



## CIVIC HEALTH IN CALIFORNIA

California is the most populous state in the union with more residents than the 21 least populous states combined. It is also one of the most diverse states. Such factors can pose a challenge to civic health, but they also make civic engagement vital to the health of the state. While civic engagement in California lags slightly behind the national average, it's not by much.

The data shows that California performs above the national average in certain types of social civic engagement, particularly on indicators such as working with neighbors to fix a problem in the community, membership in school and community associations, and involvement in sport and recreation associations. The state does not compare so favorably, however, when it comes to indicators of political civic engagement such as voting in statewide elections or attending public meetings.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

When communities have high levels of engagement across all areas, they are stronger. For example, communities with high civic rates, social cohesion, and nonprofit density are better able to withstand unemployment in a recession. California has experienced first-hand the consequences of disengagement – from high-level political scandals to bankrupt cities.

Civic health is not just important in difficult times. People are happier and healthier, and government is stronger when citizens regularly participate in the democratic process. Even in times of tight budgets, California has seen examples of creative projects and solutions in communities where residents and businesses partner with local governments for service delivery (see our Golden Governance Report released in 2011 on [GoldenGovernance.org](http://GoldenGovernance.org)). In short, individuals, communities, and our nation thrive when civic health is strong.

### WHAT SHOULD WE KNOW? AND HOW?

Using data to identify civic strengths and opportunities is the best way to spark discussion about ways to motivate greater participation.

The Davenport Institute and our partners commit to utilizing these findings to identify ways to motivate, create, and support opportunities for greater involvement from all California residents.

### WHO CAN BE INVOLVED?

Everyone has the power to make a difference in how their community, state, and country thrive. For California and our democracy to be effective, people from all backgrounds must be actively engaged in civic life. California has a history of leadership in progressive government reforms - from the introduction of direct government measures in the early 20th century to the Citizens Redistricting Commission in the early 21st century. California has also been a consistent leader in technology and innovation.

From the private, non-profit, and public sectors, California has resources that can contribute to the civic health of this great state. These resources can be best utilized through robust participation – and collaboration – from institutions and leaders across the state, including businesses, nonprofits, and government entities.

Moving from data to solutions, we recommend intentional sector-specific planning to improve civic engagement through these diagnostic questions:

---

### **PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERS:**

- Is “public engagement” part of your government’s mission statement?
- Are your elected officials/staff familiar with the “Public Engagement Spectrum,” which outlines the different purposes for involving the public?
- Looking back at recent public engagement efforts, have they been more open-ended or have they been “marketing” a particular policy solution?
- Do you distinguish between “public comment” and “public engagement?”
- Have you looked at ways of encouraging a variety of civic engagement – from voting to volunteering?

### **NON-PROFIT SECTOR LEADERS:**

- Has your experience with public engagement been focused on promoting particular policy solutions or on developing policy directions from the public you are serving?
- Do you feel policy directives have come from management (local or national), or from those you are serving?
- Have you worked with government to promote a public participation process?
- If your organizational focus has been political engagement, are there opportunities to support other forms of participation (like volunteering)?

### **PRIVATE SECTOR LEADERS:**

- What is your company’s strategy for connecting employees with volunteering opportunities?
- Are there ways, either internally (through your employees) or externally (through your customers), that you can promote unbiased political engagement?