

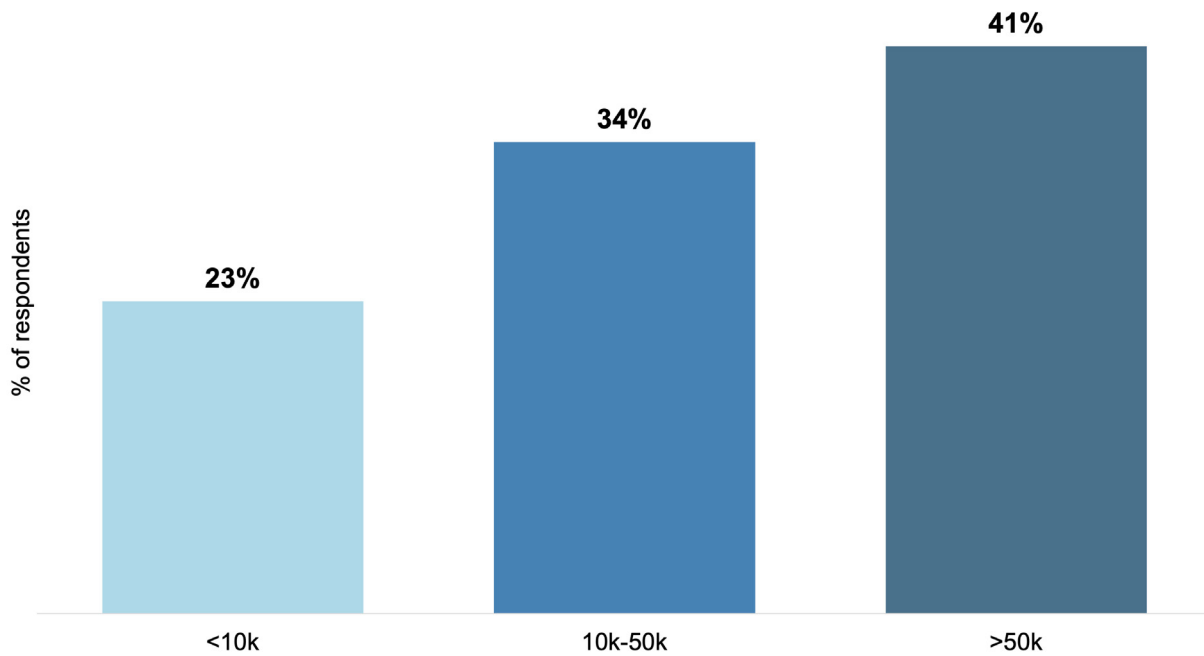
Figure A1. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization, National vs. Local

In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting...



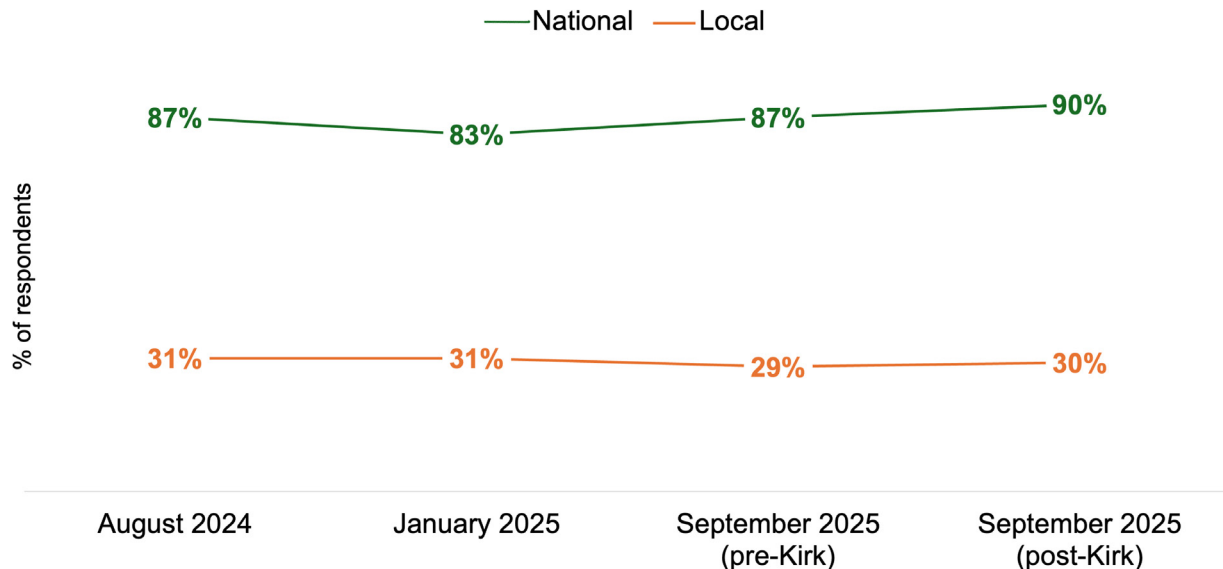
Note: Distribution of responses to the question "In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting our country?" (left) and "In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community?" (right). Results are based on a national CivicPulse survey of 1,399 local government officials conducted in September 2025. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from "A great deal" to "Not at all": National - $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 2\%$, $\pm 1\%$, $\pm 1\%$; Local - $\pm 2\%$, $\pm 2\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 2\%$, $\pm 1\%$.

