JUNE 2026

The Local Advantage:

How community-based efforts build the trust and agency America needs

TRUST FOR CIVIC LIFE 2025 COMMUNITY SURVEY REPORT

TRUST FOR CIVIC LIFE

JOHNS HOPKINS
STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION
SNF AGORA INSTITUTE

ABOUT THE TRUST FOR CIVIC LIFE

The Trust for Civic Life is a grantmaking collaborative supporting the community efforts that help Americans connect, solve problems together, and feel confident in a shared future. Launched in 2024, the collaborative brings together a cross-ideological team of over 20 funders to invest $50 million by 2028 in a new wave of local civic opportunities that increase trust, agency, and belonging in rural America. Through its grantmaking, the Trust funds both the critical groundwork and promising experiments that allow civic participation to take hold in rural communities and spread across the country.

Learning is core to the Trust for Civic Life's mission. The team regularly shares what it is learning from our grantee partners on the ground and findings from our ongoing community research efforts.

trustforciviclife.org

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people and organizations dedicated to understanding the influence of local civic engagement collaborated on this report. We owe a special thanks to Matthew Denney and Hahrie Han at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University; Trust for Civic Life team members Caitlin Shrigley, Christina Jodice, Charlie Brown, and Hollie Russon Gilman; research assistant Louis Gallegos; and the Trust for Civic Life funding members whose support makes this work possible.

TRUST FOR CIVIC LIFE CIVIC HUB GRANTEES

This year, 24 Trust for Civic Life Civic Hub grantees participated in the survey and introduced researchers to their networks. We are grateful for their partnership and generosity.

- Abara (TX)
- Adirondack Community Foundation (NY)
- Athens Area Council for the Arts (TN)
- Athens County Foundation (OH)
- BB-RISE (TX)
- Black Belt Community Foundation (AL)
- Coalfield Development (WV)
- Communities Unlimited (TX/AR)
- Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque (IA)
- Eastern Carolina Community Foundation (SC)
- Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky (KY)
- Foundation for Appalachian Ohio (OH)
- Four Bands Community Fund (SD)
- Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation (CA)
- Innovia Foundation (WA/ID)
- Keweenaw Community Foundation (MI)
- Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (MS)
- Nebraska Community Foundation (NE)
- Pennsylvania Wilds (PA)
- Sićaŋġu Co (SD)
- The Industrial Commons (NC)
- Thrive Allen County (KS)
- Thrive Umpqua (OR)
- West Virginia Community Development Hub (WV)

RESEARCH PARTNERS

Researchers Matthew Denney and Hahrie Han at SNF Agora Institute conducted the survey and analyzed the data in partnership with the Trust, pairing scientific rigor with a commitment to work alongside community partners. These research partners have played a critical role in helping the Trust understand civic life and its underpinnings.

CONTENT COLLABORATORS

The final report was produced with contributions from Drew Lindsay (writing and interviews) and Katie Caldwell (layout and design).

The findings, recommendations, and conclusions presented in this report are those of the Trust for Civic Life and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of individual Civic Hub grantees and Trust funding members.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In communities all across the country, Americans are taking action in ways that rarely make national headlines. *A group of neighbors rallies to form a grocery co-op in a rural community, downtown business owners organize a small town's first holiday festival, and two people who have never seen eye to eye on politics end up on the same volunteer crew. Within these acts, trust is forming, people share a purpose, and they believe their participation can make a difference.*

That is the picture that emerges from the Trust for Civic Life's second community survey, conducted in fall 2025 in partnership with researchers Matthew Denney and Hahrie Han at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University. Over 1,000 rural Americans across 24 communities shared what civic life looks like where they live. Their insights reinforce and deepen what the Trust team learned in its first survey: local communities have an advantage when it comes to building trust, agency, and belonging, and drawing people into civic life.

A major finding from the Trust for Civic Life's first community survey was about the importance of action. Conducted in 2024, the survey found that collective action among community members was closely tied to trust, agency, and belonging, but dialogue alone was not. That finding helped the Trust refine its grantmaking and investments, and researchers continued to explore it in the second year of the survey.

WHAT'S NEW & NOTABLE IN YEAR TWO

This second survey was larger and more specific. With nearly double the respondents and three times the number of participating communities, it gave researchers richer insight into what cultivates civic culture and participation in rural communities. Several things stood out when comparing survey results from year one and year two:

CHANGES IN LEVELS OF TRUST

In year one, trust in national institutions was low and trust in local institutions was high across nearly every community surveyed. This gap has only become more pronounced. Between year one and year two, rural Americans' trust in the presidency and Congress plummeted. Meanwhile, trust, agency, and belonging were high at the local level and consistent year over year.

CONFIRMING YEAR ONE FINDINGS

With double the survey respondents this year, the findings confirmed that taking action with other community members to achieve a specific outcome — whether around an everyday problem or a more formal community-wide issue — was strongly tied to feelings of trust, agency, and belonging, while dialogue was not.

Continued on page 6

WHAT'S NEW & NOTABLE IN YEAR 2 *Continued*

DEEPER INSIGHTS AROUND AGENCY

Agency was a trait that specifically stood out this year, with interesting relationships emerging. Individuals who are connected with a local group that was improving quality of life in that community had a greater sense of agency. Additionally, the depth of a person's engagement drives agency more than the actual time spent volunteering. The survey found it is not about hours; it is about getting closer to the decision-making.

ACTION ACROSS DIFFERENCES

People are quietly taking action across divides in daily life, with nearly 50 percent of respondents saying they initiated some type of action across differences. Those "depolarizing acts" were strongly correlated to greater outgroup trust.

In this second survey, the picture is becoming clearer. Local civic life, especially the work of trusted, embedded organizations that bring people together to act and solve shared problems, is where trust and agency are being built. That is what the Trust for Civic Life has been investing in, and it is what insights from rural community members across the U.S. continue to confirm.

INTRODUCTION

The local advantage

Before the Trust for Civic Life launched, the team spoke with 60 practitioners and community leaders across rural America. The question the Trust was asking then is the same one that drives this work today: ***What culture and conditions are required for civic participation to take hold in communities?***

The term "democracy" rarely came up in those conversations, and Trust grantees seldom use the word to describe their work or missions. Instead, local leaders talk about whether neighbors trust each other, whether people feel they have a say in decisions that affect their town, whether someone feels genuinely included or left out. Those three traits — trust, agency, and belonging — are the foundation for a functioning civic culture, and the Trust is committed to understanding them more deeply.

