

# THE CIVIC INFORMATION INDEX

Mapping drivers of engaged,  
informed, equitable, healthy  
and resilient communities.



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# CIVIC INFORMATION INDEX FOREWORD

**By A. Rima Dael**

*CEO, National Federation of Community Broadcasters*

**“For NFCB, the Civic Information Index is not an abstract dataset. It is a working tool.”**

Over the past several years, the work of the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) has centered on a clear focus: how do we strengthen community radio not simply as a network of stations, but as essential civic infrastructure? As the public media landscape has shifted and long-standing support has eroded, this question has taken on new urgency.

For the small, rural, Tribal, BIPOC-serving, and multilingual stations that are the heart of our membership, the stakes are real. Many operate with limited budgets and small or volunteer teams. Yet they remain among the most trusted sources of information and cultural companions in their communities, showing up every day as steady, local institutions that people rely on to stay informed, connected, and safe.

The Index allows us to see our stations in the full context of the communities they serve through five interconnected pillars: News and Information; Civic Participation Ecosystem; Equity and Justice; Health and Opportunity; and Environmental Resilience. Together, these pillars reflect the conditions that shape whether communities can access information, participate in civic life, and respond to challenges. The Index makes these relationships visible. It

surfaces structural realities, from broadband access and news deserts to medical debt, housing stability, and environmental vulnerability.

The Index also affirms what our stations have long understood through practice: community radio is often strongest in places where other forms of civic infrastructure are limited or absent. In these communities, multilingual access is not an add-on. It is fundamental to whether people can participate, respond, and stay connected.

This clarity has shaped both our strategy and our partnership with the Listening Post Collective and the Information Futures Lab. NFCB used the Index to guide unique investments in member stations in Appalachia and Tribal communities, helping them listen to their communities and evolve their work to target topics, platforms, and realities that shape information in their regions.

**The Index has also strengthened how we show up in advocacy.**

It allows us to move beyond anecdotes and speak with greater precision about civic health, public safety, and the conditions communities are navigating every day. It gives us a way to connect what we see on the ground to broader systems, policy conversations, and investment decisions.

Looking ahead, the Civic Information Index will remain central to NFCB's work.

**The Index informs how we plan, how we invest our time and resources, and how we support stations as part of broader civic systems.**

It is part of the infrastructure we rely on to do this work well. We invite you to engage deeply with this data and use it to inform decisions, guide investment, and strengthen the civic life of your communities.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2026 Civic Information Index. We are excited you are here.

The Civic Information Index is a practical data tool that helps you understand the civic health of your community. Newsrooms, civic and media innovators, funders, universities, community organizations and local governments across the country use the Index to make informed decisions and take action. They are relying on the Index to build investment strategies,

identify underserved communities and neighborhoods, better understand rural residents, develop training programs, and strengthen local news and information ecosystems.

In this report, we share our latest Index updates and details on how to use the Index to guide your work and community action.

The 2026 Civic Information Index brings together 27 county-level data sets into one clear framework. It helps you see where communities are doing well, where they face challenges, and how their overall civic health compares (see chapter 3 for an overview of all 27 indicators). While traditional measures focus mainly on aspects such as voter turnout and philanthropic giving, the Civic Information Index goes further. It examines a broader set of factors and drivers that shape how communities function, connect and thrive.



## THE FIVE PILLARS OF THE 2026 CIVIC INFORMATION INDEX

- **News and Information.** Includes measures such as library visits, news providers and broadband access.
- **Civic Participation.** Includes data such as voter registration, volunteering and the census response rate.
- **Equity.** Includes data on neighborhood poverty, medical debt, and youth disconnected from school or work.
- **Health & Opportunity.** Includes data on factors such as educational attainment, employment, housing and food security.
- **Environmental Resilience (new).** Introduces measures on energy burden, storm damage, and temperature changes and heat waves.

The Index was co-created in fall 2024 by The Listening Post Collective at Internews and the Information Futures Lab at Brown University, in partnership with an Advisory Group of civic and data experts, journalists and information ecosystem leaders. The project was made possible with support from Press Forward, and the dashboard build out and 2026 edition was supported by Democracy Fund.

## EXPANDING THE FRAMEWORK

The 2026 Civic Information Index expands the initial framework to include an environmental resilience pillar, and adds three new data points to the existing pillars. It also provides updated data for 18 of the 21 indicators included in the initial 2024 edition. The new Index was co-created by the same partners and an

extended Advisory Group, using the same methodologies.

In this report, we continue the story of this collective, collaborative work, anchoring the 2026 Index in this unique moment in U.S. history, based on our conversations with Advisory Group members, users and partners across the nation (see chapter 2).

We are grateful to Rima Dael, CEO of the National Federation for Community Broadcasters, for sharing her thoughts on the work in the foreword, and to our entire Advisory Group for the nuanced insights, care, ingenuity and solidarity. We are also indebted to the many innovators and leaders who immediately put the data and concepts to work, making the Index the living and breathing project we hoped it could be.



**“The Index is now my screen saver. It reminds me every day why we do this work.”**

**Ryan Eller**, Executive Director of the Appalachian Funders Network

To explore the Index data for your county, visit our [Index dashboard](#).





## 2. A CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR CIVIC INFORMATION AND CIVIC HEALTH

News and information are an essential part of civic infrastructure in a democracy. Leaders, funders, service providers and organizers at all levels need to recognize the value of news and information, invest in them, and manage them with care. Too often, critical conversations about cornerstones of U.S. democracy — from journalism and information landscape changes to social safety net disruptions to community health, economic and environmental challenges — overlook this reality. We created the Civic Information Index to address this gap.

To explore the Index data for your county, visit our [Index dashboard](#).



### A CHANGED AMERICA

As we launch the 2026 edition of the Index, we are finding ourselves in a changed America.

Across the country, a landmark bill passed by congress in July 2025 (H.R.1) is breaking down the social support infrastructure that many communities rely on, like Medicaid and SNAP food benefits. Critical elements of civic infrastructure have been defunded, from federal agencies to health and climate data projects to civil rights protection programs to local organizations supporting people in need. From Oregon to Rhode Island, from Minnesota to Texas, a brute-force immigration crackdown has brought disruption, fear, and instability to American communities.

As the very narrative of the U.S. as a constitutional democracy and nation of immigrants is at stake, these adversities have also galvanized new coalitions and resistance against democratic backsliding. More people are organizing for civic action, participation, and a vision of the nation that prioritizes civic health for all. And people are reshaping information infrastructure in the process, for example by leaning in to existing or creating new, relationship-based information networks to support immigrants in need of safety, supplies, and care.

**“This is not about journalism in isolation. We’re building a better house, and this is the first floor.”**

**Loris Ann Taylor**, President & CEO, Native Public Media

# CONNECTING LOCAL CIVIC NEEDS WITH INFORMATION NEEDS

In local communities, people are looking for ways to survive and thrive amidst these shifts. They need their local information ecosystems, everyone from journalists to libraries to public information sources to local leaders, to provide trusted information rooted in the civic issues that impact them most. They need information that can connect them to timely resources, make sense of the systems around them, provide opportunities for connection and belonging, and empower them to take action and make decisions that promote individual — and collective — wellbeing.

The Civic Information Index was designed to make these connections between local civic needs and local information needs visible and actionable. Users can check how every single county in the United States is doing when it comes to essentials such as safety, housing, education, employment, and civic engagement. Users can map key elements

of their local information ecosystem beyond journalism and newsrooms.

## DOCUMENTING THE IMPACT OF DISRUPTION

Tracking this civic data has never been more important. The ongoing dismantling of safety net policies is expected to push millions into food and housing insecurity, medical debt, and poverty — with impacts accelerating through 2026 and beyond. Future updates of the Index will make such impacts visible, for each data point and across different factors, documenting the consequences of the current upheaval for the civic health of American communities.

That is, if credible data collection is maintained. Twenty-two of the 27 data sets in the Index are based on federal-government-supported research and data collection efforts. As the federal government continues to defund federal agencies and overhaul the U.S. Census, it is unclear what the impact of these actions will be on the availability of this critical data in the coming years.



**“Place is an asset for interrupting nationalized trends and finding local solutions. The Civic Information Index helps you contextualize place and makes the drivers of civic health visible and across the U.S.”**

**Lizzy Hazeltine**, Director of the North Carolina Local News Lab Fund

## PROTECTING DATA COLLECTION

Some of the data points in the 2026 Civic Information Index provide powerful examples for why all of this matters. Amidst a backlash against the crippling effects of medical debt on people who can't pay for the care of diseases they didn't cause, and resulting changes in hospital practices and local and state laws, medical debt has

gone down across the country – with a few exceptions, especially in Alaska. And when medical debt goes down, civic health goes up. We know this because the Urban Institute is collecting the medical debt data, and we are able to connect it to other indicators in the Index.

