Mentimeter

National Civic League

Democracy Innovation

Civic Health and Community Engagement

Civic Nebraska

May 19th, 2026

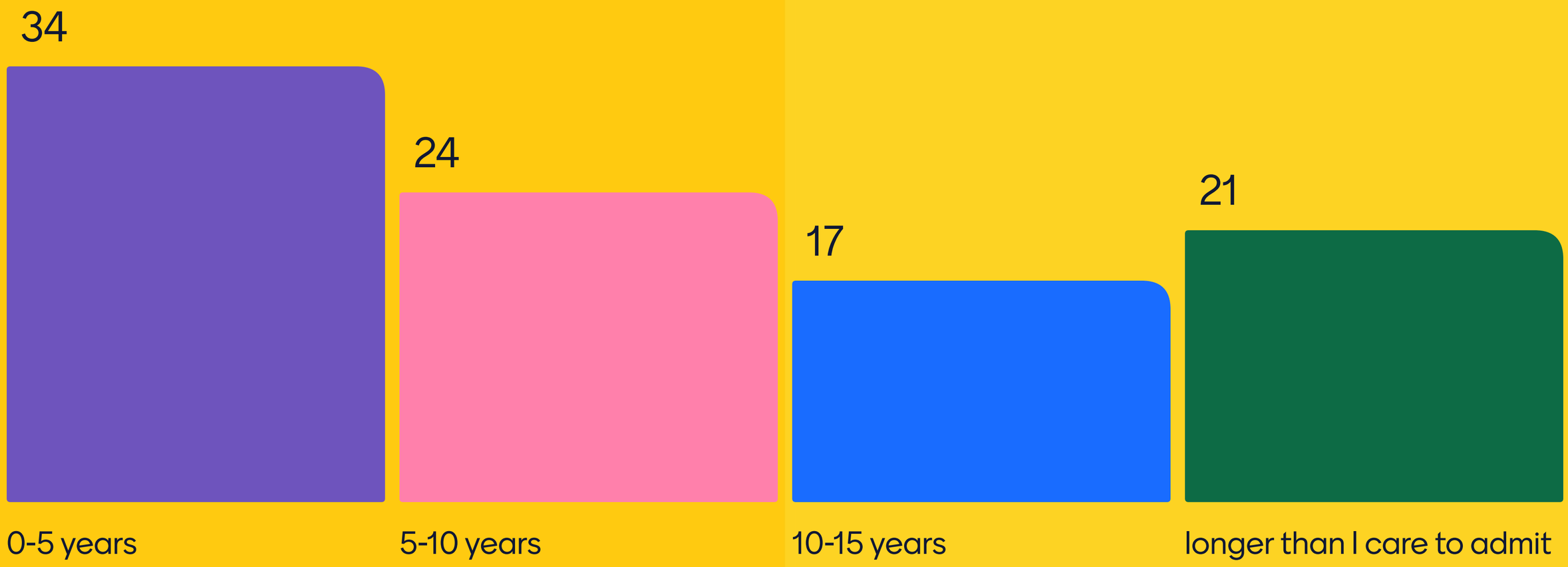
wifi: NU-Guest, username May, password Innovate2026!

Mentimeter

58

Mentimeter

How long have you been doing civic work?

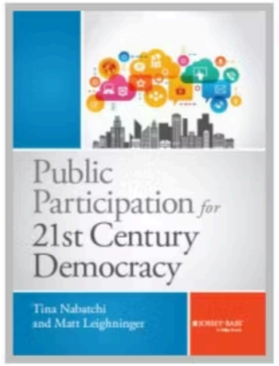


The National Civic League: A long history of supporting civic health

Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt, Louis Brandeis, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Mary Munford, NCL established the Model City Charter, city manager form of government, and other reforms to fight corruption, end patronage, and advance public health.

The mission of the National Civic League is to advance inclusive civic engagement and promote innovations in democracy to make decision-making more participatory, equitable, and effective.

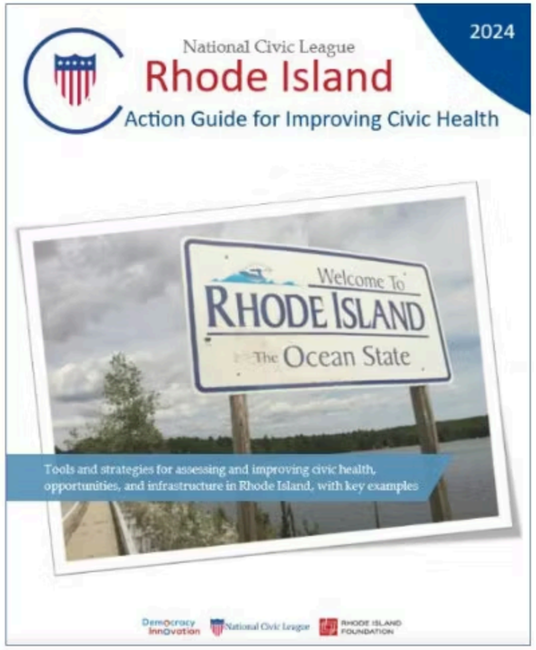
...now directed toward 21st C needs and goals

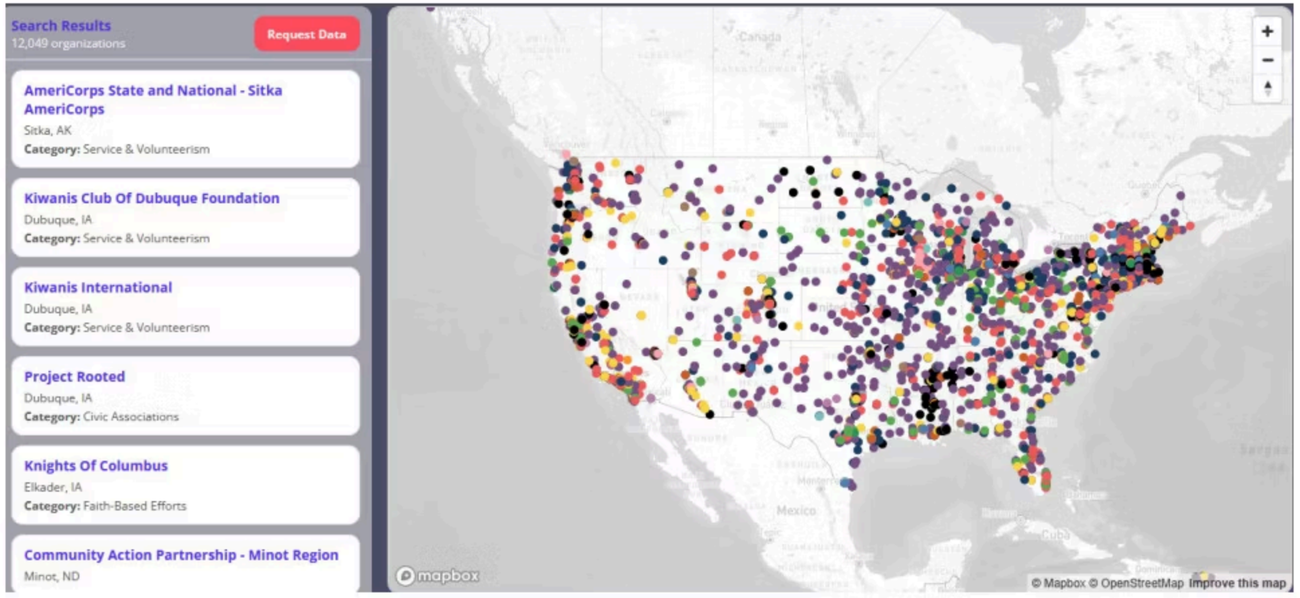


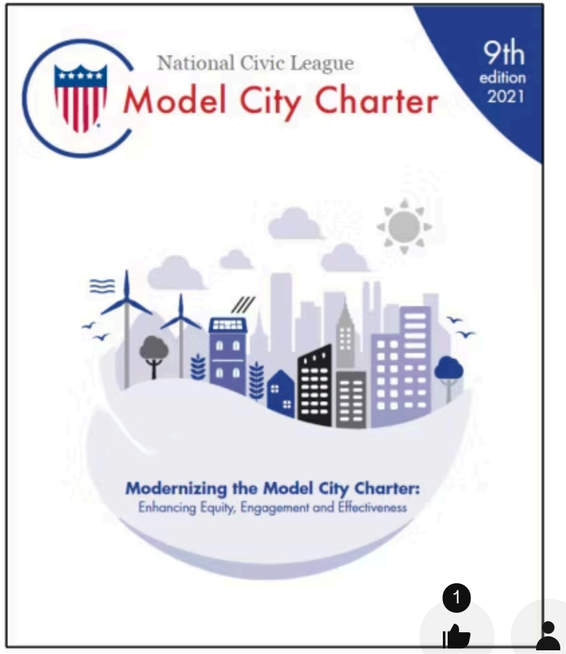
The Civic League works with communities to improve public meetings, measure civic engagement, and strengthen civic infrastructure. Nationally, we track and support democracy-building work, as illustrated on the Healthy Democracy Map.

