

Many members of conservation organizations such as the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth identify themselves as environmentalists. So do members of the Green Party of the United States. “Greens” are committed to what they call “ecological and economic sustainability.” They want to meet the needs of the world’s people today without damaging the ability of future generations to provide for themselves. Their party platform includes this statement:

“ We support a sustainable society that utilizes resources in such a way that future generations will benefit and not suffer from the practices of our generation. To this end we must practice agriculture that replenishes the soil, move to an energy-efficient economy, and live in ways that respect the integrity of natural systems.

—Green Party of the United States Platform, 2016



Liberals are considered left of center, while conservatives are on the right. But there are other positions along the political spectrum, and many Americans are not quite sure where they fit.

Like the Libertarian Party, the Green Party has been most successful in electing candidates at the local level. The party is stronger in Europe, however, and has won national offices in a number of countries.

The Americans in the Middle: Centrism Many Americans don’t fit neatly into any ideological camp. They consider themselves moderates, or middle-of-the-road. These are people who sit at the center of the political spectrum, between the ideologies of left and right.

In recent years, U.S. politics have become more polarized, meaning that political parties have adopted more extreme policies. The Republican Party has grown more conservative, and the Democratic Party more liberal. This polarization is especially evident in the current Congress, which remains divided on a number of issues.

These strong divisions often push toward **centrism**. Many surveys show that moderates, along with people who describe themselves as slightly conservative or slightly liberal, make up a large part of the U.S. population.

In contrast to people with a strong liberal or conservative point of view, centrists may hold a mix of liberal, conservative, and perhaps environmental views. Centrism is not an ideology with its own political party. As a result, during election time, centrists often cross party lines, depending on the candidates and issues of the day.

4. How Americans Engage in Civic Life

For most Americans, voting is the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the words “civic duty.” In a democracy, voting is one of the most basic and important ways to engage in civic life.

There are many other ways to be an active citizen, however. You can read articles online or watch the news on television to stay informed about current events. You can talk to friends about political issues, put a political bumper sticker on your car to demonstrate your support, or express your views on social media. You can become a volunteer with a community group or follow a political figure on Twitter. By doing any of these things, you are engaging in civic life.

Civil Society: The “Social Capital” of Democracy At the start of this lesson, you read about Robert D. Putnam’s work on civic engagement. Putnam concluded that Americans today are less likely to participate in civic associations than they were in the past. He further believes that such participation is crucial to democracy.

Putnam argues that social clubs and civic organizations are building blocks of what political scientists call **civil society**. This term refers to a middle layer of voluntary associations and institutions that exists between government on the one hand and individuals and families on the other.

Many political scientists argue that a strong civil society is essential to a democracy. The organizations that make up civil society, they point out, are nourished by citizen involvement. Citizen involvement, in turn, helps to expand a society’s **social capital**. Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals” that are forged through their participation in voluntary associations. Building a community through volunteering is one way someone can build their social capital.

To understand how social capital works, consider this simple example. In many communities, parents of school-age children join the local Parent Teacher Association. As members of their PTA, parents work together to improve their children’s schools.

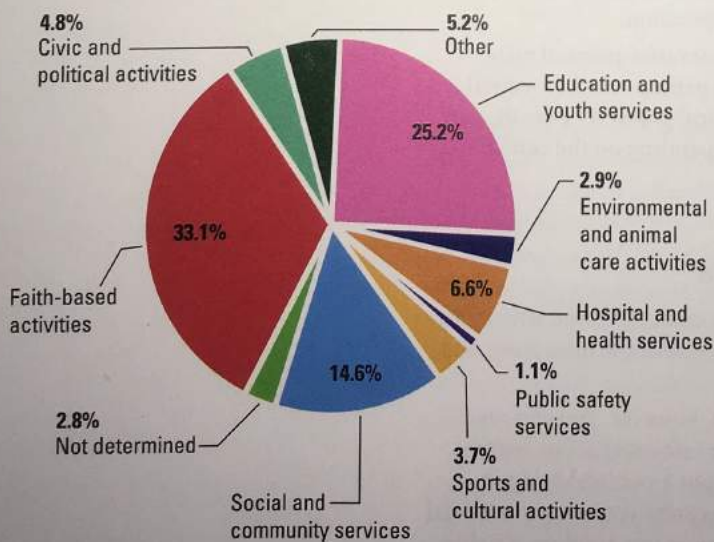
While working on PTA projects, parents form new social networks and exchange information about their community. Through these networks, they may create new groups to work on other local issues. In this way, the connections forged within the PTA help to generate new energy and ideas that benefit the larger community. By volunteering their time and working together, the PTA is able to create positive change within a school and a community. This is social capital in action.

Of course, the PTA is only one of thousands of volunteer organizations in the United States that Americans might choose to join. As the graphs in this section show, Americans get involved in many types of volunteer activities, for varying amounts of time. All of these efforts help to strengthen civil society and build social capital.

Americans who volunteer their time do so by participating in various types of activities. Over 30 percent of volunteers devote 100 hours or more a year to volunteer activities.