**“We are at a critical moment, both for how we think about measuring civic health, and for understanding what risks we face if we stop paying attention to it.”**

**Cameron Hickey**, CEO, National Conference on Citizenship

In this context, then, the Civic Information Index is also becoming a key showcase for the crucial role of data itself as a driver of civic health. Consistent data collection can make civic backsliding visible, and provides powerful evidence for advocacy. Which communities are confronting challenges? Who is thriving? Who is struggling? Sustaining data that help answer such questions will require collective efforts to advocate for data collection to remain a priority and for the data sets to remain publicly accessible. It also requires

creativity in how local and regional efforts can play a bigger role in collecting and sharing public data in the absence of reliable federal government efforts.

## LOOKING BEYOND DIVISIVE NARRATIVES

Finally, the Civic Information Index also leads us past misleading narratives about a divided America. By relying on cross-sector, community-level data rather than generalizations, we can see the more nuanced realities of communities around the country in this complicated time. Every community deserves to be considered based on what’s actually happening on the ground, and the efforts civic institutions and individuals make to improve the lives of their neighbors every day. The breadth and depth of the Index’s community-based data begins to make this possible.



COLLABORATION  
IS KEY



27  
INDICATORS

# 3. THE NEW INDEX FRAMEWORK

The new 2026 Civic Information Index connects 27 diverse data sets to assess civic health at the county level. By mapping news and information ecosystems, civic participation, and drivers of equity, health, opportunity and environmental resilience, the Index makes the overall wellbeing of neighborhoods, communities, states and the nation visible and measurable in new ways.

To explore the Index data for your county, visit our [Index dashboard](#).



## DRIVERS OF ENGAGED, INFORMED, EQUITABLE, HEALTHY AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES



The Civic Information Index is designed to grow. When we launched the first edition in fall 2024, we shared that the framework was a starting point — a foundation to build on as new data becomes available, as our understanding of civic health deepens, and as the communities and stakeholders using the Index help us see what’s missing. This year, we’ve made some important additions: we are introducing a new fifth pillar on environmental resilience as well as three new indicators across existing pillars.

## CAPTURING ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE

Adding environmental data to the Civic Information Index has been a goal since we first launched. Natural and built environments shape our health, mobility, and ability to participate in public life. And as climate change accelerates, factors such as increasing air pollution, extreme heat, natural disasters, and wildfires threaten both physical safety and the civic infrastructure that helps communities function in the first place.

Communities whose residents are spending an outsized share of their income on energy bills, or whose crops and properties are repeatedly damaged by natural disasters, face compounding pressures that can make civic participation and equitable outcomes harder to achieve.

Working with our Advisory Group and a group of data and environment experts, we explored how to best integrate nuanced and often very geographically specific environmental data into the Index. Following the Index’s design and purpose, we wanted to stay focused on a small set of indicators so no individual indicator is crowded out in a busy field of dozens of competing and overwhelming data points. We also needed data that was available for nearly every county in the nation, and we wanted to stay committed to, wherever possible, measuring outcomes — what is actually happening in communities — rather than exposure to risk.

**“Being able to see, at a glance, a county’s civic health, and how it compares to others, is invaluable. Seeing how the structural features of communities are related brings a new level of insight to my work.”**

**Sarah Stonbely**, Senior Research Fellow, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University

## MEASURING OUTCOMES RATHER THAN RISK

This last design feature is especially relevant in the age of climate change: A county in a hurricane-prone region or an extreme-heat corridor may still fare reasonably well if its infrastructure, economy, and systems are equipped to absorb and recover from an increase in those hazards. Conversely, a place that faces moderate climate risk on paper may fare poorly if its residents lack the resources to protect themselves when conditions worsen. This distinction mattered to us: risk and resilience do not always map onto the same places, and communities

that have faced historical disinvestment are often left with little to absorb novel and increasing environmental risks.

One immediate learning from this process was that there is an urgent need for better county-level data on outcomes for key environmental risks. While data collection often exists at the local level, transparent and accessible county-by-county data sets, for example showing heat-related illness visits to emergency departments, remain elusive.



**“I think this project is powerful because it brings together diverse data sets and visualizes them in a way that highlights opportunities for improving civic health. It’s a comprehensive approach that can guide us in making impactful changes.”**

**Amanda Zamora**, Co-Founder, The 19th

## MISSING INDICATORS MATTER

As a result, our new environmental pillar includes two outcomes and, for now, one risk measure: (1) household energy burden (how much of their income are people spending on energy), (2) damages from natural disasters to property and crops (natural disasters here range from storms and floods to wildfires to drought), and (3) changes in temperature and relative heat wave days (as a proxy for outcome data on the impact of extreme heat). The environmental resilience pillar also includes a missing dataset: Walkability/ Bikeability was identified as a key built environment factor that impacts civic health. As with all indicators that are deemed important but where no reliable data is available, this is listed as a missing indicator.

We have also added three new indicators across existing pillars, responding to a changed environment and addressing gaps identified in the first edition of the Index.

**In the News and Information pillar**, we have added local journalist equivalents per

100,000 people, drawn from Muck Rack’s local journalism index. Our first edition included the Medill Local News Initiative’s well-known news deserts database showing the number of news outlets in a county. When we compared this news deserts data to the journalist equivalent data, we found that the two data sets don’t consistently correlate: some counties with multiple outlets had very few journalists, and vice versa. We added the journalist equivalent indicator to add nuance to what we know are difficult to measure realities — not just whether a newsroom exists, but whether there are people doing the reporting.



**In the Civic Participation pillar**, we added voter registration (as a percentage of the citizen voting age population), drawn from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. There were several motivations to include this data set: the ongoing push to increase voting restrictions in several states stands in the way of civic participation, and is especially relevant at a time of high stake elections amidst two very different visions of America's future. At the same time, comparing voter registration and voter turnout data shows little overlap in most counties across the nation, providing an important starting point for civic engagement and journalism teams to explore what might be at play locally.

**In the Health and Opportunity pillar**, we added mental health providers per 100,000 population, from County Health Rankings. Mental health is a core issue of our time: The Covid-19 pandemic has created a loneliness epidemic, the dwindling social safety net creates new stressors for millions, and an entire generation of young adults is struggling with the impact of social media and a low-opportunity job market on their wellbeing. In this environment, access to mental health care has become an important building block for civic health.



**“Our greatest challenge is that our civic infrastructure – all the institutions and organizations that give people opportunities to solve problems, build community, and help make public decisions – is out of date. To update it, we need to know how people are thinking about those opportunities, how they are working, and why they are valuable.”**

**Matt Leighninger**, Director, Center for Democracy Innovation,  
National Civic League



# NEWS AND INFORMATION



People have access to and engage with trustworthy, credible information about issues affecting their lives and communities. Information is available in ways that meet community members’ cultural context, consumption habits, languages spoken and information needs — and is delivered by sources they trust. The information infrastructure promotes an inclusive and equitable public sphere. Digital and media literacy are part of public education and support for public service media is sufficient to meet community information needs. Journalism is independent, journalists are safe, and the media landscape is representative of and supported by the community.

**How the Index frames and measures news and information:**

Category	Indicator
<b>Lack of local news sources / presence of “news deserts”</b>	Total news outlets per 10,000 population
<b>Presence of journalists (new)</b>	Local Journalists per 100,000 population
<b>Broadband access</b>	Percent of households with broadband of any type
<b>Library utilization</b>	Library visits per 10,000 population
<b>Vibrancy of online engagement on local issues</b>	The number of Facebook Pages predicted to be “Public Good” pages based on page title, category, and other page characteristics, per 10,000 users in the county
<b>Language access / English language proficiency</b>	Percent who speak a language other than English at home
<b>Literacy levels</b>	Average adult literacy scale score
<b>Community diversity represented in newsroom staff / news coverage</b>	Not currently measured
<b>Multilingual Media</b>	Not currently measured

# CIVIC PARTICIPATION



People have opportunities to participate in civic life and they do so with some frequency. People are represented equally, their voices are heard, and they are able to shape programs and policies that affect them. The community is governed by a functioning, representative government and elections are free and fair. Processes are in place for all community members to be able to provide input on a sustained basis and access information that connects them to basic public services. People feel connected and know how they can get engaged — be that in the political process, volunteering, community engagement, advocacy, or other ways to serve, lead and affect change.