Figure A2. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization, by Population Size



Note: Percentage of local government leaders who said political polarization is negatively affecting their local community "a lot" or "a great deal," segmented by population size of the community. Results are based on a national CivicPulse survey of 1,399 local government officials conducted in September 2025. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from left to right: ±3%, ±4%, ±7%.

Figure A3. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization Before and After Assassination of Charlie Kirk, National vs. Local



Note: Percentage of local government leaders who said political polarization is negatively affecting the country (green) or their local community (orange) "a lot" or "a great deal." Results are based on national CivicPulse surveys of local government officials conducted in August 2024 (n = 1,212), January 2025 (n = 1,274), and September 2025 (n = 1,399). September 2025 results are shown separately for responses collected before and after the assassination of Charlie Kirk on September 10th. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows: National - ±2%, ±2%, ±3%, ±2%; Local - ±2%, ±3%, ±4%, ±3%.

Figure A4. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization Before and After Assassination of Charlie Kirk, by Population Size



Note: Percentage of local government leaders who said political polarization is negatively affecting their local community “a lot” or “a great deal,” segmented by population size of the community (<50k residents vs >50k residents). Results are based on national CivicPulse surveys of local government officials conducted in August 2024 (n = 1,212), January 2025 (n = 1,274), and September 2025 (n = 1,399). September 2025 results are shown separately for responses collected before and after the assassination of Charlie Kirk on September 10th. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows: <50k residents - ±3%, ±3%, ±4%, ±3%; >50k residents - ±6%, ±7%, ±11%, ±8%.

Survey Results by Respondent Type

Table A1. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization (Municipal/County/Township Officials)

	National	Local
A great deal	61%	11%
A lot	27%	18%
A moderate amount	8%	34%
A little	3%	31%
Not at all	0%	6%

Note: Distribution of responses to the questions “In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting our country?” (National) and “In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community?” (Local). Results above correspond with the 664 municipal/county/township officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: National - ±4%, ±3%, ±2%, ±1%, ±0%; Local - ±2%, ±3%, ±4%, ±4%, ±2%.

**Table A2. Perceived Negative Effects of Polarization
(School Board Officials)**

	National	Local
A great deal	61%	11%
A lot	30%	20%
A moderate amount	8%	37%
A little	2%	29%
Not at all	0%	4%

Note: Distribution of responses to the questions "In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting our country?" (National) and "In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting your local community?" (Local). Results above correspond with the 735 school board officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: National - $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 2\%$, $\pm 1\%$, $\pm 0\%$; Local - $\pm 2\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 1\%$.

**Table A3. Perceived Impact of Local Institutions on Civic
Participation (Municipal/County/Township Officials)**

K-12 schools	80%
Sports leagues	73%
Law enforcement	71%
Public libraries	72%
Local parks	72%
Universities or colleges	62%
Hospitals/Health centers	57%
Museums/Cultural centers	56%

Note: For each institution, percentage of municipal/county/township officials indicating they think it fosters civic participation in their community "a great deal," "a lot," or "a moderate amount." Results above correspond with the 664 municipal/county/township officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 5\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 5\%$.