Democracy Innovation

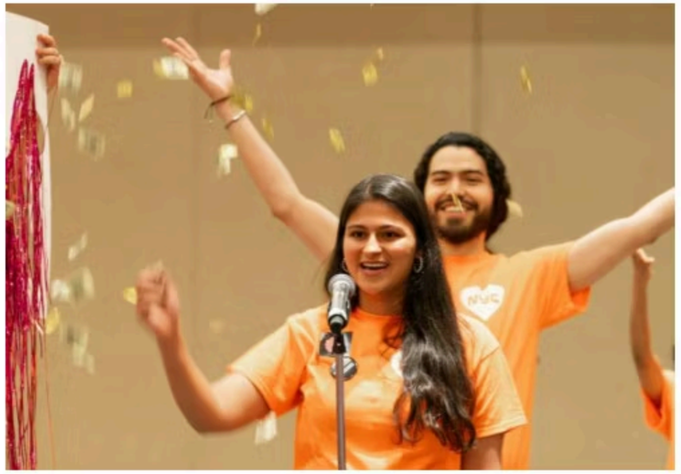
CivicGenius
A program of the National Civic League







Mentimeter



- **A legacy of impact since 1949:** Presented by the League, has recognized 500+ communities for using inclusive civic engagement to create stronger, more connected places.
- **National stage for local innovation:** 500+ civic leaders from 20 finalist communities gather in Denver each year to present how they're tackling key challenges and improving civic health.
- **Celebrates community spirit:** Diverse teams showcase their work through dynamic, creative presentations that reflect their community's unique story.
- **Powerful benefits for communities:** Builds pride and momentum, elevates national visibility, and helps attract investment, jobs, tourism, and new residents.
- **Spreads what works nationwide:** Promising practices shared at AAC are documented and amplified, helping communities across the country adopt and scale proven civic innovations.

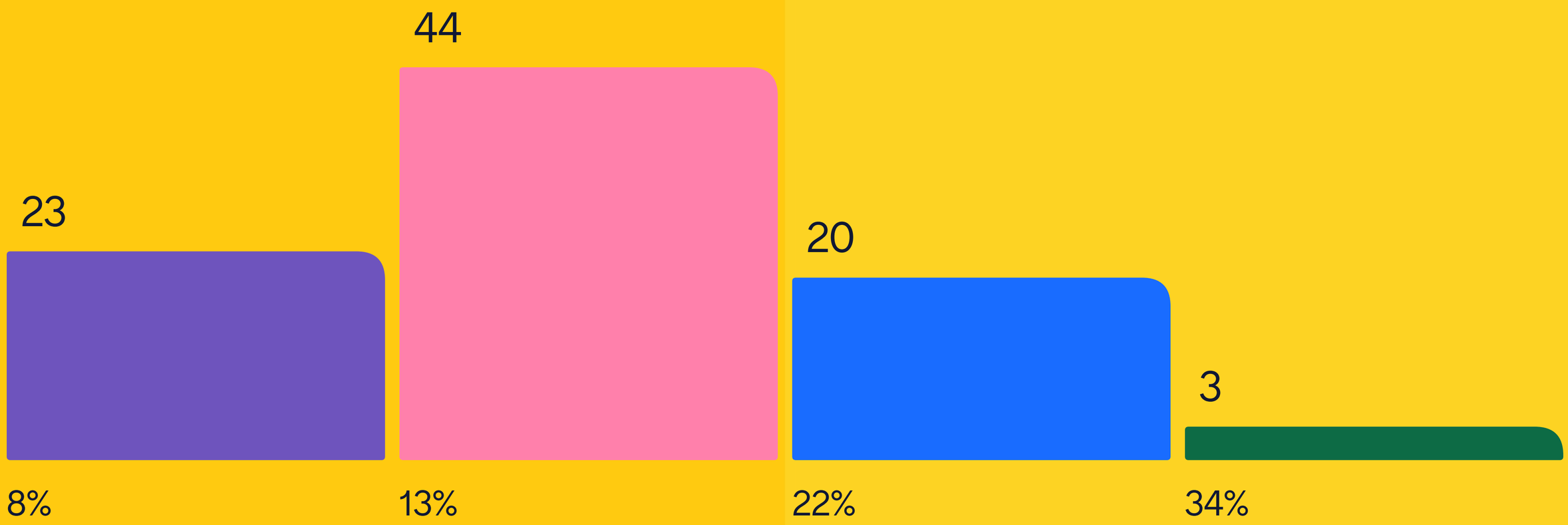
"I'm so grateful I got a glimpse of the America I knew was out there."

- 2025 AAC attendee

6

Mentimeter

Changes since the Civic League was founded: What percentage of Americans were high school graduates in 1910?