How the Index frames and measures civic participation and civic life:

Category	Indicator
<b>Engagement with political process</b>	Voter turnout (votes/citizen voting age population)
<b>Ability to participate in political process (new)</b>	Voter registration
<b>Community centers / places where people come together</b>	Number of membership associations per 10,000 population
<b>Volunteering</b>	Percent of state residents who formally volunteered
<b>Giving &amp; philanthropy</b>	Percent of adjusted gross income that are charitable contributions
<b>Opportunities for participation in government / ability to inform government policies</b>	2020 Census self-response rate
<b>Community power-building organizations</b>	Not currently measured
<b>Social connectedness &amp; people's sense of belonging</b>	Not currently measured
<b>Civic education &amp; civic attitudes</b>	Not currently measured
<b>Representation in positions of power</b>	Not currently measured
<b>Community members' sense of what is important for the community</b>	Not currently measured

# EQUITY AND JUSTICE

## (STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS)



People are free of structural barriers to civic engagement, accountability and change. Regardless of race or ethnicity, physical or mental abilities, age, gender or other factors, all people have equal access to civic life and opportunity. Structural racism, ableism, economic discrimination and other forms of oppression are dismantled, and all members of a community are able to thrive.

### How the Index frames and measures equity and justice:

Category	Indicator
Life expectancy	General life expectancy at birth
Medical debt	Percent of people with a credit bureau record who have medical debt in collections
Youth disconnected from work and school	Percent of youth ages 16 to 19 who are not working or enrolled in school
Neighborhood poverty	Percentage of the population living in high-poverty neighborhoods, defined as census tracts with a poverty rate of 30 percent or higher
Historical news deserts	Not currently measured
Cost of Voting	Not currently measured
People working two or more jobs	Not currently measured

# HEALTH AND OPPORTUNITY

## (SOCIAL DETERMINANTS)



People have access to the basic foundations of a healthy life, which are essential to people’s ability to sustainably participate in society. This includes economic stability; community connection and safety; access to healthcare, education, transportation and basic needs (housing, food, clean water and clean air); and environmental disaster resilience.

How the Index frames and measures health and opportunities:

Category	Indicator
<b>Economic stability</b>	Percent of population unemployed
<b>Access to healthcare and preventative care</b>	Percent of <65 population uninsured
<b>Access to mental health care (new)</b>	Mental health providers per 10,000 population
<b>Access to education and lifelong learning</b>	Percent of 25+ population with bachelor’s degree or higher
<b>Access to basic needs: housing, food, clean water and clean air</b>	Median gross rent as a percentage of household income in the past 12 months
<b>Access to basic needs: housing, food, clean water and clean air</b>	Percentage of population who lack adequate access to food
<b>Access to transportation</b>	Percent of households with no vehicle available
<b>Environmental disaster resilience*</b>	Not currently measured

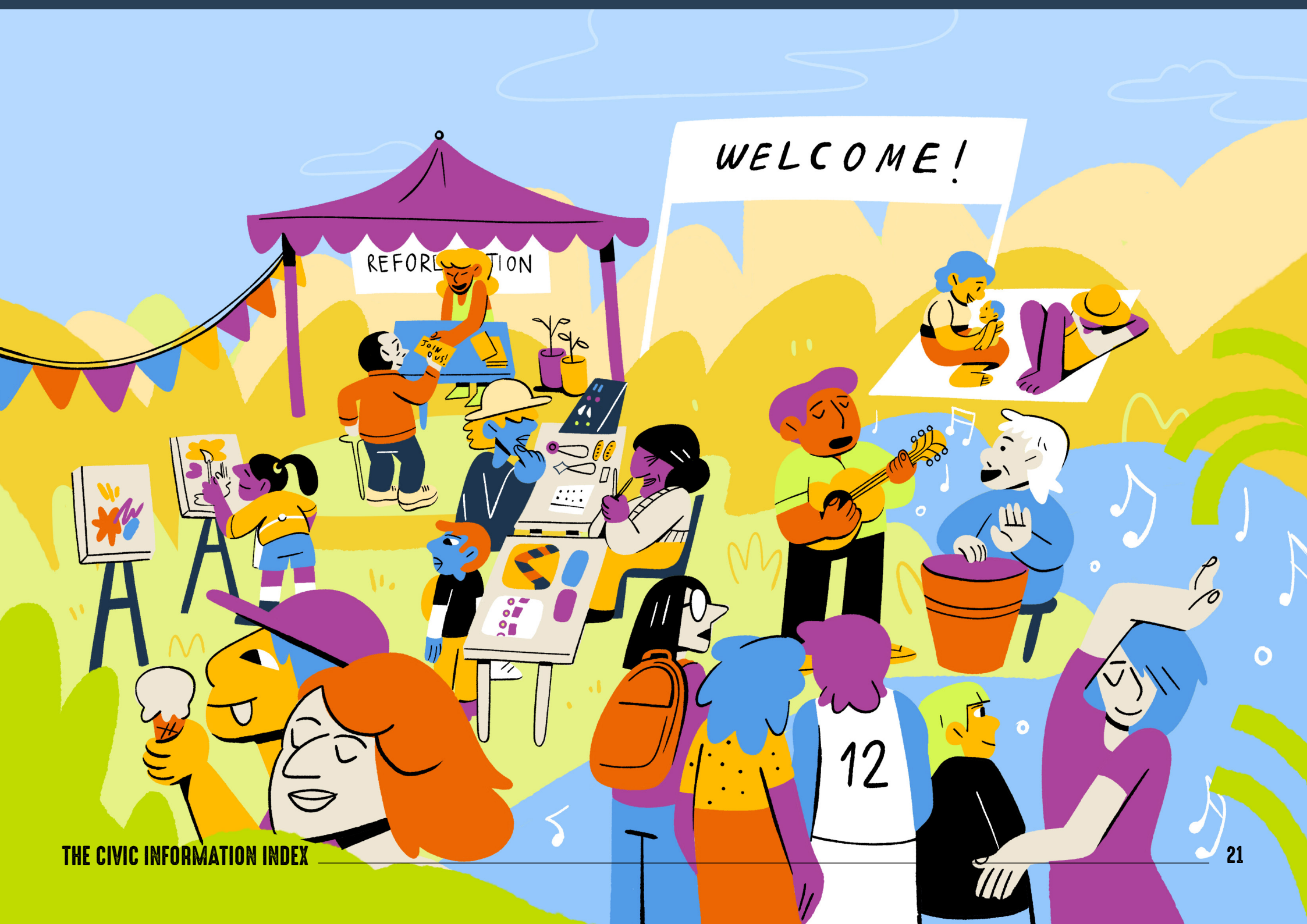
# ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE



## How the Index frames and measures environmental resilience:

Category	Indicator
<b>Affordability of protection from heat/cold</b>	Average annual energy cost as a percentage of annual household income
<b>Economic damage from severe weather events</b>	Inflation-adjusted direct damages (to property and crops) from natural disasters
<b>Extreme Heat risk/impact</b>	Changes in temperature and relative heat wave days
<b>Built Environment: Walkability/Bikeability</b>	Not currently measured

People live in neighborhoods that support individual and community wellbeing, including the presence of green space, walkability/bikeability, clean air and sustainable living, working and transportation practices. Communities are built and governed to withstand the physical impacts of environmental hazards and a changing climate; local systems are equipped to prevent harm and respond quickly when challenges occur. The burden of environmental risk is shared equitably, and no neighborhood is systematically more exposed to environmental threats because of its racial or economic composition.