Americans today face an array of forces that undercut their sense of control over their lives and their communities. These include polarization that gridlocks politics, climate change that threatens the planet, and artificial intelligence that promises to upend society. Many rural parts of the country also live with the seemingly intractable problems of intergenerational poverty, racism, opioid use, and the collapse of manufacturing and other key industries. Both national research and the Trust's own data show all three traits are in short supply at the national level, where Americans report low institutional trust, negative views across political lines, and a sense that decisions happen to them rather than with them.

At the local level, that shifts. People report stronger trust in neighbors and community organizations, more confidence in their ability to make change where they live, and a sense of belonging with other community members. While these traits appear to be deteriorating at a national level, they are already being built and sustained at the local level.

What is less well understood is how that happens, and what factors and interventions make it possible. Research on local civic life in rural communities is thin, and these areas are consistently underrepresented in national studies. This community survey is just one tool to help provide greater insights from rural community members, and supplement and compare the findings with national data that exists. Now in its second year, it points toward what is helping Americans feel more connected to each other, their communities, and their country.

Trust for Civic Life key learning questions

QUESTION 01

What conditions enable a community to develop trust, agency, belonging, and democratic norms?

QUESTION 02

How do communities create more civic opportunities that result in meaningful engagement, trusted relationships, and improved quality of life?

QUESTION 03

What efforts, interventions, and practices most effectively sustain civic participation, develop democratic skills, and lead to cohesive, successful communities?

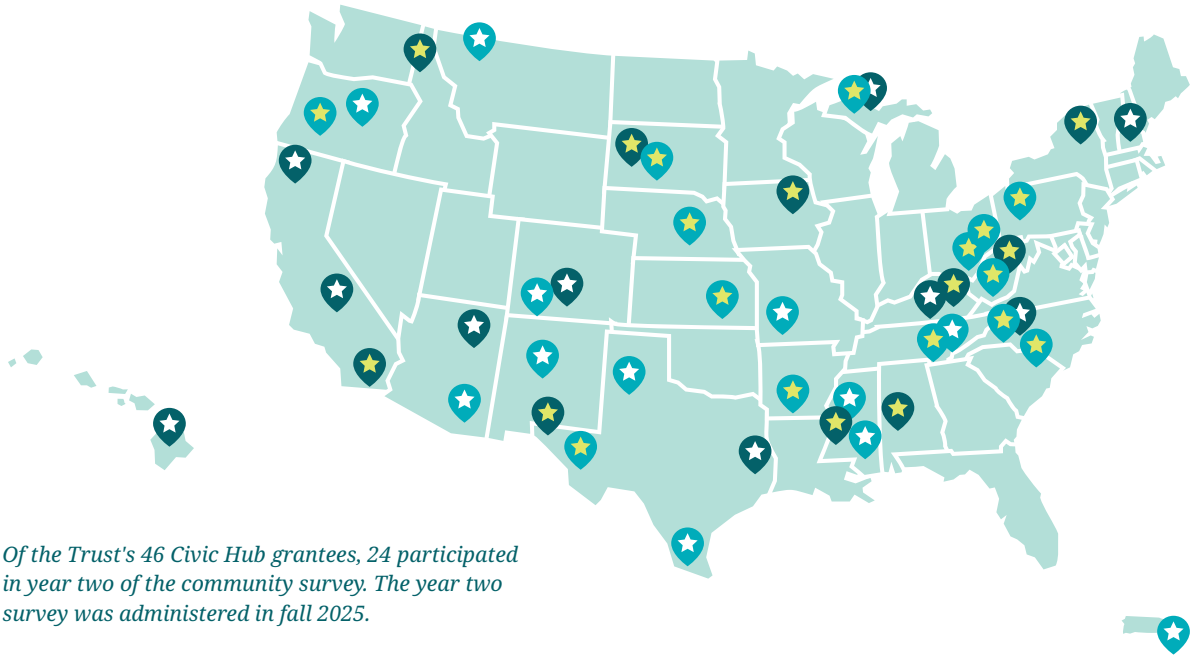
Civic Hubs: A local intervention point

Over the past two years, Trust for Civic Life grantees have provided steady evidence that investing in local "Civic Hubs" is an effective way to get national resources to rural communities, and have highlighted practices that are already building trust, agency, and belonging on the ground.

Since launching, the Trust has directed nearly all of its funding into Civic Hubs — high-impact, locally led organizations that are rallying people to create a shared vision, solve problems, and build momentum for deep, long-term civic participation. In places where outsiders can't easily make in-roads, Civic Hubs already have the relationships and local knowledge to navigate divisions and build trust. They are "doers" and problem-solvers, and their work consistently has tangible impact on daily life for hundreds of thousands of Americans.

One of the Trust's grantees, working on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, described the goal of a Civic Hub this way: "We are moving people from a mindset where things are happening to me to a place where things are happening because of me." That ability to help people shift from consumer to co-creator is a core trait of a Civic Hub.

Collectively, the Trust's 46 Civic Hub grantees reach over 300,000 rural Americans across one third of all U.S. rural counties. That reach has allowed the Trust to surface insights from places and people most researchers are unable to access, made possible because of the relationships that Civic Hubs have already built and their willingness to act as intermediaries between survey researchers and rural regions.



Of the Trust's 46 Civic Hub grantees, 24 participated in year two of the community survey. The year two survey was administered in fall 2025.

2024 CIVIC HUB GRANTEE 2025 CIVIC HUB GRANTEE 2025 SURVEY PARTICIPANT

About the 2025 community survey

The Trust for Civic Life partnered with researchers Matthew Denney and Hahrie Han at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University to conduct its second community survey. The goal was to collect insights about civic engagement, prosocial traits, the role of community life, and democratic norms across underrepresented communities in rural America.

The first survey was conducted September to October 2024, prior to the 2024 presidential election, and the Trust published the findings in Action Over Dialogue: The Case for Prioritizing Local Civic Engagement. It featured analysis of responses from 584 residents of eight communities where Civic Hub grantees work.

