

# Strengthening Civic Health in Arizona

The Intersection of Civic Engagement and Health



**October 2023** Democratic processes that are inclusive and robust are vital to creating the opportunity for everyone to be healthy. Inside, see how a community’s “civic health” matters for Arizona.

# Introduction

In 1995 in Chicago, a record-setting heat wave resulted in a dramatic increase in heat-related deaths. Research into the deaths concluded that social isolation was one of the leading factors.<sup>1</sup> This study is now complemented by a growing body of literature documenting the impact of social connectedness on health.

Vitalyst Health Foundation took a closer look at this concept in an article titled “Connect for What? Social Capital and Health” published in 2011. This analysis from the Arizona Health Survey “found evidence for the importance of neighborhood social cohesion on self-reported health and well-being.”<sup>2</sup>

Social cohesion is the trusting network of relationships and shared values and norms of residents in a community that allow members to achieve shared well-being.

Vitalyst is among the health funders investing in these efforts to grow community connections and long-term active community participation. Increasingly, health funders see this community connectedness and civic engagement as a social determinant of health.<sup>3</sup>

This “civic health” work often calls for systemic reform to strengthen conditions so everyone can participate in the processes of building their communities. This includes establishing inclusive and robust democratic processes, which shape health outcomes and increase the opportunity for everyone to be healthy.

# Civic Health is a Priority for Vitalyst

“Civic health” refers to the civic, social, and political strength of a community. It includes civic engagement and reflects the community’s capacity to unify to resolve problems.

“Civic engagement” refers to the extent to which individuals and groups involve themselves in efforts to edify their community. It includes voting, volunteerism and service, and charitable giving.

Since its founding from the sale of St. Luke’s Health System in 1996, Vitalyst has connected, supported, and informed efforts that strengthen civic health. Volunteerism has been a key mission from the start, stemming from the robust groups of volunteers who provided charity care and helped at the hospitals.

As the foundation’s brand has evolved, so has its approach to strengthening civic health. Vitalyst has:

- connected residents through Arizona Town Hall for effective deliberations and consensus building;
- supported Arizona Gives Day, which inspires charitable giving and more donations to local nonprofits;
- supported place-based community development through the Live Well AZ Incubator; and
- informed legislation and public policy, and nonpartisan awareness building.

These efforts represent opportunities for the community to engage in civic life toward the common good. They are examples of activities that build social and cultural cohesion, and ultimately civic health.