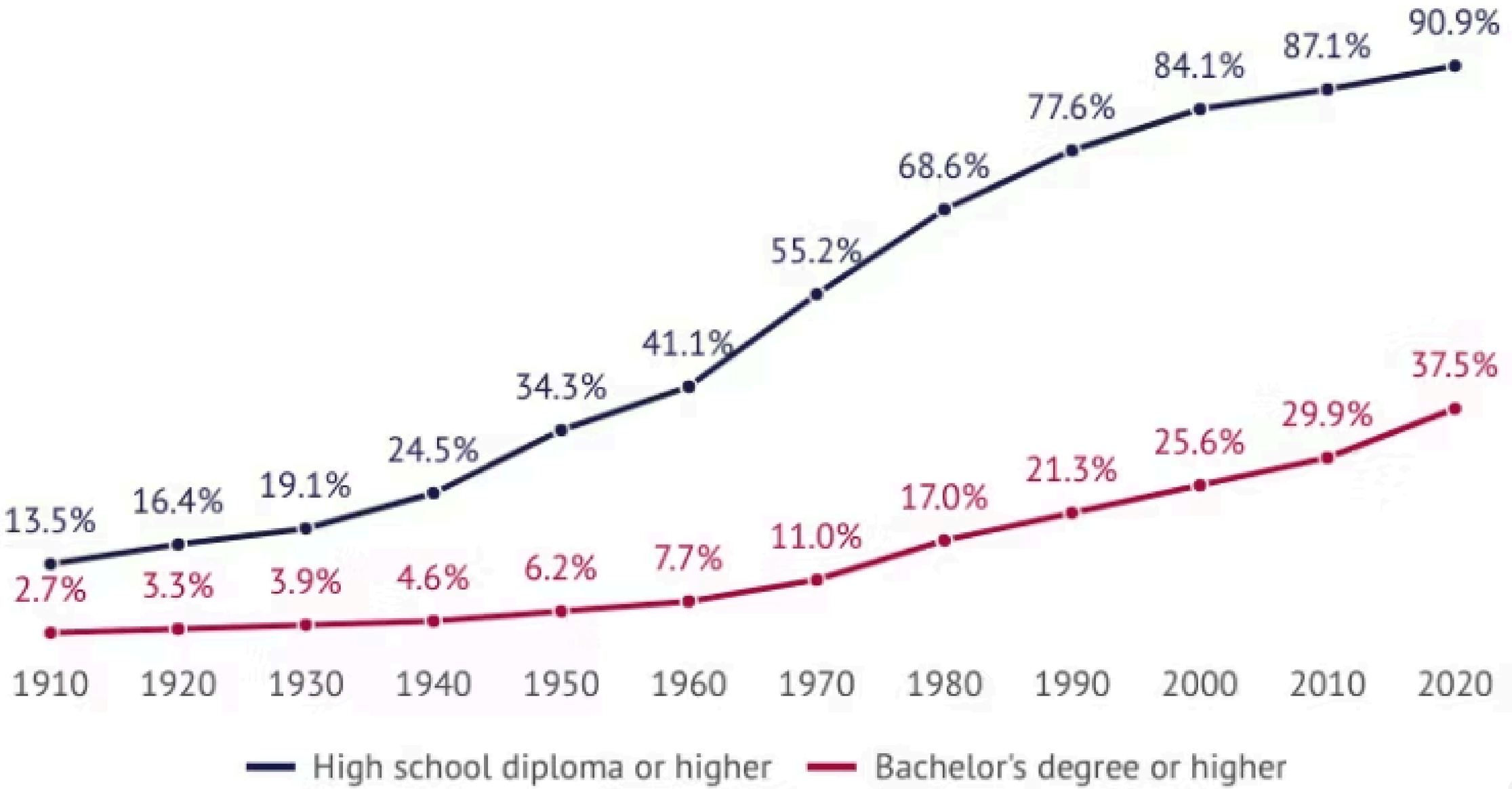


5

86 / 86

Mentimeter

Education Attainment Among Americans*, Selected Years 1910-2020



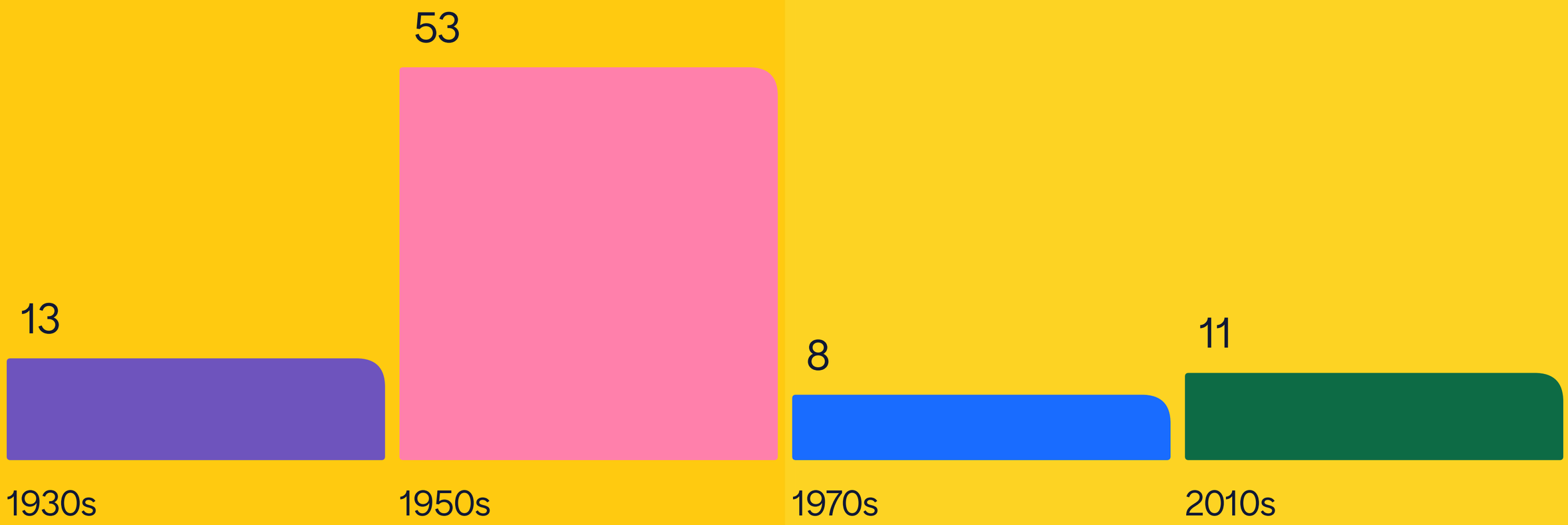
Education Data Initiative source: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics

*Adults aged 25 years and older

2

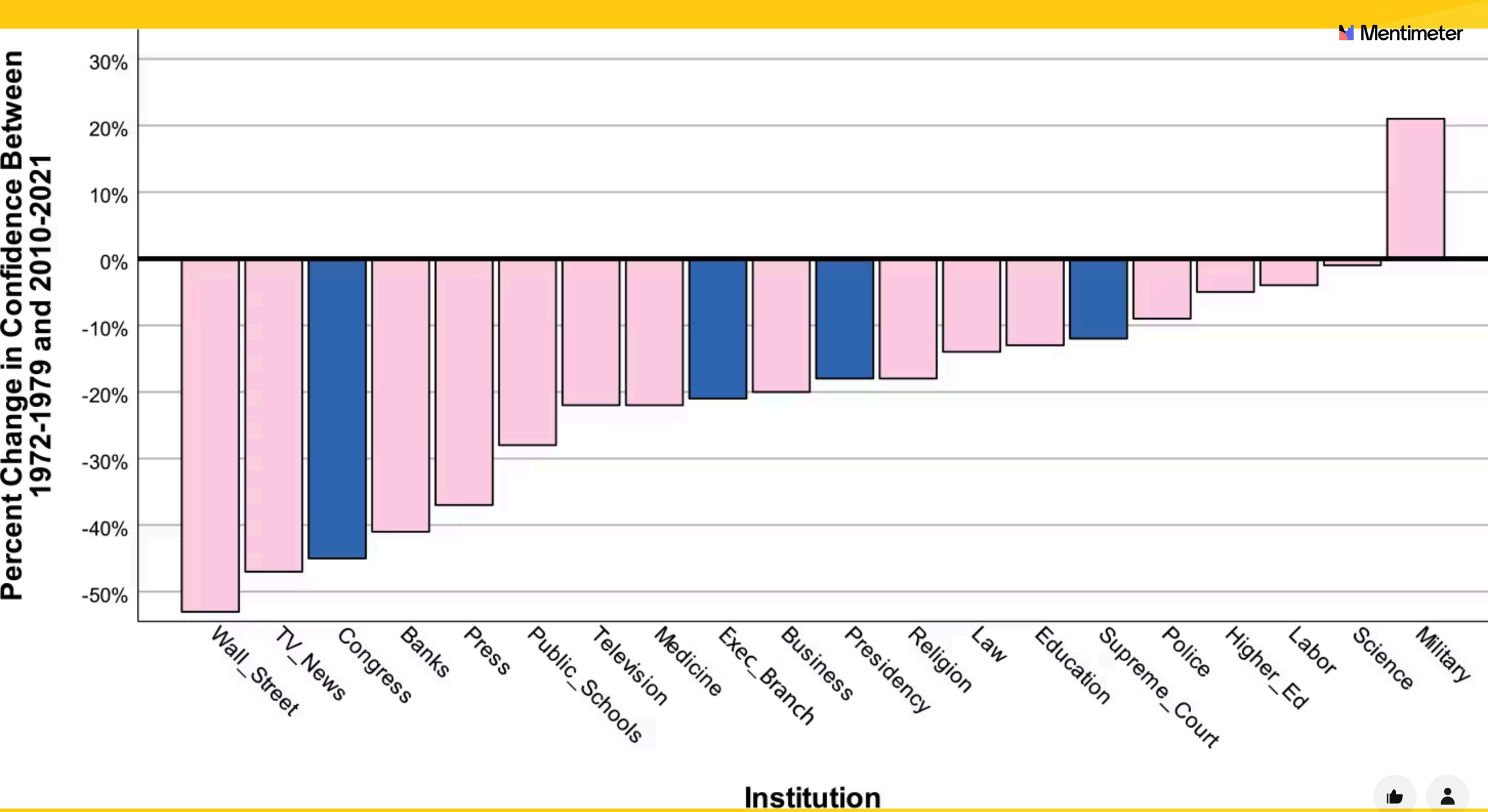
Mentimeter

Changes since the Civic League was founded: In what decade was deference to authority at its peak?