The second community survey, conducted in October 2025, set out to confirm last year's findings around local civic action, and the questions went deeper into different forms of civic participation, the impact local organizations play in their community, and explored new questions around depolarization and democratic norms.

As with the first survey, participants were sourced through Civic Hub networks using a snowball approach. Civic Hubs introduced researchers to local leaders across their service regions; those individuals produced additional names from their communities. The final survey was sent to 3,932 community leaders and their networks, and roughly a quarter returned a completed survey.

About the 2025 survey participants

All survey participants were linked to the networks of 24 participating Trust for Civic Life grantees.

- 1,029 total survey respondents (922 new respondents, and 107 returning from year one)
- 9 in 10 feel strong personal agency, particularly in solving problems in their own lives
- Three-quarters say their communities come together to solve problems
- One-third worked to improve the community with people with different political viewpoints or backgrounds

Key terms to know

The survey measures the strength of the following three sentiments among respondents:

AGENCY
One's sense of confidence in effecting change, from their personal life to community

BELONGING
Feeling accepted, valued, and authentically part of a group or community

TRUST
The confidence that institutions or fellow Americans are acting honestly and with integrity

Other survey terms

CIVIC ACTION
Both formal and informal activities in which people collaborate with others for a specific outcome

CIVIC LIFE
The ongoing, combined efforts of Americans coming together to solve problems, take action, and create the future they want to see

DEMOCRATIC NORMS
Unwritten rules, expectations, and values shared in a democratic society

INFORMAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION
Everyday acts that range from exchanging favors with neighbors to collective efforts to improve a community or neighborhood

FORMAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION
Involvement in civic organizations or political systems

Key findings

This report is organized around six key findings from the 2025 community survey:

KEY FINDING 01

Trust is collapsing nationally, but remains strong locally

In the year between our surveys, rural Americans' faith in national political institutions plummeted. Trust in the presidency and Congress dropped 46%. Trust in local institutions, meanwhile, held steady at robust levels.

KEY FINDING 02

Agency and belonging thrive in local communities

Even as rural Americans feel powerless in national affairs, they remain confident that they can join with their neighbors and local organizations to fix what's broken in their communities. Almost three-quarters of survey respondents said their community comes together to solve problems.

KEY FINDING 03

Groups that are problem-solvers build agency

Joining a group of people who are solving concrete, everyday problems enhances a person's confidence that they can make change. Respondents felt the highest agency when they worked with an organization they believe is improving their community's quality of life.

KEY FINDING 04

Agency is linked to deeper contributions, not hours

Simply logging more volunteer hours was not connected to greater feelings of agency. But people who took on leadership roles and responsibilities within a civic organization did feel an increased sense of agency.

KEY FINDING 05

Certain local institutions are trusted almost everywhere

Across the 24 communities surveyed, three local institutions — libraries, nonprofits, and community foundations — consistently earned the highest levels of trust of any local or national entity. An average of more than 80% of respondents expressed trust in each of the three, despite their portrayal in national conversations as partisan political actors.

KEY FINDING 06

Rural Americans are crossing divides in daily life

Large numbers of rural Americans are trying, outside formal or organized efforts, to build common ground with people of different political backgrounds or life experiences. These efforts are informal, like inviting someone to one's home, but they are building trust with those who are different than them.

The sections that follow examine each of these findings, drawing on survey data, year-over-year comparisons, and the insights from rural communities and the Civic Hubs working within them.

KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDING 01

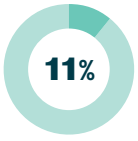
Trust is collapsing nationally but remains strong locally

Our first community survey found that rural Americans had little trust in national institutions such as Congress, major corporations, and the news media — a finding consistent with decades of declining institutional trust nationwide (Gallup, 2025; Pew, 2025).

Our latest survey suggests that erosion is accelerating. Using pre-post survey results among the same respondents, we saw average trust in national political institutions fall 46% between 2024 and 2025, driven by declining confidence in both the presidency and Congress. Notably, trust declined across the political spectrum, affecting conservatives, liberals, and moderates.

Trust in local institutions, by contrast, remained strong and stable. Nearly every local institution measured — including police, businesses, and schools — earned higher trust ratings than any national institution in the survey. On average, 70% of respondents expressed trust in local organizations, compared with just 25% for national institutions.

HIGHLIGHTS: THE NATIONAL TRUST CRISIS



Share of respondents who **believe national leaders ensure they have a voice in the country's direction**.

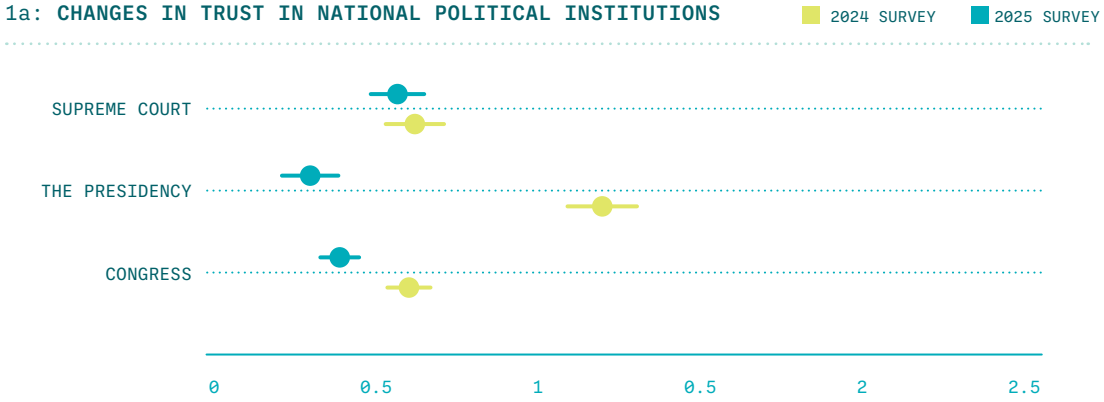
Average share of respondents who expressed trust in a **national** organization.