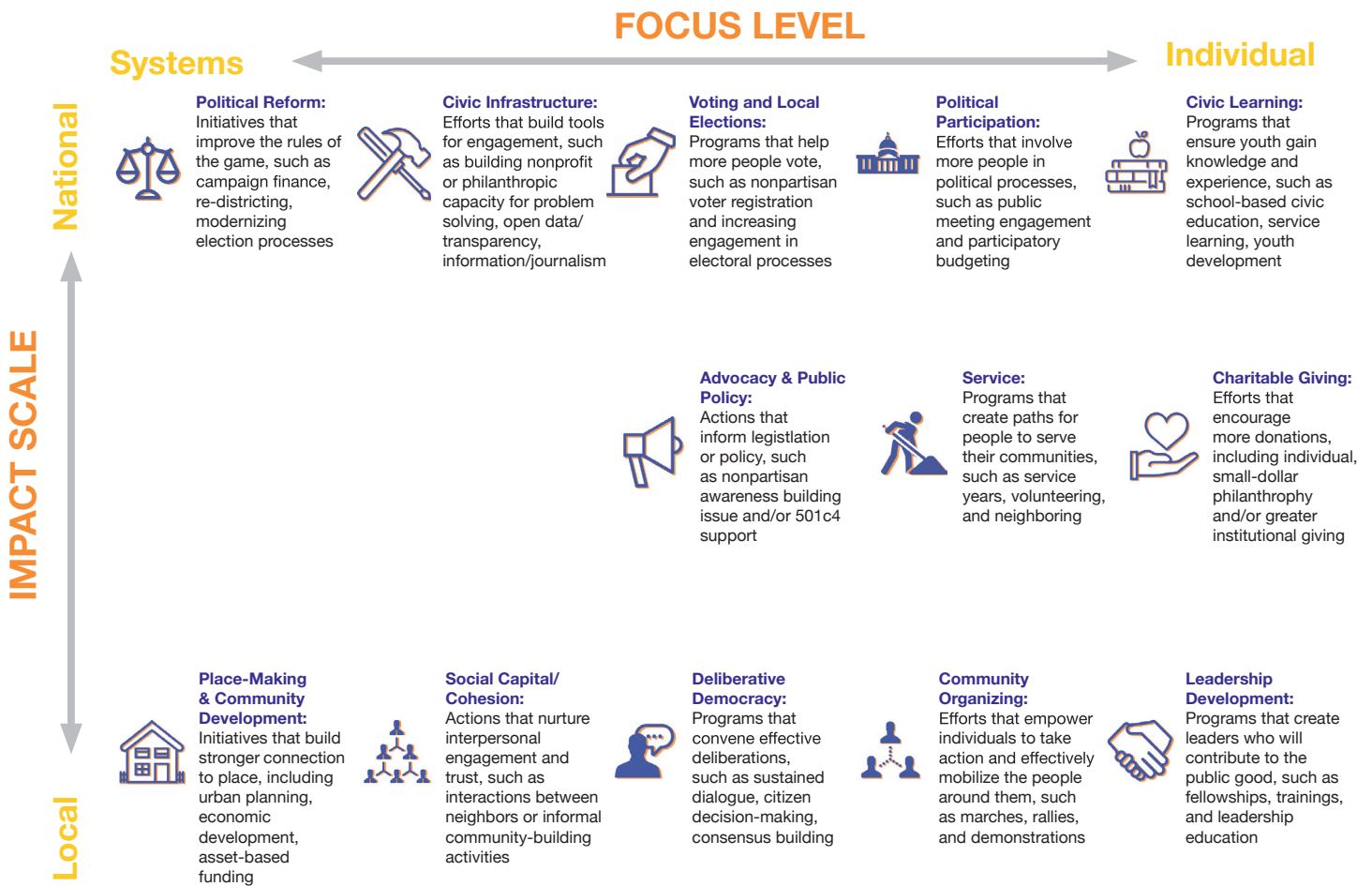
## ROBUST SOCIAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- Supportive relationships, families, homes, pets and neighborhoods
- Support for mental health
- Opportunities for engagement with arts, music and culture
- Community empowerment that can lead to systems change

## HEALTH IMPACTS

Economic stability, mental health, community well-being

## WHAT DOES CIVIC ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE?



Source: This is a component of the Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement's Civic Engagement Primer. You can access the full resource at [PACEFunders.org/Primer](https://pacefunders.org/Primer).

## Civic Engagement, Voting, and Health

Robust social and civic engagement are foundational to community health.<sup>4,5</sup> Civic engagement contributes to a community's overall health.<sup>6</sup> The ways through which communities are empowered to advocate for, and respond to, policies that reflect their values significantly impact their health and health equity.

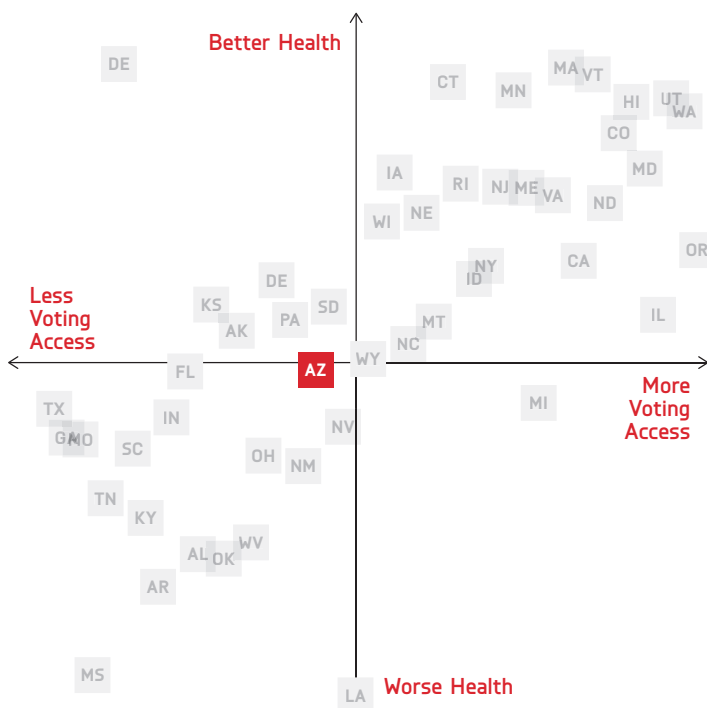
According to the Center for Diseases Control, healthy equity is achieved when every person can attain their full health potential, and no one is disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of social position or other socially determined circumstance.