# 4. HOW THE INDEX MEASURES CIVIC HEALTH

**For each county in the United States, the Index measures civic health on three different levels:\***

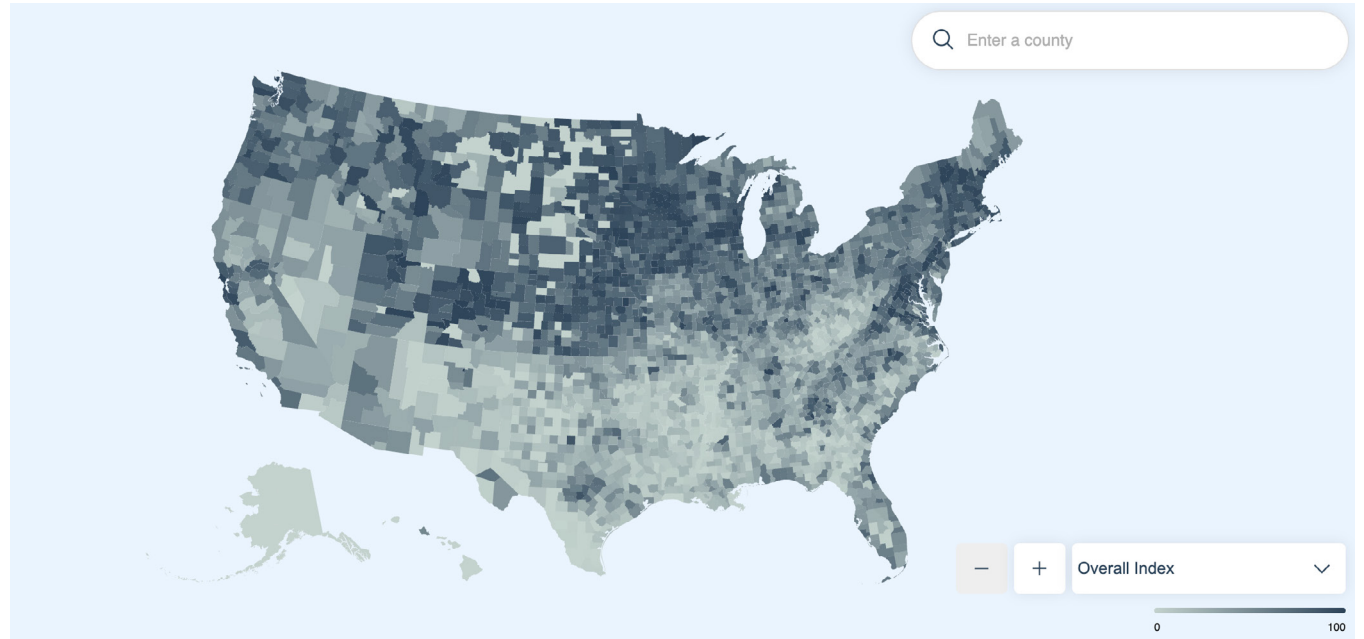
1. An overall Index score for each county shows the total performance of the civic health ecosystem across all five pillars.
2. Sub-scores indicate a county's performance for each pillar.
3. Results are shown for each indicator within a pillar.

There is also a map view, allowing users to see differences across regions, states and the nation.

For insights on national Index findings, see [chapter 5](#).

For examples of how users have contextualized local data and used it in their work, see [chapter 6](#).

**\*Note** that missing data points listed in the framework above are not included in the Index dashboard, which shows results using existing data.



**“It’s shifted how we frame our class’s core goals. We’re not just documenting local concerns, we’re helping students and, slowly, community partners co-design civic information systems.”**

**Andrew DeVigal**, Director, Agora Journalism Center

# INVESTIGATING CRITICAL DATA GAPS

As a tool aiming to compile data for all counties in the nation, our Index inevitably misses some nuances and differences that exist within counties. Urban centers are particularly noteworthy here: they are often densely populated, and differ economically, structurally and culturally from neighborhood to neighborhood.

## **This means that county averages can mask significant disparities.**

We see examples of this in Oakland, Minneapolis, and places such as Hanover County, North Carolina, a quickly urbanizing community due to the rapid growth of Wilmington, NC.

## **THE KEY IS TO DRILL DEEPER**

Using the Index framework as a launchpad for what kinds of data sets to investigate, users can explore more nuanced, hyperlocal data to get a better understanding of these differences. North Carolina's Cape Fear Collective recently published a great example of how to do this. Digging into more granular data for Hanover County, they found a 17-year difference in life expectancy between two neighborhoods. They then tracked down additional neighborhood-level data such as food and housing security, poverty and health insurance, showing a correlation between lower scores across these drivers of civic health and life expectancy.

Would you like support with exploring  
neighborhood data for your communities?  
Email us at [informationfutureslab@brown.edu](mailto:informationfutureslab@brown.edu)





# 5. INDEX FINDINGS

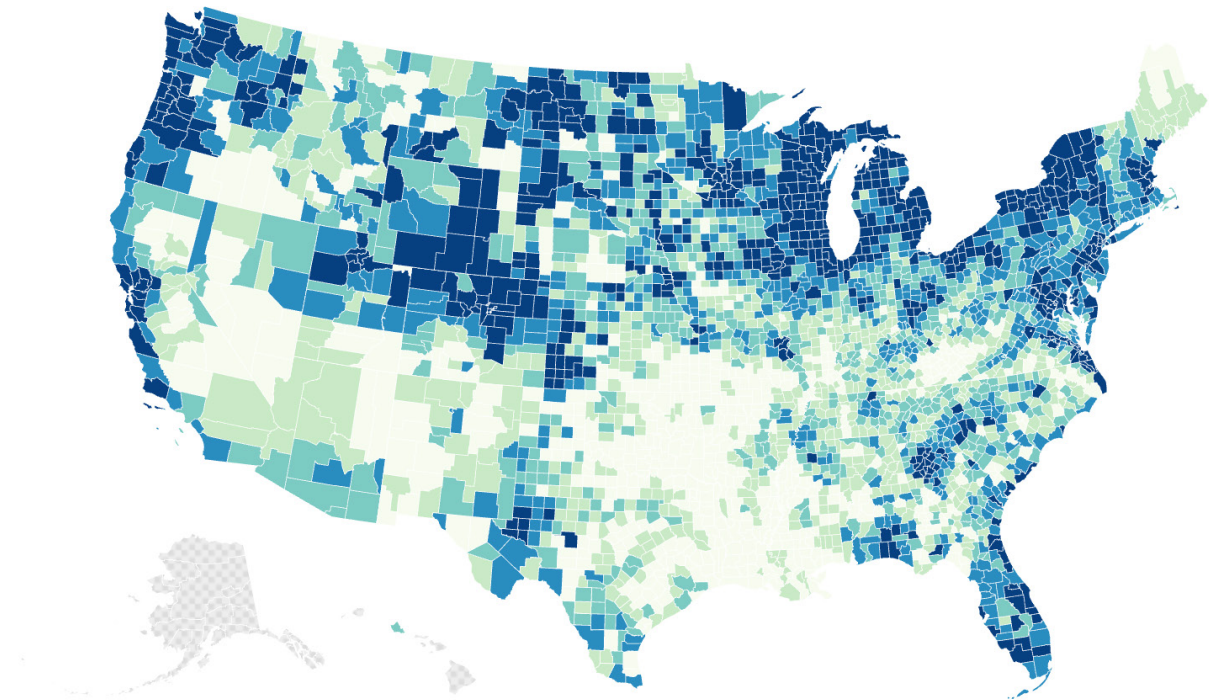
Given the diversity of communities, opportunities and challenges present across the United States, the main purpose of the Civic Information Index is to allow localized assessments of key factors that drive civic health.

At the same time, the Civic Information Index reveals regional disparities in civic health. In the 2026 Index, the essential findings from the 2024 edition have not changed: The Index continues to show lower civic health scores for Appalachian communities as well as most communities with a higher percentage of Black, Hispanic/Latino or Native American residents.

## OVERALL 2026 INDEX FINDINGS

This holds true for the new Environmental Resilience pillar as well, adding to our understanding of the persistent and systemic challenges faced by these communities.

## Environmental Resilience Index

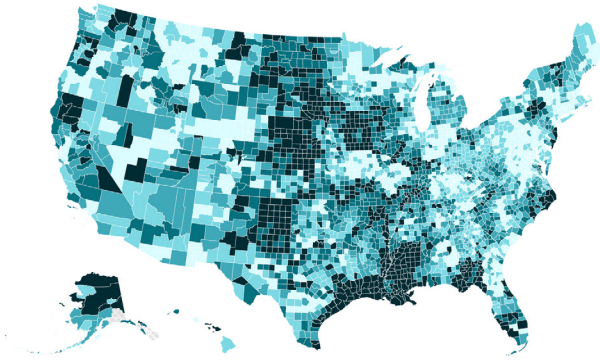


However, the Environmental Resilience pillar also reveals significant vulnerabilities in other regions – particularly, the central and south-central states, and in some counties in the West. Given the data currently included in the Index, these results illuminate an important interplay between environmental stressors (such

as extreme storms, wildfires, floods, heat waves and cold spells) and the politics of essentials such as disaster relief and energy pricing, which impact the ability of people and communities to stay safe and recover quickly.