Decline in mean **trust in national political institutions** between 2024 and 2025, reflecting a change in feelings in the months leading up to the 2024 presidential election to feelings nearly one year after that transition in power

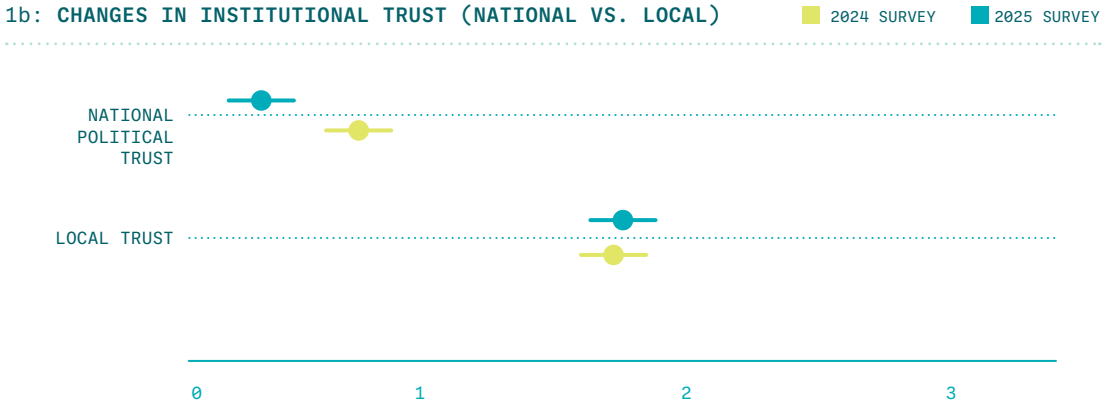
Average share of respondents who expressed a great deal or a lot of trust in a **local** organization.

FIGURE 1: CHANGES IN TRUST YEAR OVER YEAR (FALL 2024 TO FALL 2025)

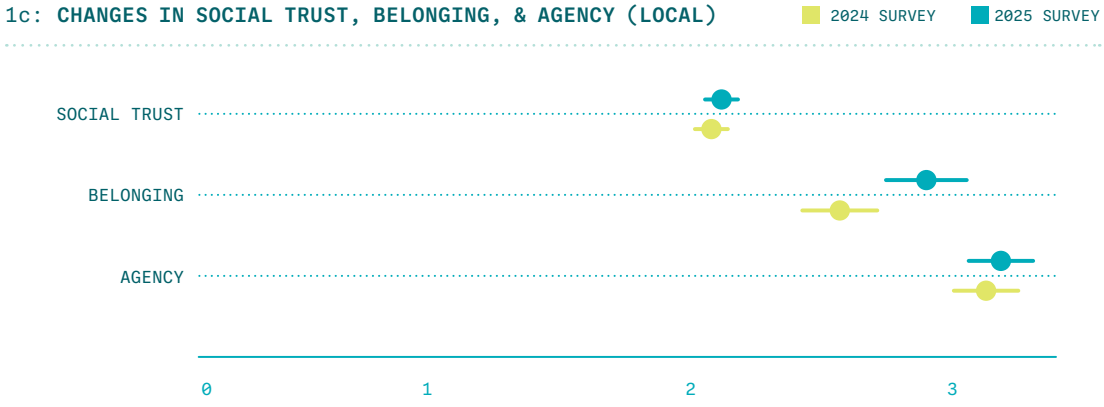
1a: CHANGES IN TRUST IN NATIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS



1b: CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONAL TRUST (NATIONAL VS. LOCAL)



1c: CHANGES IN SOCIAL TRUST, BELONGING, & AGENCY (LOCAL)



n=90 | Comparing pre-post survey results among the same respondents, researchers found trust in national political institutions fell year over year (top, middle), while trust, agency, and belonging at the local level was steady (middle, bottom)

KEY FINDING 02

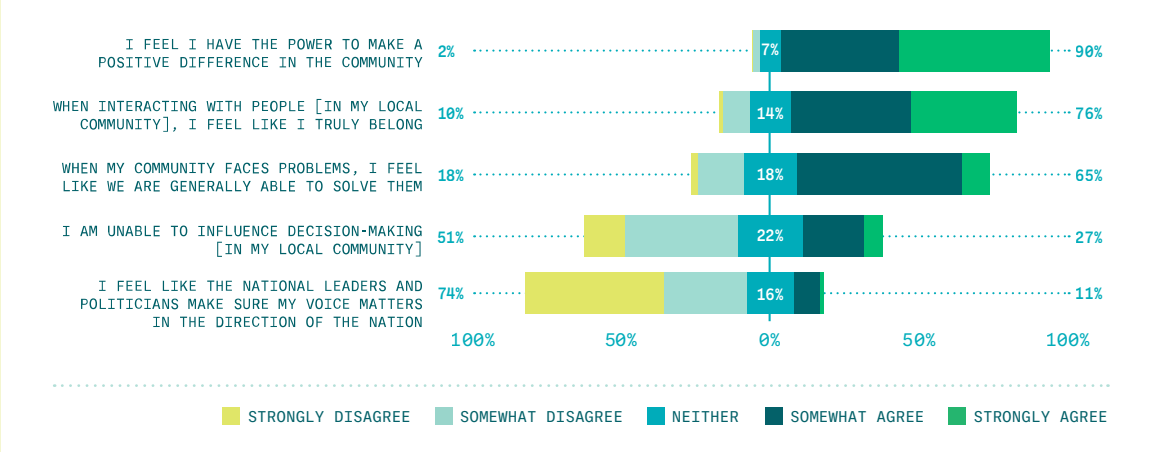
Agency and belonging thrive in local communities

In our 2025 survey, respondents reported a profound sense of alienation from national affairs. Only 11% of survey respondents said national leaders and politicians ensure their "voice matters in the direction of our nation." This data corresponds with other research indicating that many Americans believe they have little influence on what happens in Washington (Pew, 2023).

At the local level, respondents reported a far greater sense of agency. Nine in 10 said they have the power as individuals to make a "positive difference" where they live. Nearly three-quarters reported a sense of collective agency, saying their neighbors and local organizations can come together to solve problems in their communities.