Civic participation improves civic health, increases the social connectedness of communities, gives participants a sense of belonging, and connects them to the people and resources they need to thrive.<sup>7</sup>

Civic engagement includes full access to voting, which requires fair and inclusive voting systems. In a healthy democracy, inclusive voting systems eliminate inequities in voter registration and voting turnout. Fair and inclusive voting means policies are in place to assure that everyone who is eligible to vote can register and vote.

# When Democracy is Healthy, People are Healthy

Recognizing that civic participation and voting are important for health, in 2021, a coalition of public health organizations analyzed voting structures and public health outcomes across the U.S. The coalition developed the Health & Democracy Index to compare 12 public health indicators, voter turnout, and voting policies in each state. The Health & Democracy Index provides a shared health equity analysis of voting policy and serves as a tool to strengthen civic and voter participation.<sup>8</sup>



The Health & Democracy Index includes health measures only if there is an evidence-based link between the measure and civic engagement. Some of those measures are noted here, to the right.

## OVERALL HEALTH<sup>9</sup>

19

Arizona ranks 19th among all states on a composite measure of overall health, according to America's Health Rankings.

## SELF-RATED HEALTH<sup>10</sup>

29

Arizona ranks 29th among all states in self-rated health. Of Arizona adults surveyed, 82 percent reported their health is good or better when asked, "How is your general health?"

## MENTAL HEALTH<sup>11</sup>

30

Arizona ranks 30th among all states in the average number of poor mental health days reported in the last 30 days.

## EARLY DEATH<sup>12</sup>

26

Arizona ranks 26th among all states in premature death as determined by years of potential life lost (YPLL) before age 75. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are at higher risk of premature death.

## INFANT MORTALITY<sup>13</sup>

22

Arizona ranks 22nd among all states in infant mortality rate. The rate of infants dying within the first year of life is a common measure of public health worldwide. Rates are often higher among Black and American Indian communities than they are among White communities.

## HEALTH INSURANCE<sup>14</sup>

40

Arizona ranks 40th among all states in this measure of possessing health insurance.

## PHYSICIANS<sup>15</sup>

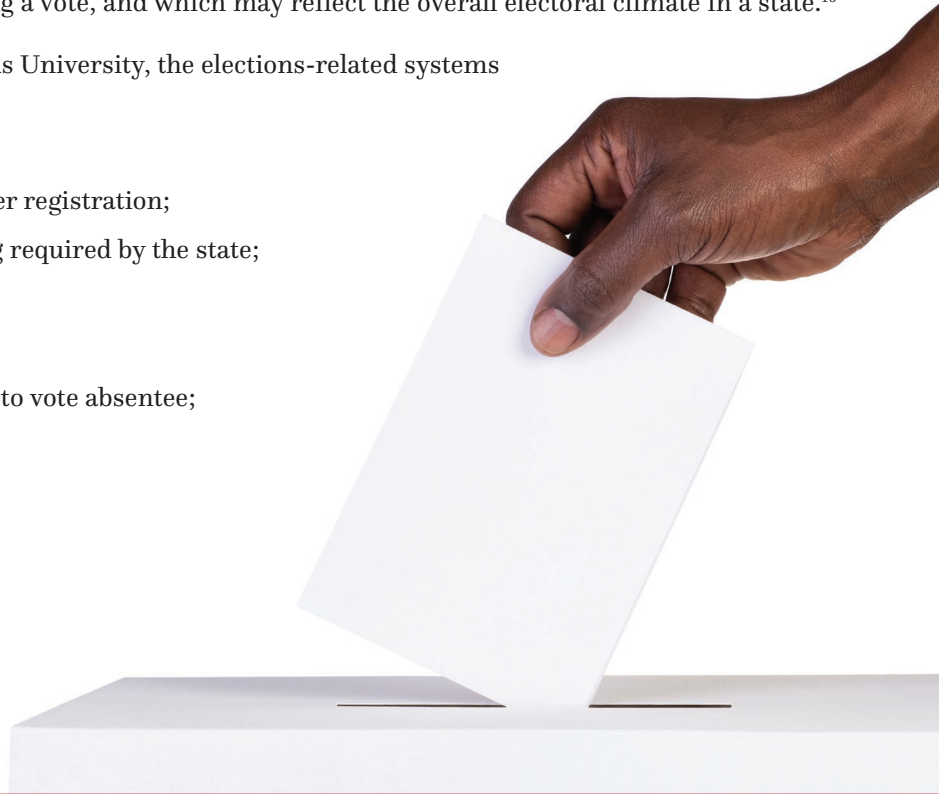
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Arizona ranks 31st among all states in the number of active physicians per 100,000 individuals, a measure indicating access to health care.