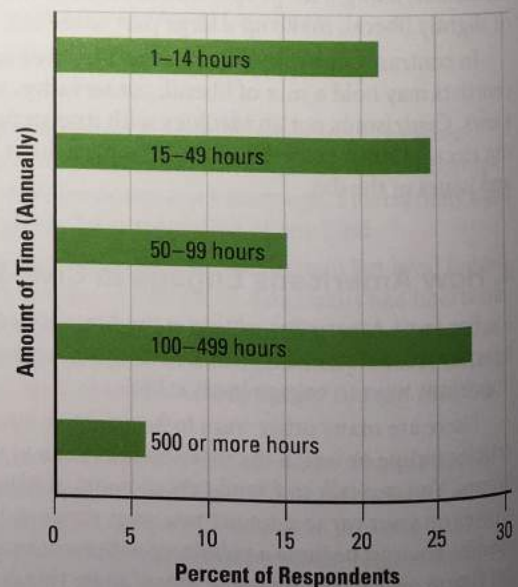
Volunteering in the United States ▼

Volunteer Activities, 2015



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Time Spent Volunteering, 2015



Source: The Gallup Organization

Forms of Civic Engagement ▼

Civic engagement takes many forms, from writing letters to organizing protests. These photographs illustrate just some of the ways citizens can make their voices heard.

Attend a Public Meeting



Find out what's going on in your community by attending a public meeting. You might be surprised to discover how many decisions affecting your life are made close to your home.

Volunteer in a Political Campaign



Get involved in a political campaign. Share the excitement of election night as volunteers wait for the votes to be counted.

Circulate a Petition



Take part in a petition drive for a cause you care about. Oftentimes, you can sign a petition online.

Organize a Fundraiser



Raise money for a worthy cause. The challenge is to help people feel good about both asking for donations and giving them.

Organize a Demonstration



Put your passion to work by organizing a demonstration. Sometimes actions really do speak louder than words.

Get Involved in a Service Project



Find a way to give back to your community. You will feel good about yourself while making a difference.

Putting Social Capital to Work in Michigan Social capital promotes civic engagement not only in local communities, but also in state and national affairs. Such was the case in Michigan in 2014, after the city of Flint changed its water source to save money.

In the 1980s, General Motors moved jobs away from the city to other locations. This led to severe economic issues. At the time of the decision to switch water lines, the city's population was majority African American, with about 40 percent of residents living below the federal poverty level. Michigan governor Rick Snyder had appointed an emergency manager to improve the city's finances. One of the steps they took was to find a more affordable source of water for the city.

They decided to use the Flint River as a temporary source of affordable water. However, when they made the change, officials did not ensure that the water's pipes were properly treated against corrosion. Corrosion is when metals are gradually destroyed by the environment; in this case, by water. When metals are destroyed, particles can enter the water stream, causing health problems for people who use the water. Still, officials claimed that the water was safe for public consumption.

Soon after the change, Flint residents complained that the water smelled like sewage and looked murky and brown. Many also reported health issues such as rashes and headaches. Michigan officials, however, said that the water met all quality standards, and insisted it was safe.

In addition to Flint residents, local organizations also raised concerns about the water. General Motors took its local engine plant off city water after determining that the water was affecting engine parts. Researchers at a nearby hospital found that the water caused elevated levels of lead in the blood of children, while the University of Michigan-Flint detected high levels of lead in the drinking water on campus. Virginia Tech also conducted research and found similar results in the city.

While the city disputed the findings of these studies, the city's citizens continued to work. Civic activists sent emails and letters to local newspapers and officials and organized marches and protests to demand clean water. They contacted state and federal government agencies and attended city council meetings to discuss the negative effects of the water. They also used social media to discuss the problem, which brought the crisis to national attention and attracted volunteers who donated and helped distribute bottled water.

During the height of the Flint water crisis, Flint residents used social media to organize donation drives and call for volunteers to help distribute donations.



The organized efforts of Flint residents had an impact. In 2016, almost two years after the Flint water crisis began, city officials began a plan to replace the city's water pipes, which had been damaged by the improperly treated water. A state investigation found that "deeply embedded institutional, systemic and historical racism," given the racial makeup of the citizens, was at the center of the crisis, leading officials to ignore concerns from Flint residents. Over a dozen state and local officials faced criminal charges for their roles. Still, many residents find it difficult to trust the water in Flint.

Four Categories of Civic Engagement: Which One Fits You? As the Flint, Michigan, story illustrates, civic engagement can have a real impact, especially when people work together toward common goals. But just how engaged are most Americans?

To answer that question, political scientists regularly survey Americans about their civic and political activities. Using those data, scholars at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) have determined that most people fall into one of four broad categories of civic engagement.

Electoral specialists. This category includes those whose main engagement is through the election process. People in this group vote, volunteer in political campaigns, and try to persuade others to vote as well.

Civic specialists. People in this group focus on improving communities and helping others. They join local civic groups, support nonprofit organizations, and take part in fundraising activities for worthy causes.

Dual activists. This category is made up of people who engage in both electoral and civic activities. They may be found passing out leaflets in a political campaign one day and volunteering in a homeless shelter the next.

The disengaged. This group is made up of people who are not significantly engaged in civic life. They don't vote or pay attention to civic affairs.

Which category best matches your level of civic engagement? Are you satisfied with your answer?

Lesson Summary

Civic participation is essential in a democracy. Citizens who get involved in civic and community groups help to strengthen civil society. At the same time, they tend to become more engaged in the political process.

Rights and responsibilities of Americans U.S. citizens have many rights. Over time, many of these rights have been extended to lawful permanent residents. Both groups also share many responsibilities, including obeying the law, paying taxes, and, for men, registering for military service.

Becoming a citizen There are two types of U.S. citizens: native born and naturalized. Naturalization is a process that takes many months. Naturalized citizens receive almost all the benefits enjoyed by native-born U.S. citizens.

Political culture Most Americans share a common set of beliefs and values about politics and government. This political culture helps to unite Americans, even when they differ over ideology. The two most prominent political ideologies in this country are liberalism and conservatism.

Civic engagement Citizens can engage in civic life in many ways. When they do so, they help to build a stronger civil society.