Respondents likewise reported a strong sense of belonging in their communities — a critical sentiment given the pervasiveness of isolation and loneliness that the U.S. Surgeon General has declared a crisis (Murthy, 2023).

FIGURE 2: **AGENCY & BELONGING**



n = 1,024 | Regardless of geography, respondents reported a strong sense of agency and belonging in their local communities, but did not feel like their voice mattered at the national level.

KEY FINDING 03

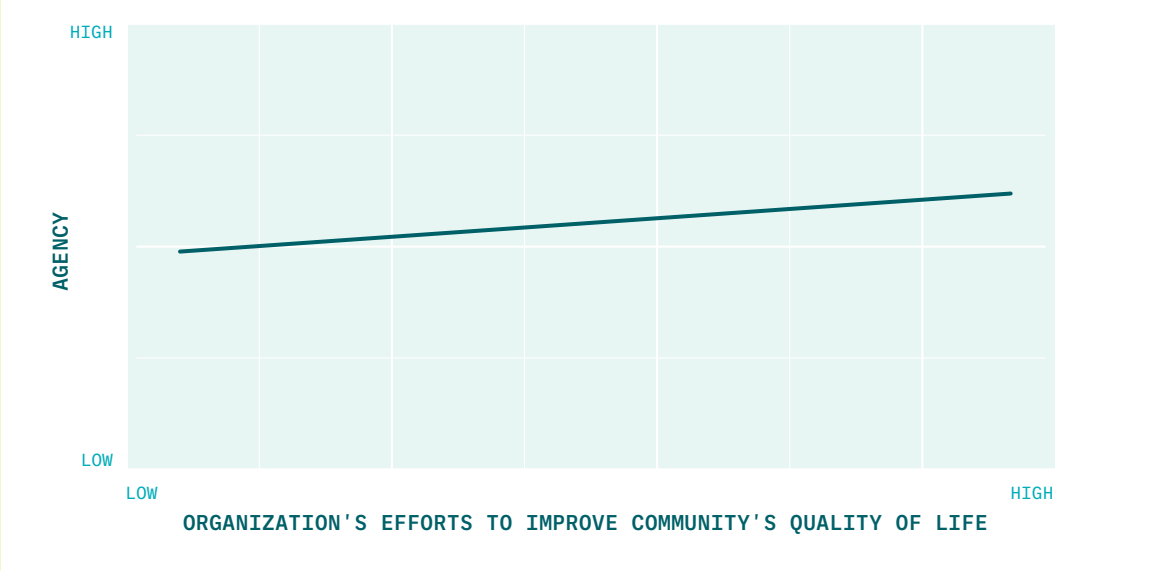
Groups that are problem-solvers build agency

In a key finding from the Trust's year one community survey, researchers discovered that collective civic action — even something as informal as helping a neighbor — was correlated with higher levels of trust, belonging, and agency, while engaging in dialogue alone was not.

The 2025 survey explored this dynamic more deeply by examining the groups that enable local civic participation. Respondents reported the strongest sense of agency when they belonged to organizations they believe are improving their community's quality of life.

In other words, participating in groups that tackle concrete, everyday problems is connected to people's belief that they can create positive change. The type of organization matters far less than its perceived impact; churches, park conservancies, food banks, and labor unions all were correlated with stronger feelings of agency when respondents believed the group was making a difference in their communities.

FIGURE 3: **AGENCY & BELONGING**



n = 1,029 | The angled trend line show a positive relationship between respondents' sense of agency and how much they believed an organization was improving quality of life within their community.

KEY FINDING 03 - **CASE STUDY**

COALFIELD DEVELOPMENT | 2025 CIVIC HUB GRANTEE & 2025 SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Solving problems, building agency

In West Virginia, an innovative job-training program empowers participants to build their community's future.

Coalfield Development offers a rarity in job training: work that empowers people to heal their community.

The 17-year-old organization is a community catalyst in southern West Virginia, a region battered by the collapse of the coal-mining industry. Residents wrestle with high unemployment, intergenerational poverty, and an opioid crisis among the worst in the country.

"Our folks can't control the circumstances around them," says Coalfield CEO Jacob Hannah, a fifth-generation West Virginian who grew up in a trailer with no running water. "They're not able to control when the employer leaves. They're not able to control the decline of their community. And they're not able to control the opioid epidemic."

Against this backdrop, Coalfield offers individuals the opportunity to take charge of their future. Its unusually extensive training can last three years and comes with pay, credentials in multiple trades, support for personal development, and a college associate's degree. The goal: equip workers with the range of skills to insulate them against a single industry's decline or other economic shocks. Graduates go on to work in agriculture, construction, and renewable energy, among other fields.

Many participants enter the program at a moment of crisis; more than a third come directly from addiction recovery. Through the training and support, they gain a sense of control over what previously were often chaotic lives.

To give this personal renewal a broader sense of purpose, Coalfield embeds its training in community-revitalization projects. A licensed contractor, the group deploys its workers to rehabilitate and repurpose dilapidated buildings — schools, train stations, factories, and more. Among its biggest makeovers: an abandoned strip mine converted to a farm with a solar array and cabins for tourists to rent.

Workers add more than sweat to their projects. They join fellow community members to help determine how a property's transformation can best serve the region. They also work with engineers and architects in charrette sessions to design the new spaces.

Such deep involvement gives workers a sense of ownership over the project, Hannah says. They are contributing to something that represents their community's answer to the seemingly intractable forces stacked against it.

"People can get confidence and agency in a one-week training," Hannah says. "But this is the most potent agency we can provide."