The analysis then compares those public health indicators and voter turnout to the Cost of Voting Index (COVI), which refers to the time and effort associated with casting a vote, and which may reflect the overall electoral climate in a state.<sup>16</sup>

Developed by political scientists at Northern Illinois University, the elections-related systems COVI is built on include:

- registration deadlines;
- registration restrictions, such as no online voter registration;
- registration drive restrictions, such as training required by the state;
- pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds;
- automatic voter registration;
- voting inconvenience, such as excuse required to vote absentee;
- voter ID laws;
- poll hours; and
- early voting.



## ARIZONA'S OVERALL COST OF VOTING RANK 30TH

30<sup>TH</sup>

Arizona's cost of voting ranks in the bottom half of all states, meaning that even with a higher registration rate, it may still be difficult for many Arizonans to cast their vote.

NO

### INCLUSIVE REGISTRATION POLICY

Inclusive registration policies reach populations that may face multiple barriers to voting in an election. Adopting policies that facilitate the registration of eligible voters, such as automatic registration, same-day registration, and Election Day registration, can help address the barriers that keep many eligible people from voting. **Arizona is one of 20 states that do not have any of these voter registration supports.**

YES

### RESTRICTIVE VOTER ID POLICY

Restrictive voter identification policies include requiring additional documentation, such as photo ID, at the polls, even after voters have already established their eligibility through voter registration. **In 2020, Arizona was one of 21 states that had restrictive voter ID policies.**

YES

### VOTE-AT-HOME OPTION

Vote-at-home options include all mail elections and states with no-excuse absentee voting. Vote-at-home policies enable individuals to vote around their schedules, helping to eliminate barriers to voting on Election Day such as long polling lines, lack of access to transportation, and inflexible work schedules. **Arizona is one of 34 states that do offer vote-at-home options.**

NO

### VOTING RIGHTS RESTORATION

In some states, individuals lose their right to vote after being convicted of a felony. In some of those states, the right to vote is not restored even after time is served. **Arizona is one of 27 states that removes voting rights for felons and does not restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated persons.**

# Impact of Voting on Health & Well-Being

The Health & Democracy Index shows that the significant voting barriers communities face correlate with worse health outcomes. While the findings fall short of establishing a direct causal relationship, with more research needed to establish that relationship, inclusive voting and civic engagement, along with social inclusion, a sense of belonging, and access to health resources, are becoming increasingly associated with better health outcomes.

Barriers to these social conditions can become self-reinforced because people who are experiencing poor health are less likely to vote. Communities with higher rates of poor health experience higher rates of mortality and a further decline in electoral influence due to the decline in their population.

Thankfully, higher levels of civic participation can mitigate disparities. For instance, rates of infant mortality are higher among Black and American Indian communities than they are among White communities, but this disparity shrinks for all racial and ethnic groups in states that have better civic participation.

**Voting shapes community health** through the policies that are made by elected officials or through citizens' initiatives, and the systems they create and fund. These include decisions that:

- determine access to integrated health care;
- develop better nutrition, housing, and transportation solutions;
- impact first responders, crisis response, and harm-reduction approaches; and
- build educational and economic opportunities.