Table A4. Perceived Impact of Local Institutions on Civic Participation (School Board Officials)

K-12 schools	86%
Sports leagues	68%
Law enforcement	58%
Public libraries	57%
Local parks	56%
Universities or colleges	63%
Hospitals/Health centers	48%
Museums/Cultural centers	48%

Note: For each institution, percentage of school board officials indicating they think it fosters civic participation in their community “a great deal,” “a lot,” or “a moderate amount.” Results above correspond with the 735 school board officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$.

Table A5. Availability vs. Perceived Impact of Civics Programming Opportunities (Municipal/County/Township Officials)

	Availability	Impact
Attending local board meetings	44%	86%
Youth volunteering during elections	16%	79%
Youth representation in local boards	24%	76%
Media literacy training	11%	77%
Mock elections and other simulations	18%	71%
Youth-run newspapers or news stations	16%	69%
Youth-led town halls or candidate forums	7%	72%

Note: Percentage of municipal/county/township officials who said each civics programming opportunity is available in their community and the percentage who said it would have a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” impact on civic participation. Results above correspond with the 664 municipal/county/township officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: Availability - $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 2\%$; Impact - $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$.

Table A6. Availability vs. Perceived Impact of Civics Programming Opportunities (School Board Officials)

	Availability	Impact
Attending local board meetings	55%	89%
Youth volunteering during elections	21%	81%
Youth representation in local boards	42%	83%
Media literacy training	24%	78%
Mock elections and other simulations	38%	81%
Youth-run newspapers or news stations	34%	80%
Youth-led town halls or candidate forums	9%	74%

Note: Percentage of school board officials who said each civics programming opportunity is available in their community and the percentage who said it would have a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” impact on civic participation. Results above correspond with the 735 school board officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: Availability - $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 2\%$; Impact - $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$.

Table A7. Adoption vs. Perceived Impact of Digital Resident Engagement Tools (Municipal/County/Township Officials)

	Adoption	Impact
Digital community calendars	63%	81%
Publicly available video recordings of meetings	72%	79%
Live-streaming official board meetings	69%	78%
Dashboards featuring data about the community	33%	71%
Polls conducted online	28%	53%
Chatbots or AI assistants for resident requests	5%	25%

Note: Percentage of municipal/county/township officials who said each digital engagement tool has been adopted in their community and the percentage who said it would have a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” impact on civic participation. Results above correspond with the 664 municipal/county/township officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: Adoption - $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 2\%$; Impact - $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 3\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$, $\pm 4\%$.

Table A8. Adoption vs. Perceived Impact of Digital Resident Engagement Tools (School Board Officials)

	Adoption	Impact
Digital community calendars	58%	78%
Publicly available video recordings of meetings	63%	70%
Live-streaming official board meetings	65%	69%
Dashboards featuring data about the community	29%	69%
Polls conducted online	33%	50%
Chatbots or AI assistants for resident requests	2%	19%

Note: Percentage of school board officials who said each digital engagement tool has been adopted their community and the percentage who said it would have a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” impact on civic participation. Results above correspond with the 735 school board officials who took the September 2025 CivicPulse survey. Margins of error (95% confidence level) are as follows, from top to bottom: Adoption - ±4%, ±4%, ±4%, ±4%, ±4%, ±1%; Impact - ±3%, ±4%, ±4%, ±4%, ±4%, ±3%.

Survey Methodology

Municipal, county, and township officials invited to participate in the survey were drawn randomly from a dynamically updated comprehensive list of all top elected officials (e.g., mayor, county executive) and governing board members (e.g., council member, county legislator) serving townships, municipalities, and counties with populations of 1,000 or more. School board officials invited to participate in the survey were drawn randomly from a nationally comprehensive list of all K-12 school board members. The survey was conducted from September 3 to October 20, 2025. Participants were recruited over the course of three weeks via email with a link to the online survey. There were 1,399 responses.