KEY FINDING 04

Agency is linked to deeper contribution, not hours

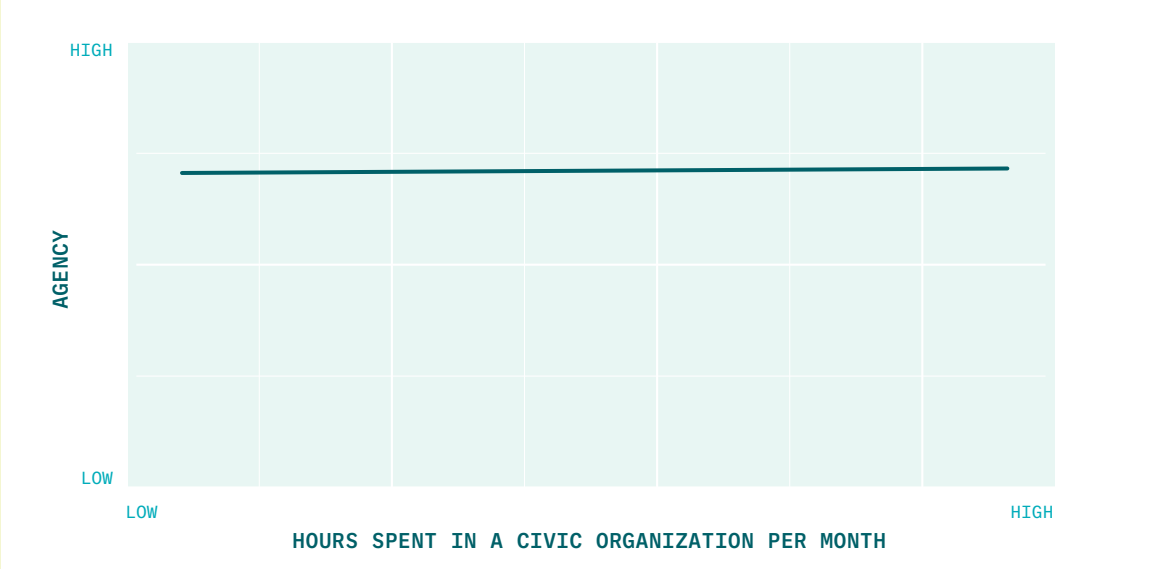
In 2025, we sought to better understand the relationship between civic action and agency. Survey questions examined not only how much time respondents spent with community organizations, but also the depth of their involvement.

We found that deeper engagement is associated with stronger feelings of trust, belonging, and agency — though not in expected ways. While philanthropy often emphasizes volunteer hours, agency among survey respondents did not increase simply through greater commitments of time. Instead, it grew when people took on leadership roles or duties, or felt essential to making certain programs or activities possible.

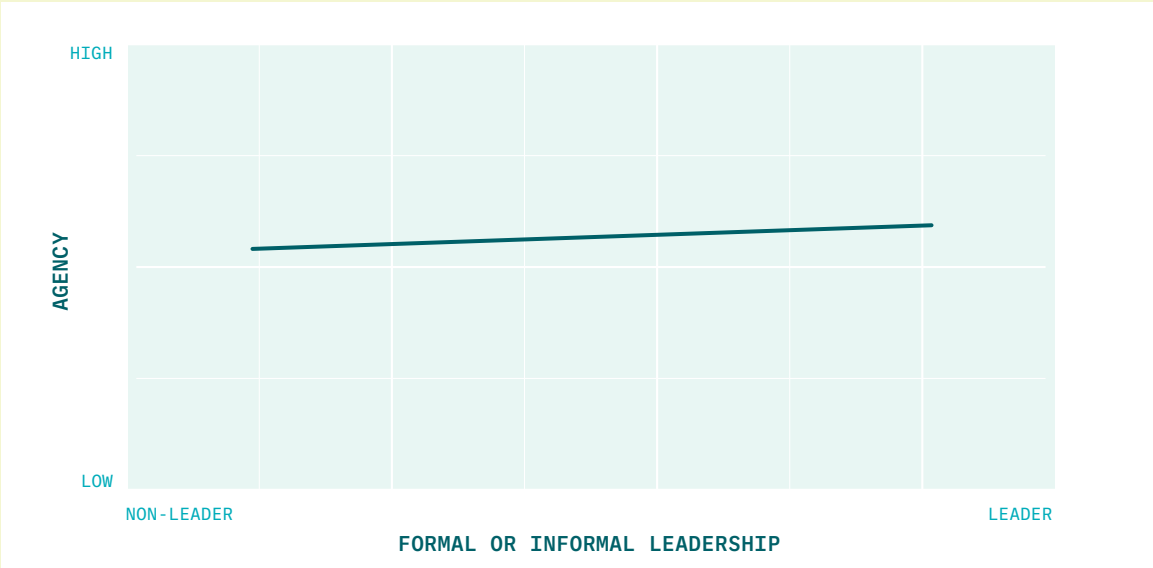
These findings raise important questions around the depth and nature of how people engage, whether showing up or leading, whether following direction or making decisions. There is a clear opportunity to support groups that are structuring programs and cultivating pathways for people to deepen engagement over time and to exercise leadership in both formal and informal ways. Later this year, the Trust for Civic Life will build on this finding through an analysis of civic participation across nearly 1,000 community events in grantee regions, with the goal of better understanding what behaviors and conditions impact participation, problem solving, and collective action.

While philanthropy often emphasizes volunteer hours, agency among survey respondents did not increase simply through greater commitments of time.

FIGURE 4: **AGENCY & ENGAGEMENT**



n = 968 | Number of hours spent volunteering did not correlate with increased sense of agency.



n = 1,029 | Leadership role or duties were correlated with increased sense of agency.

KEY FINDING 04 - **CASE STUDY**

FOUNDATION FOR APPALACHIAN OHIO | 2025 CIVIC HUB GRANTEE & 2025 SURVEY PARTICIPANT

‘I can help in a big way’

Young adults in Appalachian Ohio step up as leaders to realize their dreams for their community.

Appalachian Ohio faces an exodus of young adults that drains towns and small cities of their leaders of the future — a common problem in rural America. But the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio (FAO) is testing an unusual strategy to stem the tide: give younger generations the skills and support to realize their dreams for their community.

FAO’s Growing Home Fellowship launched in 2023, selecting more than 100 K-12 educators in their 20s and 30s to extend their leadership from the classroom to the community. Fellows get a $32,000 stipend for a five-year commitment to live, work, and volunteer in the region — a boon for young adults with college loans to pay.

