

Poll Results Illuminate American Civic Life

Marquette Law School Poll Shows Who Participates and How Much.

BY CHARLES FRANKLIN

Let us begin by recalling a famous dictum from 1840: “The political associations which exist in the United States are only a single feature in the midst of the immense assemblage of associations in that country. Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations If it be proposed to advance some truth, or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society.” — Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, Sec. 2, Chap. V.

That was then.

In *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam highlighted the decline in group membership and activity in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century.

And in a sequel to *Bowling Alone*, Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett demonstrated that the extensive civic associations Tocqueville found in the 1830s had become far less common by the beginning of the 20th century. Specifically, in *The Upswing*, published in 2020, Putnam and Garrett documented low levels of group memberships in the early 1900s and the dramatic rise of associations over the next 50 years, before the declines found in *Bowling Alone*. The hopeful message was that a rise of associations could happen again. Americans may yet rediscover the value of civic organizations.

In March 2025, the Marquette Law School Poll took a look at elements of civic participation

in the United States today. Membership in some types of associations is quite limited, while there is greater participation in other groups. Here we look at levels of membership, who participates, and the relationship of membership with opportunities to influence local policymaking.

Membership

Among a national sample of 1,021 American adults, just 6% say they are members of (“belong to”) “a business or civic group such as Rotary, League of Women Voters, Masons, or Junior League.” Some 13% say they are members of “a neighborhood association, block group or club, or any group dealing with other local issues.” And 28% say they do volunteer activities for organizations in some way.

To combine the data on membership of this sort (a civic group, neighborhood association, and performing volunteer work for an organization, to restate

them in brief), 34% of American adults are engaged in at least one association or activity. We will refer to them as “members,” or call this “membership,” in the discussion below.

We will let one other form of membership stand by itself here: regular participation in religious services. The ubiquity of places of worship provides near-universal access to an extent that more secular organizations may not. Thirty percent say they attend religious services at least once a month, with 20% attending a few times a year and 51% attending seldom or never.

Actions

Interaction with neighbors is another form of civic activity. Thirty-five percent talk with their neighbors at least a few times a week, rising to 76% if speaking at least monthly is the measure.

Overall, 37% of adults say that on at least one occasion they have attended a “local school meeting, such as the PTA or PTO,” and this percentage rises to 47% among those with school-age children.

A similar percentage, 35%, say they have attended a city council or school board meeting, a rate that rises from 24% for 18–29 year olds to 44% among those 60 years old or older.

And aspirationally, 72% say they would work with neighbors to keep a local elementary school

open, and 83% say they would work to keep a fire station open.

Expectations of others

Trust in the federal government has declined steadily since the 1960s. In this March 2025 national poll, 23% say they trust the government all or most of the time, with the majority, 63%, saying only some of the time and 14% saying they never trust the government.

There is somewhat more confidence in getting a fair hearing from a local school board, city council, or county board, with 51% who say they would get a fair hearing, while 49% don't think they would.

Trust in people is somewhat higher, with 57% who say most people can be trusted and 43% who say people can't be trusted.

Who is more likely to join?

College graduates are more likely to be members of an association (45%), including volunteering (as noted above), than are people without a college degree (28%).

Black respondents are more likely to be members or to volunteer (44%) than are white respondents (33%) or Hispanic respondents (30%). This advantage in Black participation is related to greater church attendance and associated volunteering, but it persists for secular civic organizations not directly connected with churches.

Homeowners are also a bit more likely to be members of associations (36%) than are renters (30%).

Perhaps surprisingly, there is little difference in association membership by age. Among those 18–29, 33% are members, as are 35% of those 30–44, 31% of those 45–59, and 35%

of those 60 and over. This lack of correlation with age also holds for each of the types of membership: civic organizations, neighborhood groups, and volunteer activities.

Having school-age children is related to only a slight increase in membership, 37%, compared to 32% for those without children at home.

Church attendance has a strong relationship with membership in secular groups, as we've defined it above. Those who attend church at least monthly have a membership rate of 57%, while those who attend a few times a year have a 32% membership rate and those who seldom or never attend have a 21% membership rate.

Some of this is likely connected to volunteer activity that is church-related. Frequent church-attenders have a 49% rate of volunteering, while those who seldom or never attend volunteer at only a 17% rate. However, those who attend often are also more likely to be members of civic organizations and of neighborhood groups than are those who seldom attend.

Membership and opportunity to influence local government

Members are more likely to attend school meetings, such as the PTA or PTO, with 50% of members attending versus 31% for non-members. Forty-seven percent of those with school-age children have attended such meetings, while 34% of those without school-age children have done so.

Fifty-one percent of members have attended school board or city council meetings, compared to 26% for non-members.

As for expressing willingness to work with neighbors to keep

the nearest elementary school open, 79% of members say they would, while 69% of non-members would. There is little relationship of membership with expressing a willingness to work to keep a nearby fire station open, with 85% of members and 82% of non-members saying they would.

Those who are members of associations are considerably more likely to think they would get a fair hearing from the school board or city council, 60%, than are non-members, 46%.

Those who are members show higher levels of trust in other people, with 65% saying that most people can be trusted versus 52% among non-members.

Conclusions

This one survey cannot tell us whether civic memberships (in associations, organizations, etc.) have begun to reverse the decline Putnam found in the second half of the 20th century. We find that about one-third of adults take part in civic associations of some kind, and no doubt a more specifically expansive list of associations would increase this percentage. But we also find that for certain demographic groups membership passes the 50% mark. Membership in civic organizations is also associated with opportunities to influence local government and a greater anticipation of a fair hearing from school boards and city councils. Whether the current level of civic membership is historically high or low, it is clear that membership opens pathways (including, not least, the perception of pathways) to influencing local decision-making. ■

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