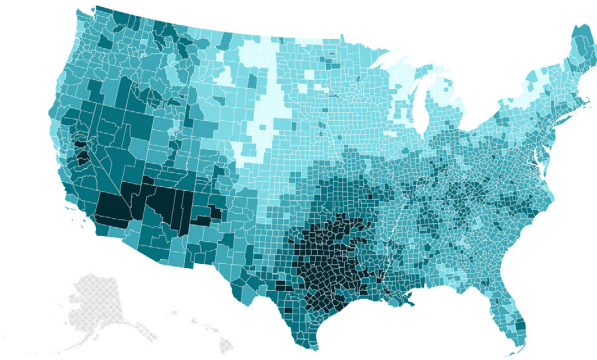
### Damage from natural disasters per capita

Lower damages are associated with higher civic health.



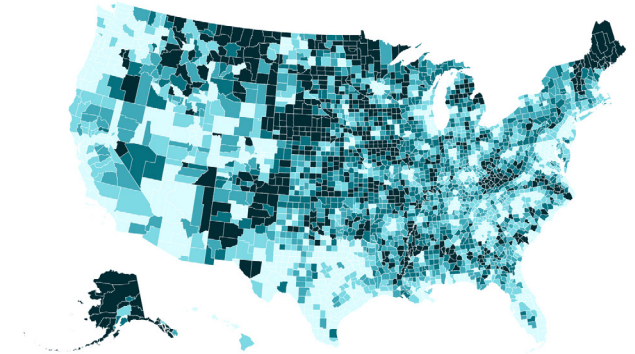
### Heat wave days, 2006-2025

Fewer heat wave days are associated with higher civic health.



### Household energy burden: Average annual energy cost as a percentage of household income

Lower energy burden is associated with higher civic health.



#### DAMAGE FROM NATURAL DISASTERS

This map shows the damage from natural disasters to property and crops over a 20-year time frame (inflation-adjusted). It illustrates the disproportionate burden carried by central states all the way from North Dakota to Kansas to Louisiana. Over 40 event types are included in this data, such as floods, storms, wildfire and tsunamis.

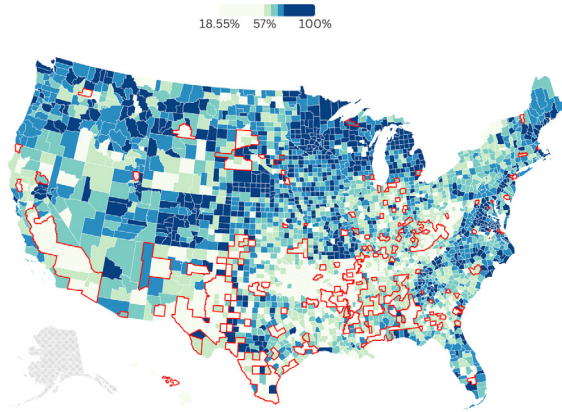
#### HEAT WAVE DAYS

This map shows where increases in temperatures and heat wave days are most pronounced, revealing significant risk in the South and Southwest, but also in the Northwest, Northeast and even some counties in the Midwest. It demonstrates the importance of tracking these changes everywhere, not just in the hottest counties.

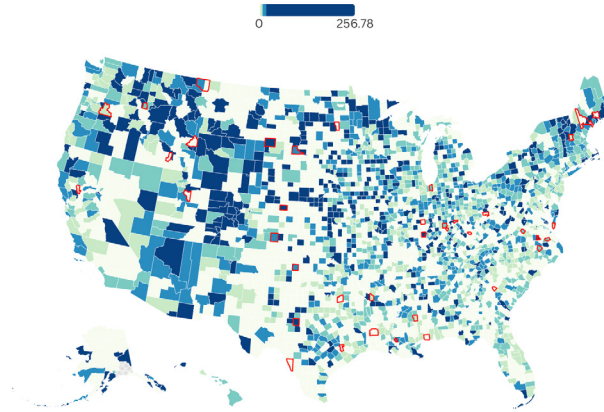
#### HOUSEHOLD ENERGY BURDEN

This map shows how much of their income U.S. households are paying for energy (electricity and/or gas). It makes visible that paying for heat in colder climates is still a higher burden for households than paying for cooling in warmer climates; but economically distressed regions such as the central South and central Appalachia also see high burden. Index users should investigate both people's incomes and local energy costs to assess local dynamics.

**2024 Voter turnout**  
Counties where >40% of the active voter population did not vote in 2024 circled



**Local journalist equivalent per 100,000 people**  
Counties with 0 news outlets but at least 1 journalist circled



### REGISTERED VS. ACTIVE VOTERS

This map shows updated 2024 voter turnout data, with an overlay of counties marked in red where more than 40 percent of the registered voters (also called ‘active’ voters) did not vote in 2024. We include a new data set of active voters in the 2026 Index because it turns out voter registration and voter turnout don’t always correlate – especially in some key Black and Hispanic/Latino communities.

### NEWS DESERTS VS. JOURNALISTS

This map shows a new Index dataset calculating the number of journalists present in a community. Comparing it to our existing dataset of news deserts, which counts the presence of news outlets, we noticed that the two data sources often don’t correlate. For example, circled in red here are counties considered news deserts where journalists were found present.

# WHY WE ARE NOT COMPARING 2024 AND 2026 INDEX SCORES

Given the updates made to our Index framework, we are not providing comparisons of overall Index scores or individual pillar scores between the 2024 and 2026 Index editions. It would be like comparing apples to oranges since the data inputs and weights have changed.

What we see in the new data is that for most communities, overall Index scores have not significantly changed. This shows the Index is robust, as our framework measures performance across diverse factors over time. It also aligns with the fact that most of the updated data in this 2026 edition was collected before 2025, so the data represents trends before the more recent and significant disruptions to civic society emerged.

In a small number of communities, overall Index scores have changed more visibly. This means our new combination of data sets puts your county in a different space



compared to others, based on what is now included in the Index. For example, in many counties in Wyoming, a decrease in the state's volunteer rate caused the overall Index scores to drop. In such cases, it's especially interesting to dive into what drives these changes locally. Why did volunteerism in Wyoming drop by 5.7 percent between 2021 and 2023? Note that we are seeing other civic participation indicators, such as voter turnout, decline in Wyoming too — a trend worth investigating.

In other cases, shifts in overall Index scores may be due to newly added data. For example, the inclusion of energy burden and storm damage may put your county in a better or worse position. Finally, there may also be methodological reasons for shifts in scores. For example, we now use voter turnout data from the United States Election Assistance Commission, which aggregates data from state and local jurisdictions and for this past election proved more reliable than our previous source for voter turnout data.

A change to a new data set, collected by a different institution with a different methodology, inevitably means the outcomes will differ at least slightly. If

this is your community, think of it as an opportunity: What do you know about voting participation, and who is counting? How may this data, including discrepancies, lead you to a better understanding of who in your communities turns out to vote?

## 2024 INDEX INDICATORS WHERE NEW DATA IS AVAILABLE

The new Index also provides updated data for 18 of the 21 indicators included in the initial 2024 edition. This means that in specific cases we can use the Index to track changes in individual data sets — such as how employment rates have changed between the 2024 and 2026 edition, and whether medical debt is going up or down in a specific community. Users can explore these changes in the data for 10 of the updated indicators (8 more indicators have updated data, but comparing these data sets is not recommended due to methodological changes or other data constraints.)