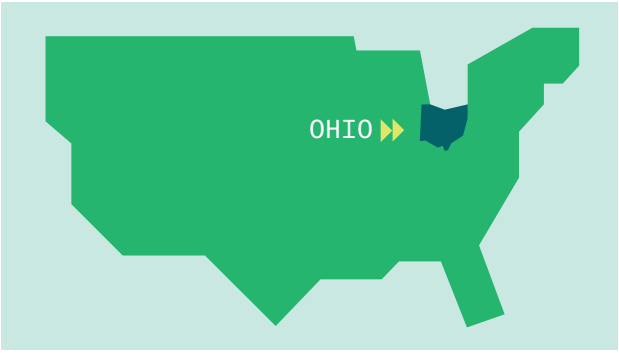
The chief incentive, however, is the opportunity to step into community leadership roles and start civic projects. The foundation builds a path for fellows that includes access to grant funding, coaching, and leadership training. “The fellows are people who have enormous skills and abilities,” says Cara Dingus Brook, FAO’s president. “The program simply gives them more belief in their ability to create opportunities and solve challenges in their community.”

Since Growing Home began, more than half of the fellows have joined the boards of local groups and clubs. One fellow is starting a school-based health clinic; another launched a mobile food pantry. Among the biggest projects: building and growing community parks, the renovation of an old theater, and the designation of Ohio’s 17th scenic river.

Devan Eier, a 27-year-old agriculture educator in Morgan County, was already a volunteer with Future Farmers of America when she joined the fellowship. But civic leadership beyond that felt daunting. “For someone as young as I am, it's really hard to show up to a meeting and really think that I have a spot at the table,” she says.

With Growing Home’s training and encouragement, however, Eier swung into action. Partnering with a Morgan High colleague — another Growing Home fellow — she launched what’s now an annual Fill the Freezer campaign to encourage the donation of hogs purchased at the county’s livestock fair. In its debut last year, sales produced 1,450 pounds of meat for a food pantry.

Organizing the event, Eier found herself building partnerships with businesses, raising money, and wrangling people much older than she is. The fellowship, she says, “gave me the confidence that I needed to decide, ‘I might be 27 years old, but I can definitely help the community in a big way. I don’t need to wait until I’m older.’ ”



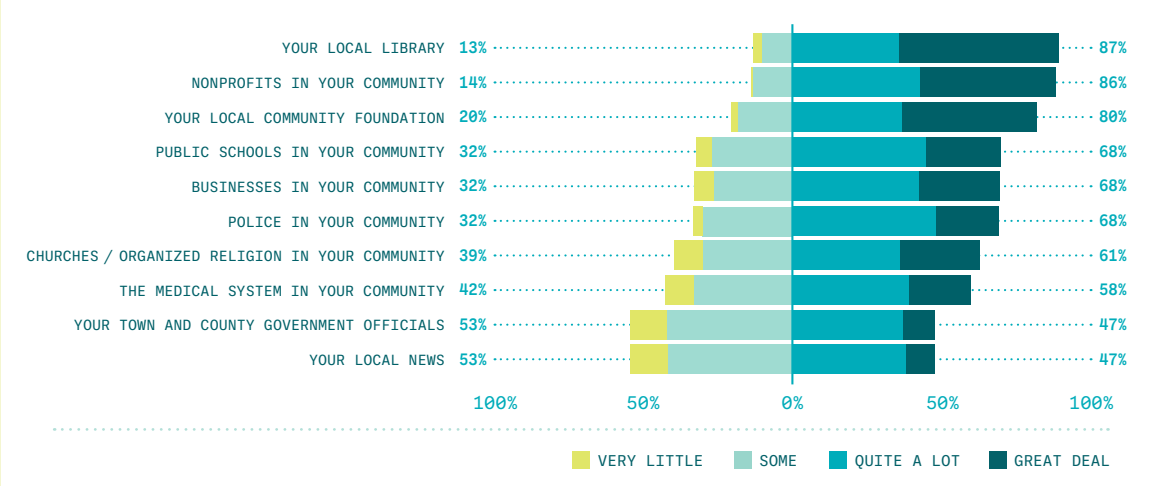
KEY FINDING 05

Certain local institutions are trusted almost everywhere

Our survey measured trust levels for 10 local institutions, and three earned consistently high marks: libraries, nonprofits, and community foundations. National debates often portray these three as politically motivated or ideologically biased (Backstrom, 2025; Schultz, 2026; Dale, Falk, 2026). Our findings, however, suggest that narrative has gained little traction locally. Across the 24 communities in our survey, more than 80% of respondents, on average, expressed trust in each of these institutions. That confidence likely reflects the role these organizations play as widely accessible providers of community support, including disaster relief, poverty assistance, health services, and education.

This year, the Trust for Civic Life is expanding its grants portfolio to include more community foundations that act as Civic Hubs in rural regions, and will launch a targeted portfolio for rural libraries, which act as vital third spaces and connection points for local services and workforce support.

FIGURE 5: **LOCAL REALITIES DISRUPT NATIONAL NARRATIVES**



n = 952 | Respondents expressed consistently high levels of trust in local institutions. Libraries, nonprofits and community foundations were consistently trusted most. Survey question adapted from Gallup's Confidence in Institutions survey.

KEY FINDING 06

Rural Americans are crossing divides in daily life

One of the survey's most encouraging findings is that many respondents are already working on their own to connect across differences, outside formal programs or organizations. Nearly half said they are personally trying to build common ground with people from different political backgrounds or life experiences. Almost a third are doing so through efforts to improve their communities.

These informal acts of connection are associated with higher levels of trust across social and political differences, helping people build relationships beyond their immediate social circles.

The finding stands in sharp contrast to the country's broader political climate. Nearly half of U.S. voters believe members of the opposing party are "downright evil" (Robbins, 2024), while roughly 80% of both Republicans and Democrats view the other party as a threat to "destroy America as we know it" (NBC, 2022).

Our results echo other research showing that Americans are open to connecting across political, racial, and class divides. What many communities lack, according to recent research (More in Common, 2025), is not willingness, but opportunity.

The survey findings suggest that efforts to connect and act across differences are already happening in rural areas and that, even when the efforts happen outside formalized spaces or structured programs, they are still associated with higher trust.