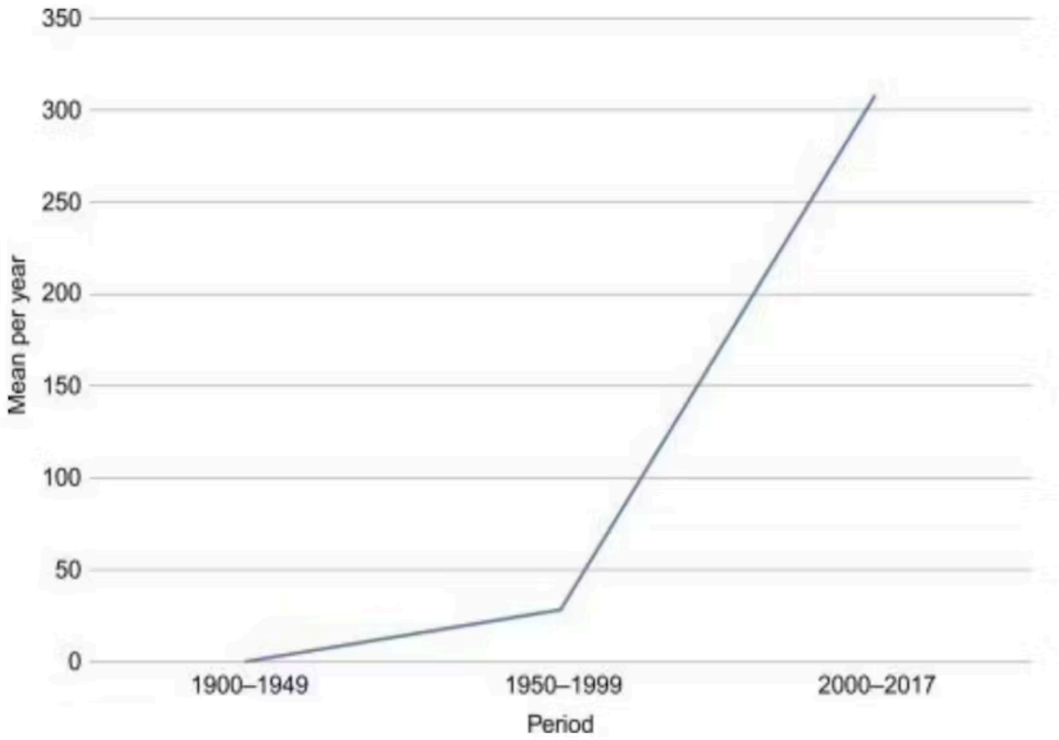


2

85 / 85

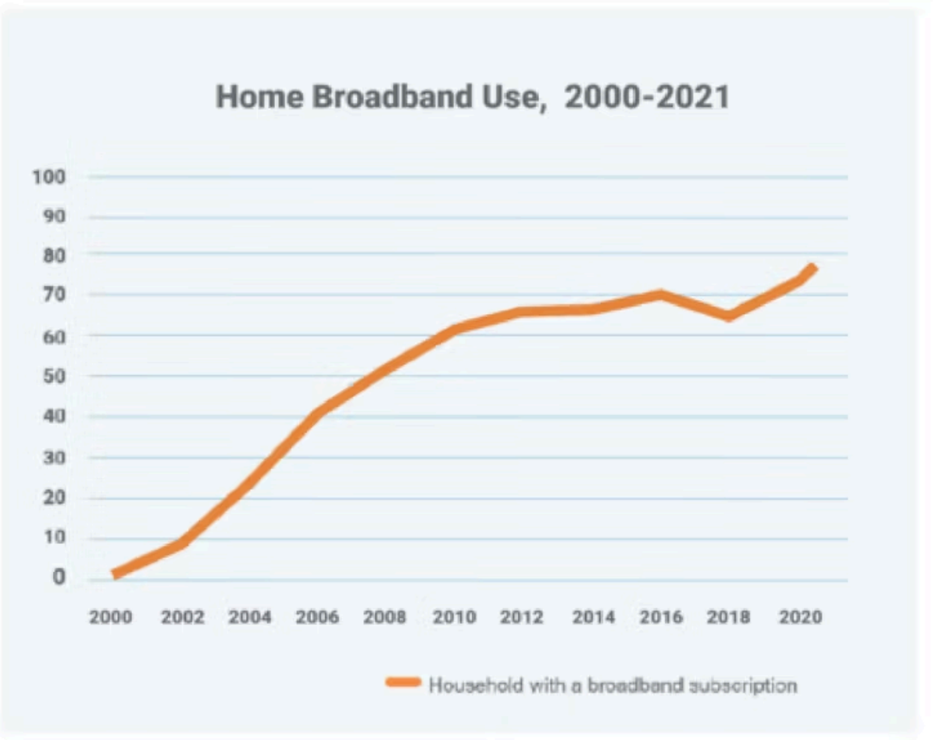

Mentimeter
Percent Change in Confidence Between 1972-1979 and 2010-2021
30%
20%
10%
0%
-10%
-20%
-30%
-40%
-50%
Wall_Street
TV_News
Congress
Banks
Press
Public_Schools
Television
Medicine
Exec_Branch
Business
Presidency
Religion
Law
Education
Supreme_Court
Police
Higher_Ed
Labor
Science
Military
Institution

Loneliness



https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0065260118300145

Internet use



https://www.learning.com/blog/digital-divide-statistics/

Mentimeter

2

How are these trends affecting your community?

Less engagement

Disconnected

Fracturing

People don’t show up in person

Disconnect and disengagement

It's harder to get other young people to come to in-person events

Disconnection

Polarization

How are these trends affecting your community?

Fear

separated society

Getting participants is like pulling teeth.

Less engaged

Low voter turnout

People no longer know their neighbors

Connectivity Easy

Teen anxiety

How are these trends affecting your community?

Less trust in institutions

Disengagement

Lack of engagement in the process

Third spaces lost

Mistrust of government institutions

Apathy

Distrust in media leading to misinformation and conspiracy theories

Depression

How are these trends affecting your community?

- Less shared reality
- Disconnection
- Minimal engagement
- Burnout
- Apathy
- Connection/bonds to community
- Lack of connection between generations
- Discouraging

How are these trends affecting your community?

We're disconnected and depressed

People rather stay home than engage with their friends or community

Polarization, mistrust , creative solutions

isolation /alienation

Isolation and mistrust

Hard to build connections

Less involvement with others

Hopelessness

How are these trends affecting your community?

We don't trust experts anymore, we don't know who to trust

Overwhelm

Feelings of powerlessness

Higher levels of individualism

Erasing connection

Sense of powerless

Apathy

Exacerbating capitalist exploitation

Mentimeter

How are these trends affecting your community?

Youth disconnected from communities

Lack of understanding or knowledge

Polarization

Disconnected

Isolation

Increased stress, less resilience

Lack of engagement

Lack of focus

How are these trends affecting your community?

Overwhelmed

Less civil discussions

Poor metal health

Prioritizing individuality and status over connection and community

Depression

Easier access to hybrid or remote work

Distrust in everyone around them.

Less face to face conversation

Mentimeter

How are these trends affecting your community?

Infighting

Anxiety

Young adults don't know how to be in community relationships

Distrust.

People are disengaging from life in community

Tension

People checking out and feeling powerless

Rage

How are these trends affecting your community?

Degrading sense of togetherness

Us v them

Leave rather than engage.

Less trust in institutions, less empathy for neighbors, people feel like they can't have an affect on the world around them

Disconnection and unengaged with more independence

Higher social anxiety

No intention in the work

Major polarization - especially around government mandates (ex COVID)

Mentimeter

How are these trends affecting your community?

Fragmentation

distraction

No están socializando.

No connection to physical spaces

Kids think they're more informed bc of internet, but also more misinformed by political propaganda and polarization

Elder isolation

Polarization/silos

More independence while being disconnected

Mentimeter

How are these trends affecting your community?

distraction

Generation Gap

AI psychosis

Hopelessness

Fear of difference

Everyone doing the same work but not talking to each other about it

Lack of confidence in gifts and abilities

No están socializando.

3

How are these trends affecting your community?

Growth in racial and ethnic animosity

They encourage community participation

Building communuty

Mentimeter

Mentimeter

What is civic health?

"Civic health" encompasses all the ways in which people make decisions, solve problems, and build community. It is based on:

- "Civic readiness" – skills and capacities people need to do these things
- "Civic opportunities" – all the spaces/infrastructure that help people do these things

2

Mentimeter

Why does civic health matter? (part 1)

Stronger connections among residents, and between citizens and institutions, makes people:

- Physically healthier
- More successful economically
- Kids do better in school
- More prepared for natural disasters

5

Mentimeter

Why does civic health matter? (part 2)

When people have meaningful roles in public decision-making, they produce policies/decisions that:

- Represent what people want
- Are more informed by local experiences and conditions
- Enjoy broader public support
- In some cases, are accompanied by other changes made by citizens

3

Why does civic health matter? (part 3)

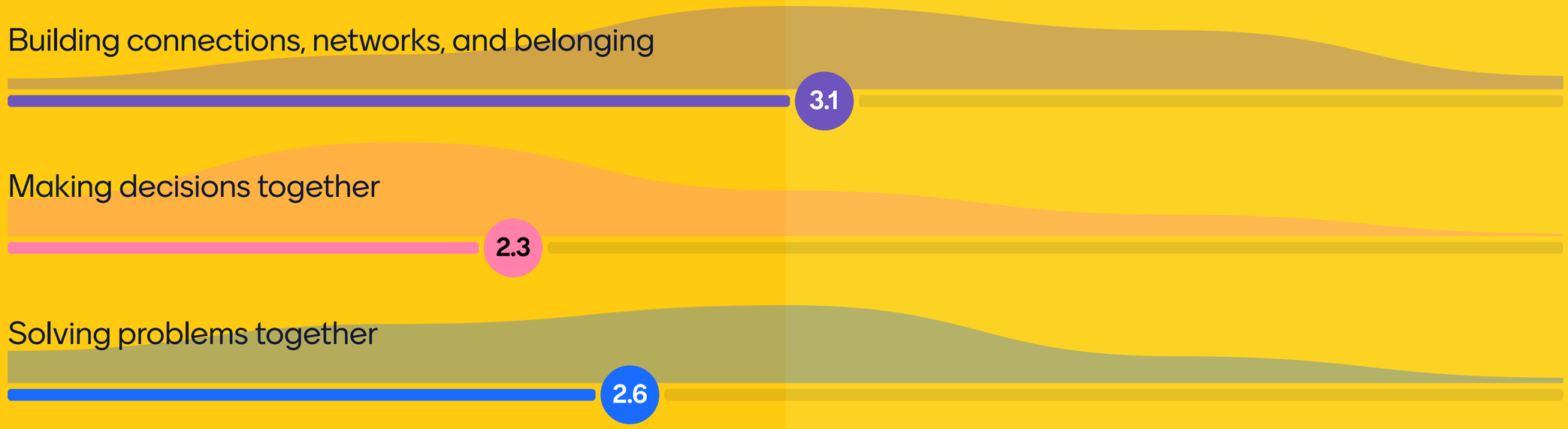
When people have meaningful roles in public problem-solving, they produce solutions that:

- Rely on volunteerism and citizen capacity
- Rely on volunteerism in collaboration with government
- Are creative
- Get people involved who don't want to participate in decision-making

Voting and community engagement are intertwined

- Across political parties, people want more than to vote for representatives – they want a voice on public decisions
- Voting can seem like a solitary activity
- When people are engaged in other ways, they are more likely to vote
- When people are engaged in other ways, they are more informed voters

Rate the civic health of your community when it comes to:



Mentimeter

Mentimeter

One way to understand civic health: Measure it!