**EXAMPLE**

**CHANGES IN MEDICAL DEBT**

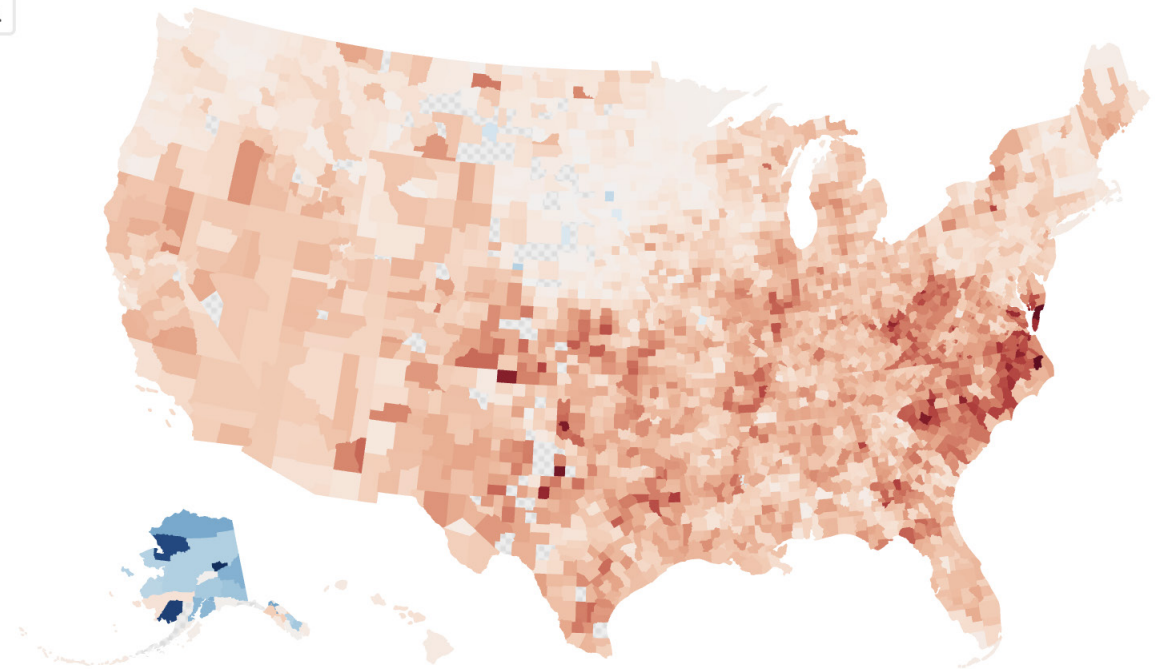
As the map shows, medical debt has gone down in most places across the country, a piece of good news. Hospital billing practices changed in different locations for different reasons, including media exposure of the crippling financial burden on families, community backlash and activism, and political leadership. North Carolina, for example, implemented a strict relief program that erased medical debt for 2.5 million people – a bright spot clearly visible on the map. Alaska, on the other hand, made a concerning move in the opposite direction. And recent changes in medical debt policies and access to medicare may quickly reverse this trend in 2026. Thanks to the great database from the Urban Institute, we'll all be able to keep tabs.

To explore the Index data for your county, visit our [Index dashboard](#).



# Civic Information Index: Comparison of Indicators 2026 vs. 2024

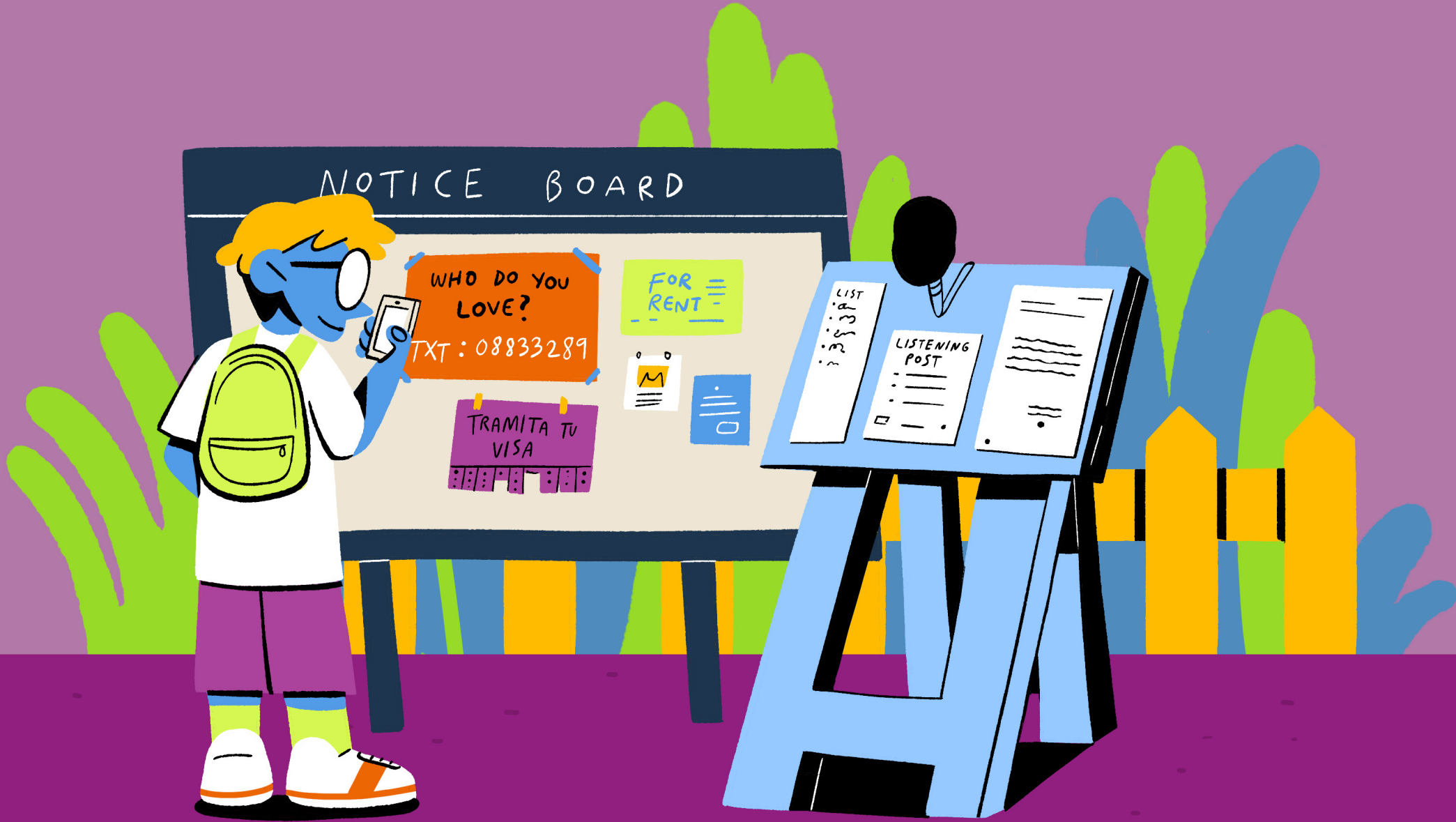
Percent with medical debt \* Lower better



**PRO TIP**

If you are especially curious about how the recent upheavals at the federal level are impacting your community, make sure you check when the new data for a specific

indicator was collected. Some updated data is from 2025, but some is from 2024 or earlier.



# 6. THE INDEX IN ACTION

We built the Civic Information Index as a tool for local leaders and trusted information sharers of all stripes. Not to tell folks how to do their jobs, or what condition their communities are in, but to provide better footing for the power building and important community work that is already under way.

It worked: foundations, universities, civic and media innovators and newsrooms across the country have turned to the Index to understand how local data about information ecosystems, civic engagement, health, and equity relate to the issues they're already funding, reporting on and organizing around.

Funders from Appalachia to Minnesota have used the Civic Information Index to build investment strategies; newsrooms serving immigrant communities have used it to identify where communities are most underserved; and university students are using it to listen more deeply to rural communities. In rural central Virginia, the Index was recently used by government

and social service agencies at a monthly convening to determine resource gaps in the region.

MacArthur's director of local news, Silvia Rivera, turned to the Civic Information Index to understand what parts of the country could benefit from catalytic investments and to ground their decision-making.

**“Usually, when there is a news desert, there’s all sorts of other deserts as well. And so the Index helped us to make that case... that this is why we’re making these choices, and they’re the hard choices,” said Rivera.**

For Rima Dael, CEO of the National Federation for Community Broadcasters, the Index also became an essential tool for a very specific fight: making the case to Congress for continued funding of rural public media.

**“This year, as public media across the United States experienced unprecedented destabilization,” she said, “the Civic**

**Information Index became one of the most valuable tools we had for grounding our advocacy, understanding risk, and championing the needs of small, rural, BIPOC, and Tribal communities navigating worsening information inequities.”**

The reach of the Index has extended beyond the U.S. as well. Sweden-based FOJO Media Institute met with the Index team to explore developing a version adapted to their country's unique challenges with language barriers and information access. The Index team also met with the Irish government's information commissioner, who was interested in how they could use the Civic Index as a tool to improve information access. The pages that follow tell a fuller story of how, and by whom, the Index is being put to work.

# THE INDEX BY THE NUMBERS



12,000

unique Index website users



26

conferences and presentations;



8

case studies

## CASE STUDIES

In our 2024 Civic Information Index report, we offered actor-specific recommendations for funders, journalism support organizations, news outlets, local civic actors, and academic institutions. In 2025, we began regularly connecting with organizations to see if our recommendations were useful. What we found was both humbling and encouraging:

For **funders**, we recommended using Index data to prioritize under-resourced regions and treat information as ecosystem work. This is now visible in place-based strategies from Press Forward Central Appalachia, Press Forward Minnesota, the North Carolina Local News Lab Fund and MacArthur, all of which use Index scores to support where and why they invest.