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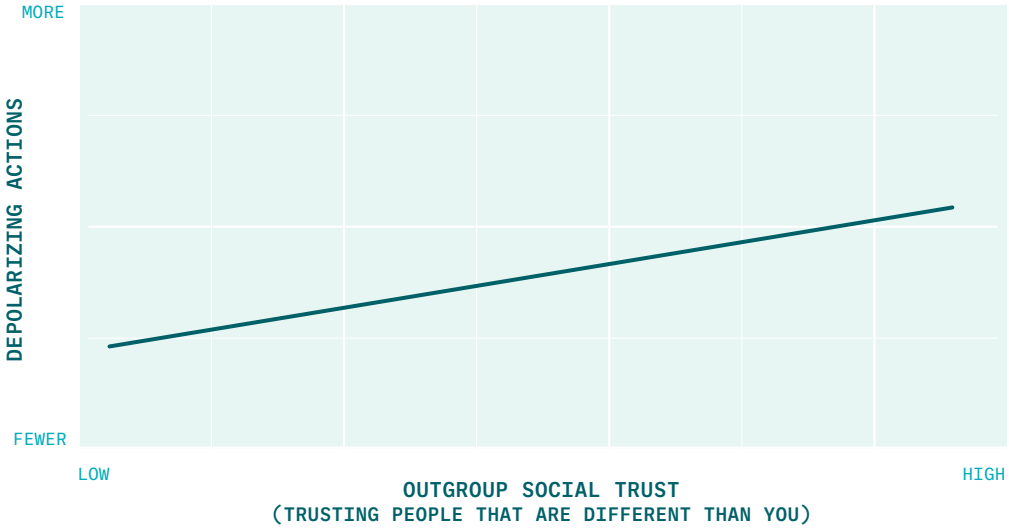
FIGURE 6: **ACTION ACROSS DIFFERENCES**



n = 1,010 | The angled trend line show a positive relationship between depolarizing actions, such as taking action across differences, and outgroup social trust.

CONCLUSION

Takeaways for funders

Two years into this work, a consistent picture is emerging. The conditions that are tied to trust, agency, and belonging are not mysterious, and they are not out of reach. They are being cultivated every day by local organizations that know their communities, bring people together around real problems, and enable meaningful participation. This survey helps confirm that those efforts are working, and that investing in local civic life represents an immediate opportunity for national philanthropy.

For the Trust, and for other funders interested in supporting locally led civic efforts, the implications of this survey are actionable. There are clear opportunities for funders to have impact:

Local holds the advantage

Year two of the survey echoes the findings from year one: trust and agency are built and sustained at the local level. This year, more specificity is emerging about who and what is driving that.

There are certain organizations that rural Americans consistently trust most, including libraries and community foundations. Understanding their role more precisely is a priority, and the Trust is already compiling targeted grant portfolios for libraries and conducting a research sprint in 2026 to better understand the unique approaches they take to engage community members.

Civic Hubs are a proven vehicle

Rural Americans feel more empowered to shape their communities when connected to local groups doing meaningful, practical work. Civic Hubs are just that. They are embedded, responsive, and trusted, and have demonstrated they are an effective vehicle for local civic renewal.

The Trust has developed a clear definition of what makes a Civic Hub, and that has guided the selection of its grant portfolios. Now the Trust is building on that foundation, working to understand how Civic Hubs grow over time and what different stages of development look like in practice. The goal is to map that spectrum, from emerging organizations to established anchors, so that funders with different portfolios and areas of expertise can identify where their support will have the most impact.

Narrow in on specifics

These findings give the Trust greater confidence in a set of principles that will continue to anchor its grantmaking going forward, and they are also a prompt to go deeper. The important questions are about nuance, such as which specific interventions work, under what conditions, and for whom? Answering those questions will require multiple research methods.

This year's community survey, combined with the Trust for Civic Life's latest research project that analyzes 1,000 community gatherings in three Civic Hub communities in partnership with Indiana University, will offer a detailed view into local civic life, capturing not just how people feel but how they actually behave and engage.

The insights from over 1,000 rural community members in this survey are consistent with what the Trust has heard from its grantees and seen in its past research, and that consistency is meaningful. Trust, agency, and belonging are built locally, through problem-solving organizations, community leadership, and opportunities for people to engage beyond their immediate social circle. What lies beyond that foundation is the hard, interesting work of pushing past generalities into a specific roadmap for investing in local civic efforts in rural America.

Local civic life holds an advantage that national efforts cannot replicate. The breakthroughs are already happening in communities across the U.S. That is where the opportunity lies, and where greater national investment is needed.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Survey approach

Researchers relied on questions from established survey instruments, including the Cooperative Election Study, the Current Population Survey on Civic Engagement and Volunteering, the Belonging Barometer, and the World Values Survey. They also used original questions as well as questions and prompts from national studies about civic life, social trust, and agency, allowing the researchers to compare these local results with previous national ones. It intentionally leveraged baseline standards to enable comparative analysis.

MEASURING TRUST

To better understand who community leaders and their networks trust, the survey measured:

- **SOCIAL TRUST**
  Researchers applied the standard metric found in the World Values Survey and similar research to measure social trust — trust in other people, both close and distant.
- **INSTITUTIONAL TRUST**
  Institutional trust was measured using a modified Gallup Poll scale.

MEASURING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The survey measured community participation in the following ways:

- **INFORMAL PARTICIPATION**
  Everyday acts with other community members with clear outcomes such as favors or neighborhood initiatives.
- **FORMAL PARTICIPATION**
  Leadership and structured involvement in civic organizations.
- **DIALOGUE WITH OTHERS**
  Conversations about political, societal, or local issues with friends or family, or talking and spending time with individuals from racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds different from one's own.

MEASURING AGENCY & BELONGING

Researchers presented a series of original statements and those drawn from the Belonging Barometer to gauge agency (e.g., "I can work with others to solve community problems"or "I feel I can influence decisions affecting my community"), along with statements about belonging (e.g., "I feel like I belong in my community"). Responses were then converted into a numeric scale, and the totals for each respondent were summed up. The analysis included aggregated measures of trust, belonging, and agency and separate analyses to distinguish between each variable.

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

All survey participants were linked to the networks of the Trust's 24 participating Civic Hub grantees. As with the year one sample, the majority of respondents identified themselves as "community leaders" with higher levels of local civic engagement, feelings of agency, and belonging than the general population. Respondents again spanned demographics, educational backgrounds, and political identities, including Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

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