History shows that these decisions reverberate through generations because they shape systems and structures for years to come.<sup>17</sup>

**Voting also shapes individual health** by improving social cohesion as people work together to shape the conditions of their lives. When people take part in decision-making processes, it increases their sense of self-efficacy as they realize they do have the means to improve life for themselves and their communities.<sup>18</sup>

The reverse is also true. Research from the National Child Development Study shows that voting abstention has been

associated with poor self-rated health, even after controlling for socio-demographic factors.<sup>19</sup>

Inequality in voting behavior is also associated with self-rated health. Researchers at Harvard School of Public Health investigated the association between voting inequality at the state level and self-rated health using the Current Population Survey data. They found that socioeconomic inequality in political participation, as measured by voter turnout, is associated with poor self-rated health.<sup>20</sup>

## Healthy Voting Systems

In a democracy, voting is one of the most important ways in which people come together to shape the conditions in which they live. The act of voting, both individually and as a collective, is an affirmation of our democracy.

Inclusive voting policies enable every eligible voter to easily register and vote. This ensures the participation of their voice in the democratic process, in turn increasing the likelihood that decision-makers work on behalf of the health and well-being of everyone, not just of a few.<sup>21</sup>

Vitalyst believes all Arizonans should have an equitable opportunity to participate in democracy. Policies ensuring such opportunities establish the basis of a healthy democracy and a healthy community. Health and civic engagement are interconnected. As such, Vitalyst supports policies that enhance the ability of individuals and communities to constructively engage with each other and the political systems that represent them.

In addition to supporting nonpartisan systemic reforms that improve civic health, Vitalyst is committed to building the infrastructure of partners working to improve civic health in Arizona, including the nonprofit and philanthropic capacity for problem solving that builds stronger intracommunity connections.

This includes supporting the development of grassroots organizations that improve community and civic health leading up to decennial Censuses, strengthening community partners advancing health equity through civic health coalitions, and informing decision makers on the connection between civic health and the health of communities.



# Register to Vote and Vote!

Voting matters for health, so Vitalyst encourages Arizonans to register and vote in elections. Not being registered to vote was the leading reason eligible individuals across the country did not vote in the 2020 General Election.<sup>22</sup> While the first step in voting is registering to vote, being able to register is not always straightforward.

In Arizona, eligible individuals can register online if they have a state-issued ID, or they can register by filling out a paper registration form and returning it by mail or in person to their local elections department. However, the deadline for voter registration is three weeks before the election. In addition, when registering to vote, Arizonans must provide proof of citizenship.<sup>23</sup> While federal policies can help certain groups of people overcome barriers to registration and voting, inequities remain.<sup>24</sup>

There are multiple reasons why people do or do not vote. Often, the reasons reflect policies in place to encourage or restrict voting. One general population survey found that respondents reporting having not voted in 2020 due to a barrier reported there were sometimes multiple barriers. These included not being able to get off work, not having childcare, lack of transportation to the polls, being turned away at the polling location, or finding the lines at the polling place too long.<sup>26</sup>

Voter registration and voting policies shape these barriers, and include voter registration guidelines, identification policies, number and locale of polling places, and assistance with voting processes.

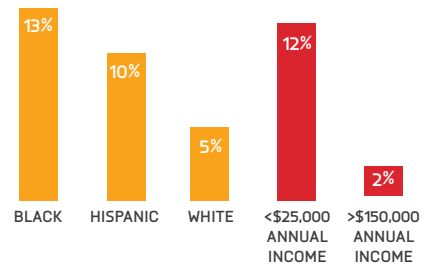
Getting information about elections, voting systems, and the role of civic participation to Arizona voters is important for the health of our communities and our state.

Health and well-being for the people of Arizona depend on the active participation and engagement of Arizona residents. Fair representation and inclusive voting are essential elements of civic health in every community, as voting empowers communities to advocate for policies that will promote optimal health for all.



## Photo Identification

Registration and voting restrictions do not affect every community equally. Below are the percentages of eligible voters that lack photo identification.<sup>25</sup>



## VOTING MATTERS FOR HEALTH.

TO REGISTER TO VOTE IN ARIZONA, VISIT [WWW.SERVICEARIZONA.COM](http://WWW.SERVICEARIZONA.COM).  
FOR INFORMATION ON VOTING IN ARIZONA, VISIT [WWW.AZSOS.GOV/ELECTIONS](http://WWW.AZSOS.GOV/ELECTIONS).

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Produced in Partnership



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