For **newsrooms and journalism support organizations**, we suggested using the Index to map information needs and design more community-centered reporting and collaborations. Evansville NewsLab and Documented are implementing this by using Index indicators to validate local research, target immigrant communities in low-civic-health counties, and shape training programs for other outlets.

We also encouraged **academic institutions and local civic partners** to act as anchor institutions. The University of Oregon course and the university-led Evansville NewsLab models how the Index can be embedded in

teaching, community partnerships and local ecosystem planning.

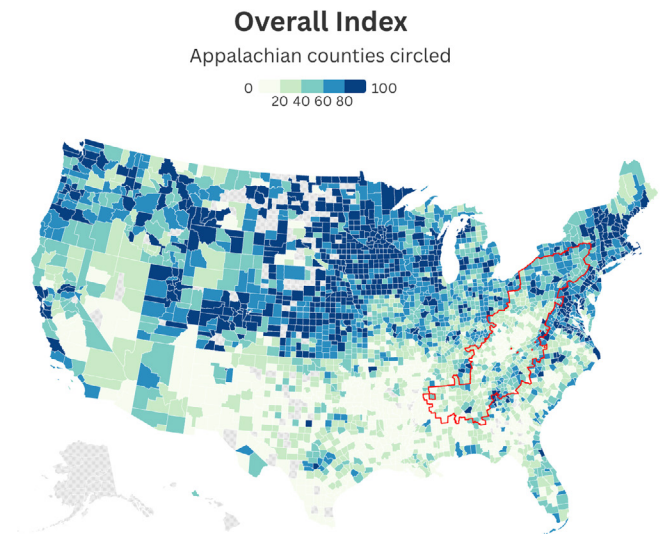
Read on for a closer look at four examples. Together, they show how the Index is informing decisions and strategies. You can find more case studies on our website at [Civic Information Index](#).

**“The Civic Information Index illustrates the influence that education, housing, and well-paying jobs have on the strength of local news. By articulating the mutual connection between local news and other vital elements of thriving communities, the Index encourages us to consider this interconnectedness when designing regional solutions.”**

Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque.

# MAKING THE CASE TO FUNDERS IN RURAL APPALACHIA

Rural Appalachian counties score significantly lower than the rest of the U.S. across every pillar of the Index, from civic participation to health and opportunity. Press Forward Central Appalachia used these numbers to show how the decline of local news affects the well-being of communities and the real-world return on investing in it. Their analysis found that for every additional news outlet in central Appalachian counties (for counties with five or fewer outlets), the average civic health score is 7 points higher. Using this data, the team built a powerful case for national funders to invest in an area historically overlooked.



**“Not having to organize this data ourselves has allowed us to spend resources on supplementing and analyzing the data, rather than finding and housing it.”**

**Eli Fluornoy**, Press Forward Appalachia.

# IMMIGRANT-CENTERED NEWSROOM TRAINING AT DOCUMENTED

Documented, a New York City-based non-profit newsroom serving immigrant communities, is leveraging the Civic Information Index to guide a new training program for peer outlets. Program Manager Maria Arce has been using the Index to identify parts of the US that can most benefit from this training and investment, cross-referencing Index data with counties that have higher immigrant populations to identify the areas of greatest need. Grantees will also explore the Index in the training program, using it to mitigate bias, connect with communities in a more informed way, and have more meaningful conversations with the people they serve.



**“Being able to identify the exact places where local newsrooms can better serve immigrant communities is an invaluable tool for us, as it provides fact-based information for a fair and equitable selection process for our new training program.”**

**Maria Arce**, Program Manager at Documented

# IN THE CLASSROOM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Students at University of Oregon's Agora Journalism Center are working with the Index to explore how local journalism can contribute to broader civic infrastructure in rural communities. "In Florence, for example, the Index helped us realize that Lane County's overall information score masked fundamental inequities for residents on the coast," said Agora Journalism Center Director Andrew DeVigal, who leads the class. Using the Index as a starting point for listening sessions and community surveys, students experienced firsthand how a community can be information-rich on paper but information-poor in practice for specific groups, such as older adults or those without reliable broadband, and that this gap has real consequences for civic life. Seeing those dynamics broken down into measurable pillars via the Index helped both students and residents articulate what's missing more concretely.



**"It gives language to something they've already felt: that access to trustworthy, relevant, and timely information isn't evenly distributed and that this gap has real consequences for civic life."**

**Andrew DeVigal**, Director, Agora Journalism Center

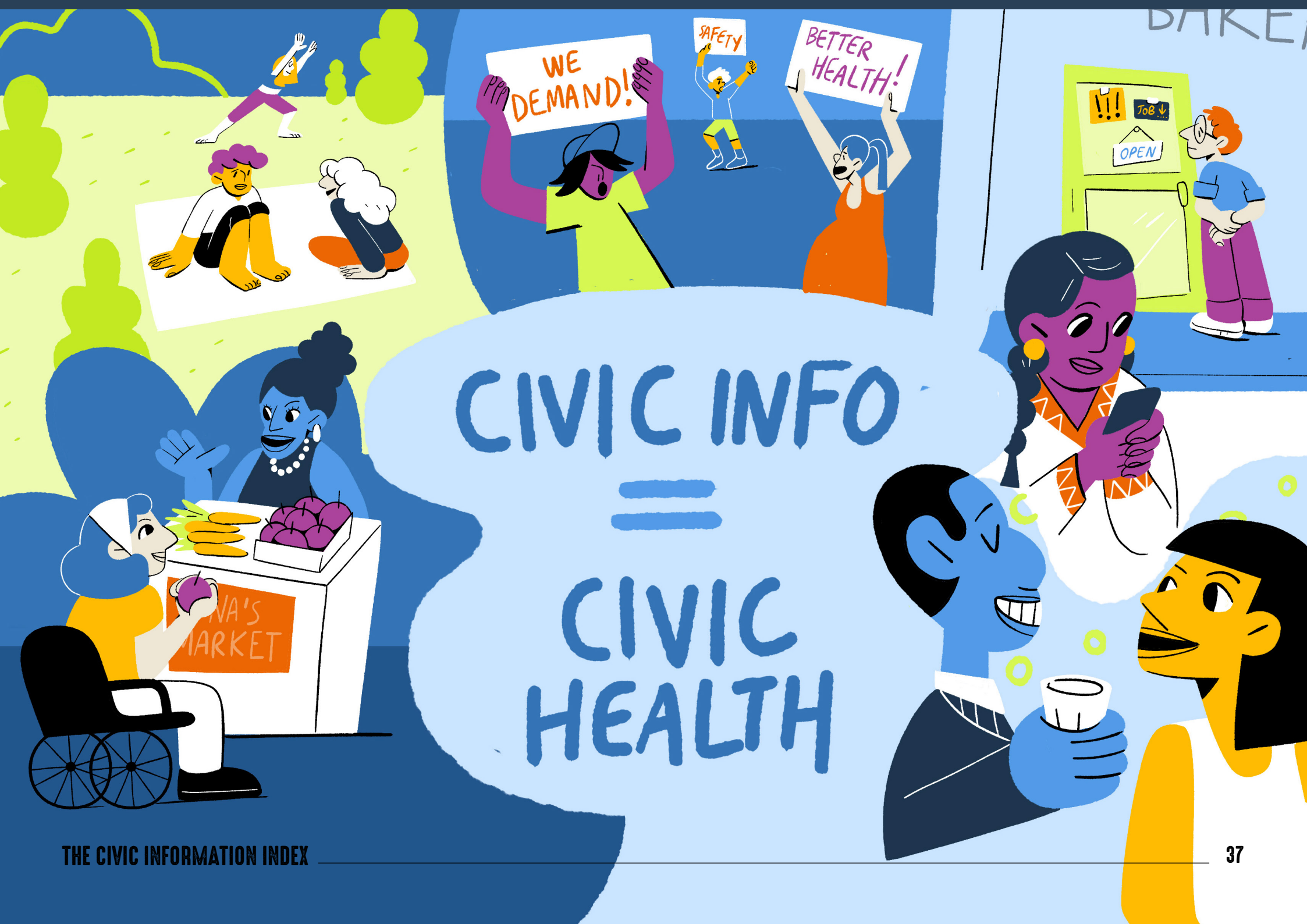
# A MILLION-DOLLAR BET ON CIVIC HEALTH IN MINNESOTA

A recent statewide information ecosystem assessment in Minnesota showed that despite some of the highest voter turnout and census response numbers in the country, people reported low civic confidence. As a response, Press Forward Minnesota created the [Civic Health and Community Collaborations](#) grant round, incorporating the Index directly into their grant evaluation rubric to create a \$1 million strategy. The application process also required newsrooms to explore partnerships with nonprofits that were already trusted sources of information in the community, such as local food pantries or refugee services that also distributed civic information.