Survey Composition and Representativeness

Table A9. Distribution of Respondents by Respondent Type

Respondent type	Number of respondents
Municipal/county/township officials	664
School board officials	735
Total	1,399

Table A10. Distribution of Respondents by Government Type

Government type	Number of respondents
County	97
Municipality/township	567
School district	735
Total	1,399

Table A11. Representativeness of Community Demographics of County/Municipal/Township Respondents

	Number of residents	Proportion of college-educated residents	Proportion of residents who voted for Trump in 2024
Sample median	8,500	0.20	0.57
Sampling frame median	5,940	0.17	0.61

Table A12. Representativeness of Community Demographics of School Board Respondents

	Number of residents	Proportion of college-educated residents	Proportion of residents who voted for Trump in 2024
Sample median	14,650	0.19	0.60
Sampling frame median	10,410	0.17	0.65

Table A13. Representativeness by Region of County/Municipal/Township Respondents

	Midwest	Northeast	South	West
Sample median	0.32	0.22	0.27	0.19
Sampling frame median	0.39	0.23	0.28	0.10

Table A14. Representativeness by Region of School Board Respondents

	Midwest	Northeast	South	West
Sample median	0.37	0.30	0.13	0.19
Sampling frame median	0.36	0.27	0.21	0.16

Questionnaire

There is a lot of talk about political polarization in America now. For the purposes of this survey, consider political polarization to be defined as divisions between more liberal and more conservative individuals or groups.

In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting **our country**?

Response options: Not at all, A little, A moderate amount, A lot, A great deal

In your view, how much is political polarization currently negatively affecting **your local community**?

Response options: Not at all, A little, A moderate amount, A lot, A great deal

Now, we'd like to ask you a bit about public institutions in your community and how they may or may not affect local civic participation. For the purpose of this survey, consider civic participation to be defined as residents getting involved in public activities that benefit the community.

How much do you think each of the following public entities fosters civic participation in your community? *Select "Not applicable" if this entity does not exist in your community.*

Response options: A great deal, A lot, A moderate amount, A little, Not at all, Not applicable

Grid rows: K-12 schools, Public libraries, Museums or cultural centers, Hospitals or healthcare centers, Local universities or colleges, Local law enforcement, Local parks, Recreational sports leagues

If relevant, please choose one of the entities from the previous list that you do feel has had a positive effect on civic participation and provide an example of why.

We'll turn now to some questions about digital tools local governing board/local school boards might use for resident engagement. For the purposes of this survey, resident engagement refers to government officials sharing information with community residents that may or may not result in resident feedback.

Which of the following resident engagement tools are currently used in your community? *Select all that apply.*

Response options: Dashboards featuring data about the community, Polls conducted online, Chatbots or AI assistants for resident requests, Livestreaming official board meetings, Publicly available video recordings of meetings, Digital community calendars, Other (Please specify):, None of the above

Regardless of whether you currently use any given tool, what impact do you believe each could have on civic participation in your community?

Response options: Very negative, Somewhat negative, Neither negative nor positive, Somewhat positive, Very positive

Grid rows: Dashboards featuring data about the community, Polls conducted online, Chatbots or AI assistants for resident requests, Livestreaming official board meetings, Publicly available video recordings of meetings, Digital community calendars

If possible, please provide an example of a time that using a digital tool for resident engagement in your community either failed or succeeded.

To the best of your knowledge, which of the following civics education opportunities are available in your community? These may or may not happen in a school setting. Select all that apply.

Response options: Youth volunteering on Election Day, Experiential learning (e.g., attending local government meeting), Simulation-based activities (e.g., youth mock elections), Media literacy training (e.g., training to spot mis- or disinformation), Youth-run newspapers or news stations, Youth-led town halls or candidate forums, Youth committees or boards within your government, Other (Please specify):, None of the above

Regardless of whether your community has any of the following civics education opportunities, what impact do you believe each could have on civic participation?

Response options: Very negative, Somewhat negative, Neither negative nor positive, Somewhat positive, Very positive

Grid rows: Youth volunteering on Election Day, Experiential learning (e.g., attending local government meeting), Simulation-based activities (e.g., youth mock elections), Media literacy training (e.g., training to spot mis- or disinformation), Youth-run newspapers or news stations, Youth-led town halls or candidate forums, Youth committees or boards within your government, Other (Please specify);, None of the above

If possible, please provide an example of a time that a youth civics education opportunity in your community either succeeded or failed.

Before submitting your survey, please provide any comments on its contents, or suggestions for future topics. We take all feedback seriously.