2

2025 NEBRASKA
CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

2025 NEBRASKA CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

NE ranks highly in:

Volunteering (3rd)

Spending time with neighbors (6th)

Group membership (6th)

Following news (7th)

Voting (8th)

Not as highly in:

Discussing issues with family/friends (37th)

Doing favors for neighbors frequently (41st)

Discussing issues with neighbors (47th)

In the middle:

Contacting public officials (13th)

Attending public meetings (19th)

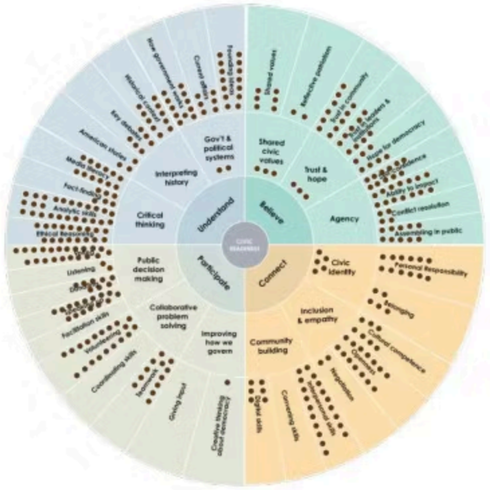
Mentimeter

5

How are you going to measure civic health?

Some options:

- Ratings systems
- Survey panels
- Interviews and focus groups
- Storytelling
- Annual reports produced by a commission or institution

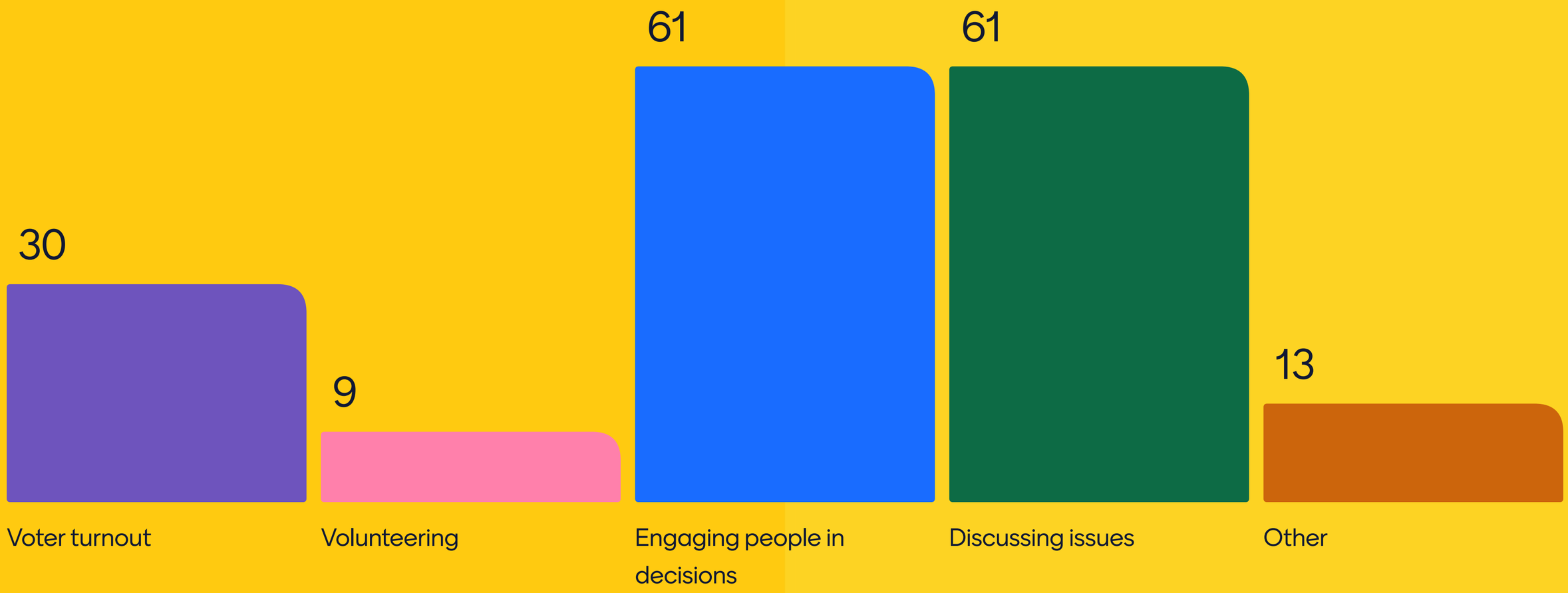


Mentimeter

Rate your community:

https://bit.ly/ActiVoteScorecard

I would like Nebraska to get better at:

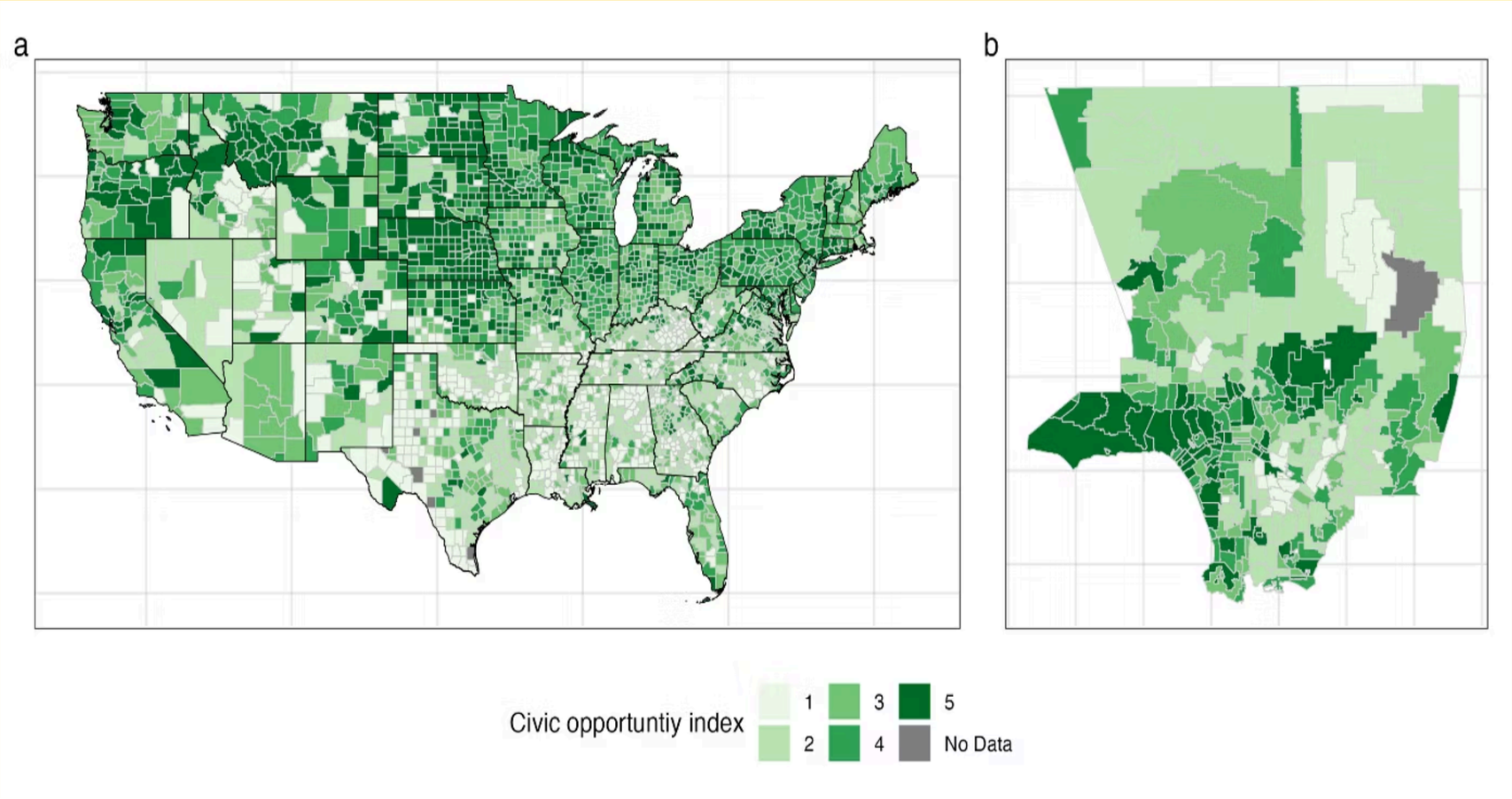


Mentimeter

Another way to understand civic health:

Map it!

