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Civic Health Index shows God, Friends and Facebook are critical in tough times

Michael Smith on 27 Aug 2009



Photo by bookgrl

In these times of economic uncertainty, housing starts and stops and growing debts, Americans have become all too familiar with the glut of polls, indexes and trend reports that measure our every national move. Today, the [National Conference on Citizenship](#) released one more measuring stick, the annual [Civic Health Index](#), which reveals some cause for comfort, and some for concern.

Based on data collected in 2009, this year's America's Civic Health Index provides a

comprehensive view of how Americans are confronting their civic/neighborly duties during the worst economic crisis in recent history. An overwhelming majority of survey respondents (72%) reported cutting back time spent on civic activities (like volunteering and community groups) in the past year. And, 66% of Americans say they feel other people are responding to the current economic downturn by looking out for themselves.

While the data does seem to draw a conclusion that Americans are cutting back and turning inward, a series of new questions, which get to a different (but just as important) side of civic participation shows that personal engagement is thriving with 50% of respondents having reported giving food or money to someone in need who is not a relative and 43% giving food or money to someone in need who is a relative.

In a [New York Times article](#) today, Stephanie Strom points out the possible contradiction between the Civic Health Index with nonprofit reports of record volunteering requests or the [Corporation for National and Community Service's \(CNCS\) Volunteering in America report](#), which showed volunteering remaining steady in 2008. NCoC Executive Director David Smith notes 2008 is a lot different than 2009 when it comes to hard times, and CNCS Lead Researcher Robert Grimm explains that the two studies agree that "do it yourself" civic engagement is on the rise.

The Civic Health Index always yields interesting information about what motivates some people to action while some sit on the sidelines. This year's study is no different, showing that people with modest means (annual income of less than \$50,000), people that frequently attend religious services, and people with active social lives (online and offline) tend to give more and do more. The results indicate that social engagement through church, friends or even via social networking sites can have a significant impact in countering the negative effect of the current economic downturn on civic engagement. Additionally, Millennials outpaced all other age groups in volunteering (43%), while Baby Boomers outpaced everyone else in giving food, money or shelter to those in need (38%).

I encourage you to take the time to read the report, which is full of thought-provoking data on a variety of civic health indicators beyond what I've mentioned here. In the meantime, here are a few other interesting points:

- Only 6% of Americans have a "great deal of confidence" in Congress, the Executive Branch, or banks and financial institutions, and major companies occupy the basement of public trust at only 5%. This is a significant change as major companies were the 3rd most trusted institution in 2000 and have fallen to 10th in 2009.
- 31 percent of survey respondents noted they had a "great deal of confidence" in small

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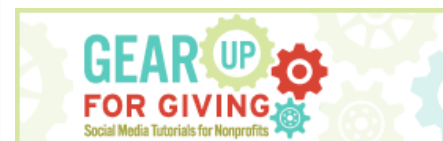
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businesses, making them the most trusted institution.

- 40 percent of African Americans expressed some level of trust in federal government, compared to only 22 percent of Whites.
- Tax breaks, paid time off, and educational vouchers are the incentives that people favored most as ways of increasing levels of public engagement (all between 65-80%).
- Regarding "Citizen-Centered" civic engagement, which combines community dialogue and deliberation with volunteer action, 16% of respondents reported attending a community meeting in which there was a discussion of community affairs, and 13 % reported working with other people in their neighborhood to solve a community problem.
- Texas, Minnesota and Kansas received the highest numbers when asked, "In your opinion, how strong is the civic tradition of your state?" while Illinois, Arizona, and Georgia received the lowest.
- In addition to the America's Civic Health Index report, the National Conference on Citizenship will be partnering with local institutions to release state specific reports in California, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Ohio throughout the fall of 2009.

On September 9, 2009, the National Conference on Citizenship will [host a gathering](#) in Washington, DC to discuss the findings in this report, while engaging celebrity citizens, nonprofit leaders and everyday Americans in a discussion on how meaningful civic engagement can solve real problems. The Case Foundation is proud to be the official Online Engagement sponsor of the event, supporting live streaming and interactivity so that everyone can join the discussion from anywhere. Keep watching NCoC's website for more information.

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