**“It helped put all of these pieces together to really create a conceptual framework that we could apply to what we’re already doing.”**

**May Yang**, Director of Democracy Programs, Minnesota Council on Foundations



CIVIC INFO  
=  
CIVIC HEALTH

# 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The first edition of the Civic Information Index has shown us that local data, in different hands, can help build civic health ecosystems in a variety of ways. Funders have used it to build investment strategies; newsrooms have used it to find underserved communities; students have used it to listen more carefully; and advocates have used it to make the case to Congress to preserve community media. Building on what we have learned from these early adopters, we propose the following actions to guide the establishment of more robust, equitable information and civic health ecosystems.

To explore the Index data for your county, visit our [Index dashboard](#).



## LOCAL AND NATIONAL NEWS OUTLETS

Prioritize reporting that explores important storylines emerging from some of the Index data and investigate the civic health of specific regions or communities.

Use the Index and available community information needs data to deliver reporting in more nuanced and equitable ways.

Partner with mutual aid groups to identify and reach community members who are disconnected from formal information channels, and to ensure that reporting on civic health issues reflects the lived experience of those most affected.

## FUNDERS

Prioritize funding for parts of the country in need of investment based on Index outcomes.

Recognize and fund civic media and information efforts as an ecosystem model.

Encourage and incentivize collaboration between outlets, journalism support organizations, civil society groups and academic institutions.

Fund research around civic data identified via this Index as missing but necessary.

Recruit additional funding institutions with expertise outside of journalism to partner in this effort.

## JOURNALISM SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Partner with funders and local media and civic society actors to map information needs, including where and how to reach people with information, and build more robust local ecosystems.

Share existing tools and expertise. Use the Index to foster more collaboration and especially coordination with peer organizations based on specific local needs in different parts of the country.

## LOCAL CIVIC SOCIETY ACTORS

Use the Index to advocate for more support in local communities around improving information access to strengthen civic health.

Partner with outside institutions to bring expertise and tools that can benefit local efforts to build sustainable information ecosystems.

Educate funders, media outlets, journalism support organizations and academic institutions on local context for working in specific communities and ground them in an understanding of existing information ecosystem work and gaps.

## ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Serve as local anchor institutions by partnering with local media and community stakeholders on collaborative and engaged research and providing technical assistance. Academic institutions can host partnerships between local and outside collaborators, provide monitoring and evaluation of local efforts to build information ecosystems, and publish local impact assessments related to these efforts, involving students in the process of research and research-informed collaborative initiatives.

## COLLECTIVE EFFORTS

There is a great opportunity to combine forces around data collection and sharing. We encourage all of the institutions mentioned above to find ways to collaborate around supporting local civic data collection efforts. For example,

partnerships could develop standards around community engagement in data collection and standards for data collection around community information needs, with options for customization at the local level.

# 8. METHODOLOGY

## THE ROLE OF THE ADVISORY GROUP

We reconvened and expanded our Advisory Group for the 2026 Index update. Over the course of four meetings, Advisory Group members reviewed current indicators in the first version of the Civic Information Index and brainstormed possible inclusions for this version, including a focus on environmental and climate indicators. From a list of suggestions and considerations as well as additional research, we developed a set of potential new indicators, including missing indicators. These indicators included possible additions to all four existing pillars as well as new environmental data, which could be included in existing pillars or organized in a new pillar.

Following these discussions, we identified potential data sources for each suggested indicator, prioritizing sources for which national county-level data was available. Some indicators were then classified as missing due to unreliable data. We then distributed a survey to Advisory Group

members, asking them to vote on the inclusion of each indicator. For each of the indicators listed, a majority of the advisory group voted in favor of inclusion. We also asked the group whether environmental indicators should constitute a new pillar or be distributed among existing pillars; the majority voted in favor of a new pillar.

### NEW INDICATORS

The new indicators are as follows, bringing the total number of indicators to 27:



Local Journalist Equivalent per 100,000 people



Voter registration



Mental health providers per 10,000 people



Household energy burden



Damage from natural disasters



Change in temperature and frequency of heat waves

During the final Advisory Group meeting, members discussed the new indicators and were introduced to the process of weighing, which was done in a Qualtrics survey following the meeting. Consistent with the 2024 Index methodology, the survey provided a total number of “chips” that was equal to 10 x the number of indicators in each pillar. For weighing the pillars in the overall index, 50 chips were provided in total (10 chips per pillar).

# UPDATING INDICATORS

For 18 of the 21 indicators used in the 2024 Civic Information Index updated data was available at the time of data collection. This included new American Community Survey data: the 2024 Index used 2018-2022 estimates while the 2026 Index now includes 2020-2024 estimates. For each existing indicator, we compared this year's data release to the data used in the 2024 version of the Index to ensure consistency in data quality. We then added three new indicators under existing pillars and three new indicators under the new Environmental Resilience pillar.

# CONSTRUCTING THE INDEX SCORE

Our calculation methods remained relatively unchanged from the [2024 Civic Information Index](#). First, we adjusted the indicators for which a lower value was preferable and standardized each indicator using z-scores. To account for missing values, we imputed counties with only one missing value (n= 461) with the county calculated as most

similar. This was done by comparing all of the remaining 26 indicators and calculating the sum of the absolute differences between the target county and all counties with complete data (known as “donor” counties). This type of “[nearest neighbor](#)” approach has been used before in other contexts, and in our 2024 Index. This time, we added one new step: Rather than imputing solely based on how similar a county was to other counties based on the Index indicators, we wanted to also include geographic proximity. Doing so made it a two-stage selection process, in which we selected the county with the closest distance out of a list of the ten most similar counties.

As in the 2024 Index, we computed a score for each pillar based on the distribution of chips Advisory Group members allocated. We then computed a weighted composite score — the overall index. Finally, we converted all index values to percentiles, which allows us to easily compare counties to each other. For example, an index score of 80 indicates that a county performed better than 80% of other counties in that particular pillar (or overall).

The Index and its accompanying indicators were then visualized to explore the data and better understand the score for each county.

You can find a list of all [data sources](#) on the Index website.



**“All of these pieces have to work together in order for an ecosystem to be efficacious for its least powerful people—and everybody else.”**

**Lizzy Hazeltine**, Director, North Carolina Local News Lab Fund

To explore the Index data for your county, visit our [Index dashboard](#).



# TEAM

## INDEX ADVISORY GROUP

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Director of the North Carolina Local News Lab Fund

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**Caroline Hoffman,**

Assistant Director Content and Strategy

# Listening Post Collective

Powered by Internews

## ABOUT THE LISTENING POST COLLECTIVE

The Listening Post Collective was established in 2013 by Jesse Hardman to adapt Internews's global expertise in community information mapping for the U.S. Through innovative strategies, the Listening Post Collective helps local media and community organizations address information gaps and empower underserved communities. The Listening Post Collective's work demonstrates the power of community engagement in creating impactful, local journalism. We provide a proven framework to build resilient information ecosystems that directly serve community needs.



information  
futures lab

## ABOUT THE INFORMATION FUTURES LAB

Brown University's Information Futures Lab is an interdisciplinary space for civic society leaders, journalists, researchers, public officials, and other creators and sources of trusted information. Together, we respond to the ongoing information crisis as a civic and public health threat. We listen deeply, disrupt exclusive knowledge hierarchies, connect siloed leaders, expand access to quality information, and strengthen skills to see past deception and manufactured controversy. Our vision is a future where people can access, create and make sense of information that is crucial to their wellbeing, and where communities can have productive conversations and solve urgent problems—so all Americans can thrive.



## ABOUT DEMOCRACY FUND

Democracy Fund works toward an inclusive, multiracial democracy that is open, just, resilient, and trustworthy. In collaboration with grantees, donors, and other partners, we are working to strengthen and expand the pro-democracy movement, defend against anti-democratic attacks, and advance structural change.



# THE CIVIC INFORMATION INDEX

Mapping drivers of engaged, informed,  
equitable, healthy and resilient communities.

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futures lab

democracy  
fund