Mentimeter



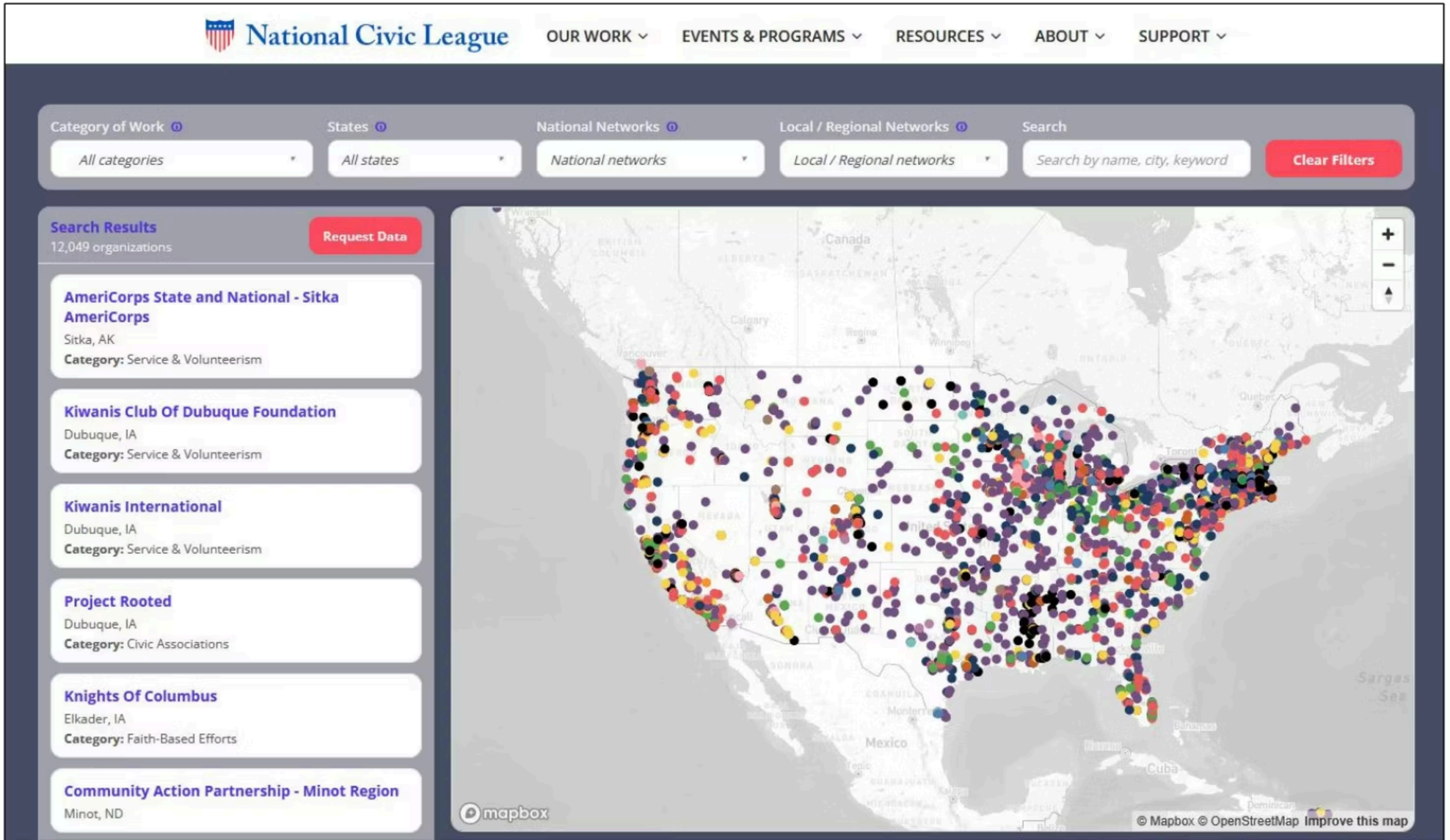
Maps from Han et al, "The Unequal Landscape of Civic Health"

Civic opportunities are not distributed equitably!

1

Many organizations are working to improve civic health

www.healthydemocracymap.org



Mentimeter

Help us Build the Map

We want to give the full picture of democracy in America, including nonprofit groups, for-profit organizations, and groups that are part of larger networks, associations, and institutions.

You can help us by adding organizations or networks, filling in data on those groups, and correcting errors.

How can we improve civic health ?

Mentimeter

National Civic League

Colorado

Action Guide for Improving Civic Health

2025

Tools and strategies for assessing and improving civic health, opportunities, and infrastructure in Colorado, with key examples

Table of Contents

Section 1: Measuring Change: Tools for Assessment 7

Section 2: Forming Leadership Groups 10

Section 3: Directly Engaging Citizens 12

- a) Deliberative Discussion 14
- b) Digital Engagement Tools 15
- c) Hybrid Strategies 16
- d) Official Public Meetings 17
- e) Community-Based Organizing Strategies 18
- f) Citizens' Assemblies 19
- g) Participatory Budgeting 20
- h) Social Engagement 21

Section 4: Reaching Diverse Audiences 23

Section 5: Arts-Based Strategies 25

Section 6: Citizen Academies 27

Section 7: Civic Media & Journalism 29

Section 8: Grassroots Civic Groups 32

Section 9: Local Online Networks 35

Section 10: Civic Education & Youth Leadership 37

Section 11: Nonpartisan Voter Engagement & Support 41

Section 12: Service & Volunteerism 43

Section 13: Research & Advocacy Groups 45

Section 14: Increasing Equity 47

Section 15: Public Spaces 49

Section 16: Putting It All Together 51

2

Mentimeter

Civic health programs and assets include:

Opportunities that support civic health broadly

Opportunities that engage community members directly in decision-making and problem-solving - they can be "thick" or "thin"

THICK ENGAGEMENT: Informed, deliberative, emotional, full of choices for small groups to make

THIN ENGAGEMENT: Fast, easy, full of choices for individuals to make

Mentimeter

“Thin” engagement

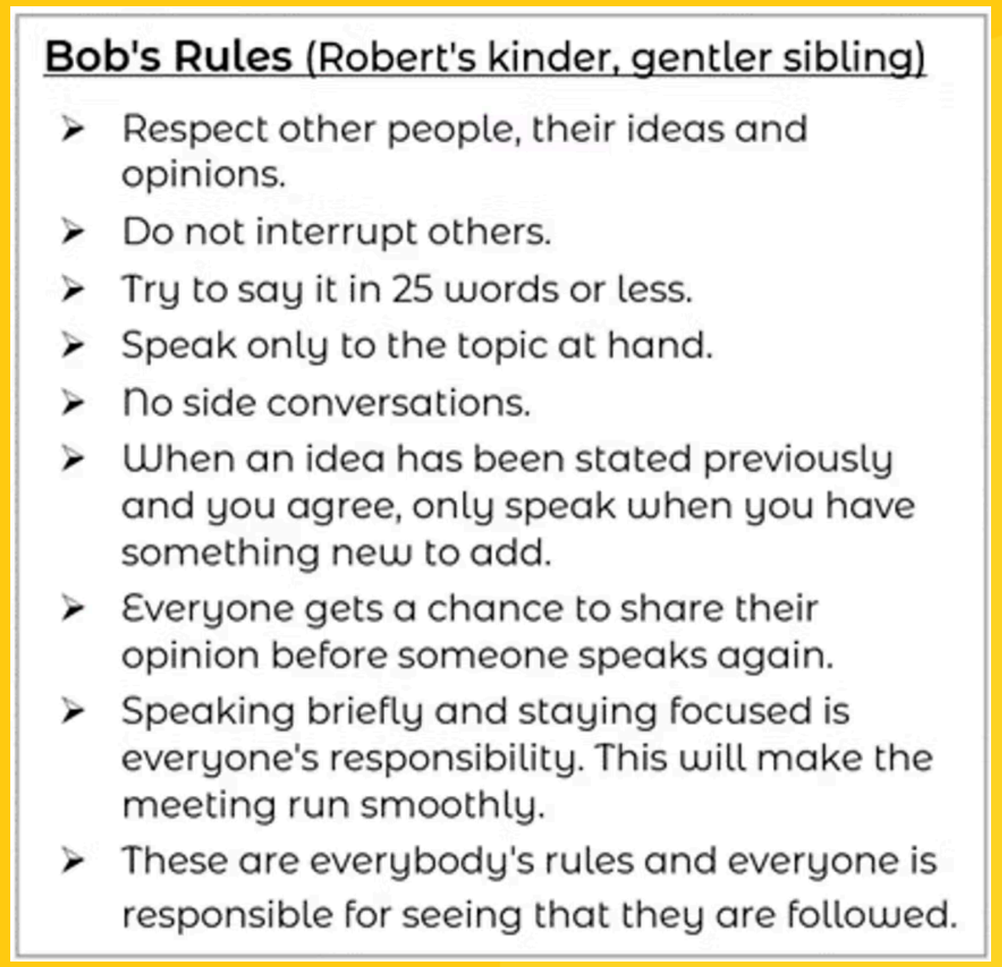
- Survey panels
- Hybrid processes using texting, survey platforms – bring the meeting to where people are
- Digital tools for ideation, crowdfunding, finding common ground
- Social engagement – food, fun, kids

Mentimeter

What does it take for people to feel/be heard?

- When they are face-to-face in a small-group setting
- When they can see the input displayed somehow
- When they encounter different views and info
- When there is some sort of response from officials/institutions
- For more, see: https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/what-do-people-need-to-feel-heard/

Mentimeter



Small discussions need better rules than "Robert's Rules of Order"

2

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

Lots!

Leadership training

A youth advocacy coalition connecting multiple groups

Farmers market

Park buildng

Get Out the Vote

Community leadership

Candidate forums

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

- Braver Angels alliance founded
- Child care access discussions
- Canvassing
- Capitol Experience Days!
- Black the Vote
- Volunteer opportunities
- Neighborhood potlucks
- Volunteering

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

- Murals
- Resource fairs
- Taco Tuesday Familia
- Community Meetings
- Civic experiment mini grants!
- Public input on comprehensive planning
- Capitol experience days
- Writing groups

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

People coordinate carpools to testify at the unicameral

Listening sessions

Touch A Truck

Block parties

Community Impact Network

Voter education

Community garden

A variety!

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

Speakers series

Free coffee gatherings for community

Jazz in June!

Historic tours

Makers Markets!

Specific groups (eg moms for gun safety)

Music festivals

Social events with food and vendors and beer!!!

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

Tabling, petitioning

We Make Omaha Lecture Series & Future Lab

State of Civic Life

Hyperlocal focus

Community parade

Arts festivals

Collaborative, multi institutional meetings around youth violence and engagement

Art Festivals

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

100s of Women, 100s of Men

Advocacy networks

Lincoln Discord "Monday Night Social"

Art Alley Night Markets

Kids after school and throughout the summer programs

Postcard parties

Public transportation

Community tradition events - annual festival, etc.

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

- Festivals
- Awareness campaign
- Voter registration
- Postcard parties
- Year of the Neighbor in Omaha
- Boys and Girls State
- Leadership training for all
- Grant funded block parties

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

Afterschool programmibg, training students to be leaders

Regular street protests

Cycling Club

Art walks

Apartment building meetings

Community gardens

Cultural Festivals

Neighborhood association events

Mentimeter

What kinds of civic health programs or activities are happening in your community?

Public comment

Stand Up Nebraska

community Health and clean water/ sanitation program

Better public meetings

Most official public meetings (city council, school board, etc.) are frustrating, inequitable, and inefficient. Public is angry or absent; less trust between residents, government.

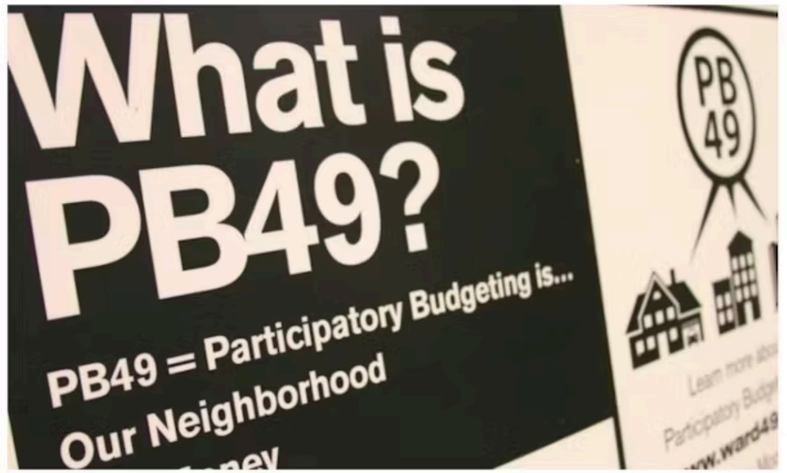
Options for improving them:

- New procedures for advance notice and comment on agenda
- New procedures for bringing input from community organizations
- Changes in format from two-minutes-at-mic public comment period to small-group discussion, digital polling, conflict resolution avenues, etc.

Mentimeter

Participatory Budgeting

- Money that citizens decide how to spend
- A structured process – citizens brainstorm, research, and develop proposals, working with gov't officials, staff (the thick part)
- Citizens vote on proposals (the thin part)
- Can have multiple levels – city, region, state



Mentimeter

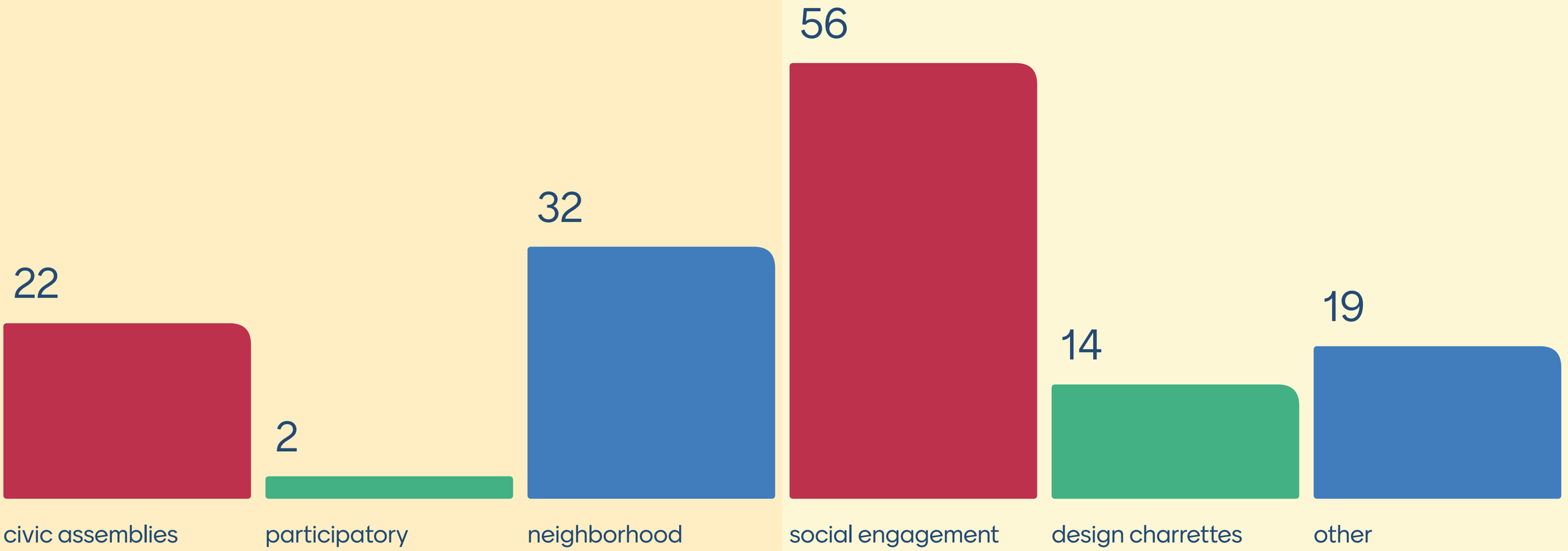
Mentimeter

Civic assemblies

- 20-50 randomly selected people
- Meet 3-10 days over several months
- Hear testimony, learn together
- Issue recommendations
- Officials pledge to consider recommendations

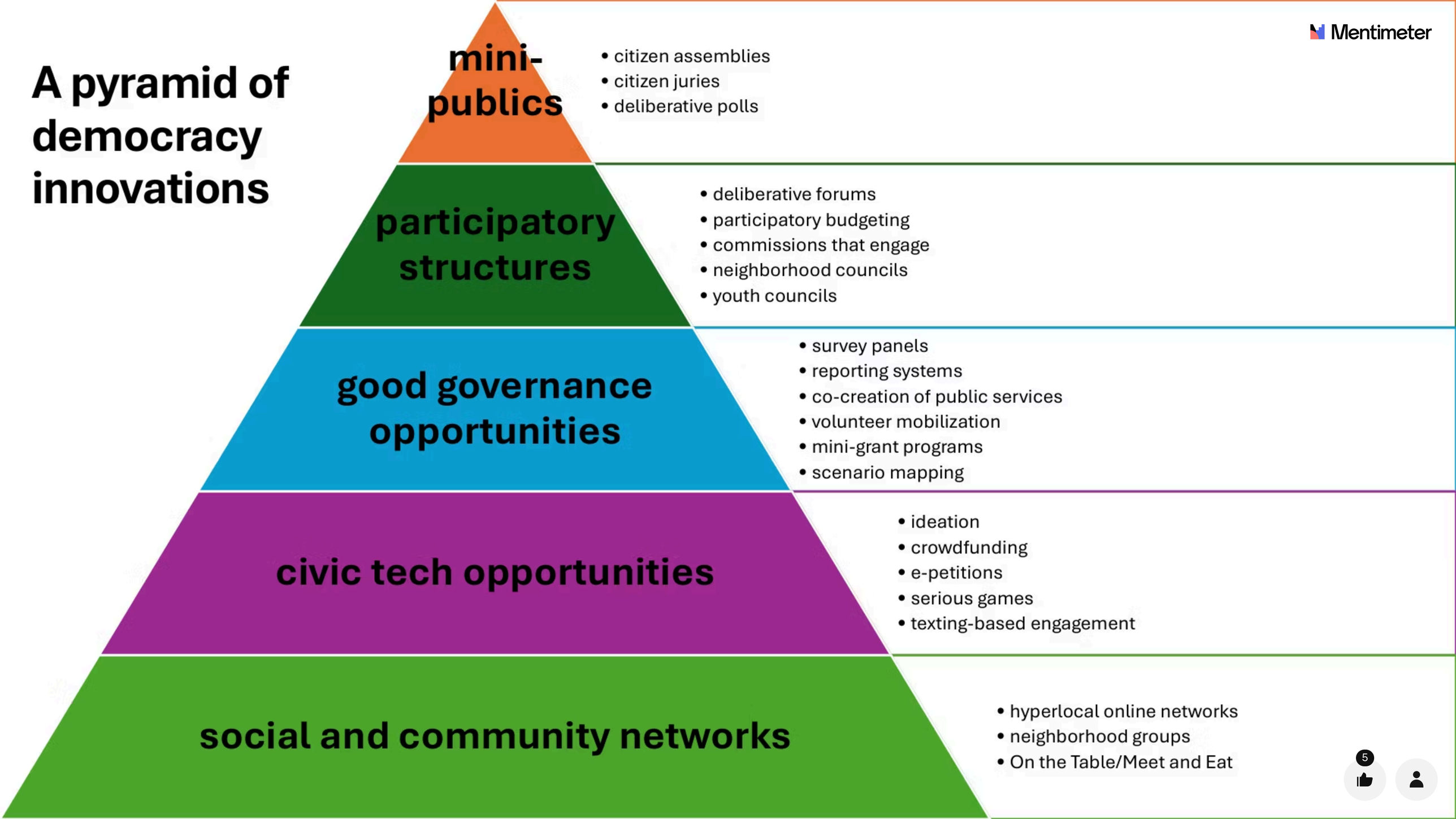
Mentimeter

How have you engaged people in public decision-making? (check all that apply)



3
64 / 64

A pyramid of democracy innovations



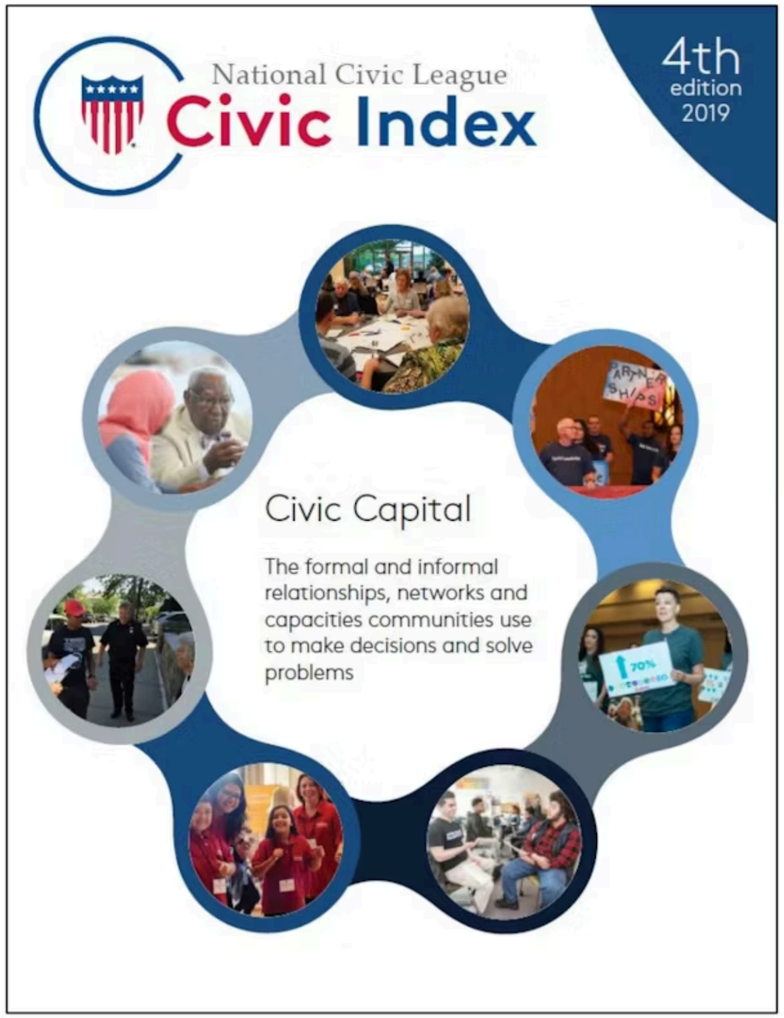
Mentimeter

5

Mentimeter

Civic health planning for your community

- What does your community need to add or expand?
- Where do you need more collaboration/coordination?
- How are you going to measure your progress?
- What specific, tangible (preferably small!) next steps do you want to take to help tackle these questions about civic health in your community?



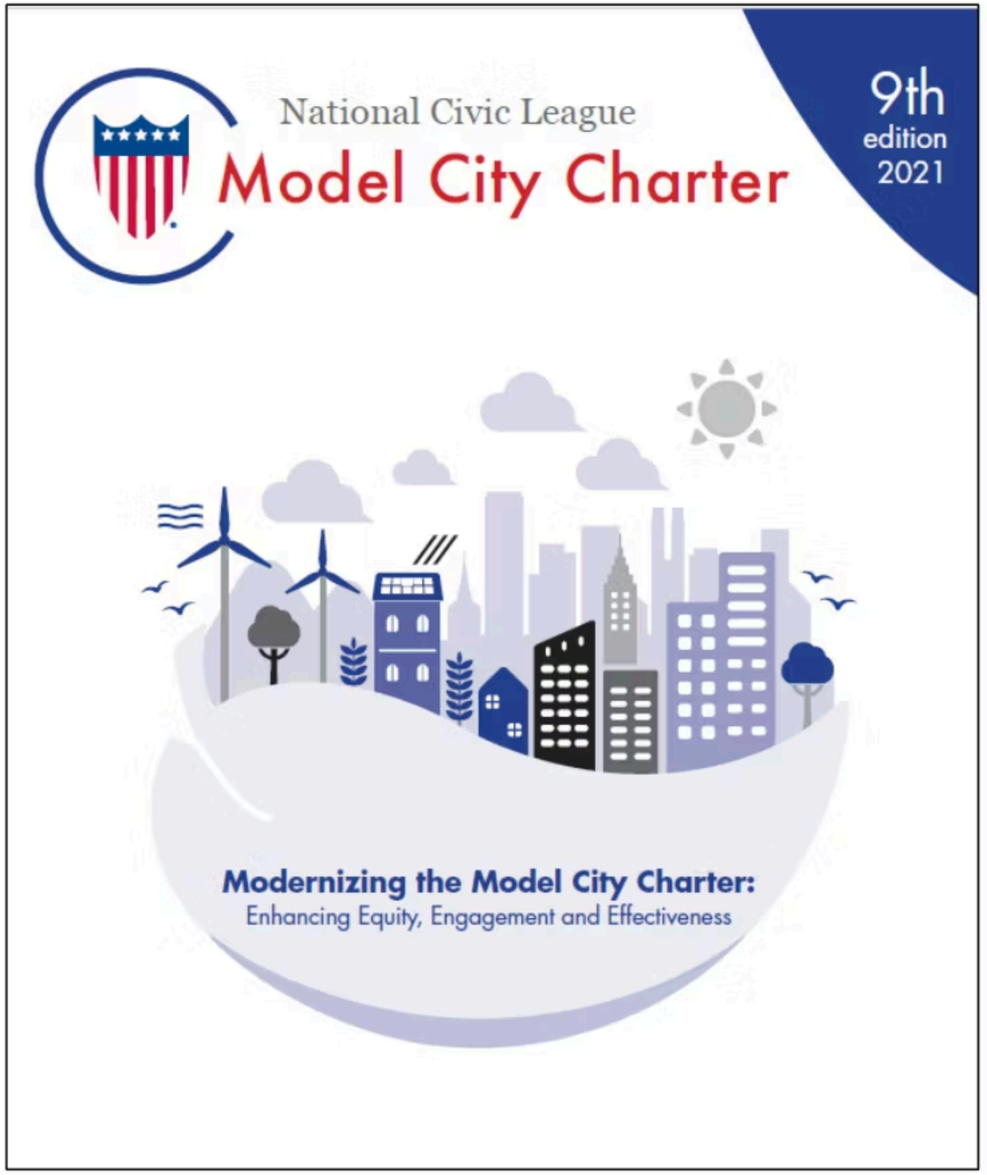
Mentimeter

How to incorporate civic health in a city charter?

Questions to tackle:

- Who should be in charge of public engagement and civic health?
- How to build in engagement on the biggest issues?
- How to support engagement by neighborhood, youth, community groups?
- How should official public meetings work?
- How are you going to measure success?

Some answers go in charter – some shouldn't



Report – Community Foundations for Civic Health: Learning & Action in 2025 and Directions for 2026

Access the report here:

CFLeads
Community Foundations Leading Change

Rhode Island Foundation

National Civic League

What do you need next?