

# The State of Latinos and Civic Engagement

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**ASU** Center for Latina/os and  
American Politics Research  
Arizona State University

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# Executive Summary

## Why it is important to talk about Latinos and civic engagement now.

The co-producers of this report acknowledge that Latinos, like all other social groups in America, are integral to social, economic, and political life in the United States. A political community, especially one committed to democracy, shares the responsibility for the health of each of those areas.

There is currently considerable stress on the health of our democracy. That stress comes from hyperpolarized politics, and is linked to increasingly indecent rhetoric and bellicose behavior by, and in some cases against, our leaders that has not been adequately resolved or addressed. We are referring here to attacks against family members of elected officials<sup>1</sup>, a plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan<sup>2</sup>, local elections administrators facing threats of lynching for reporting no factual evidence in support of the claim of widespread election fraud.<sup>3</sup>

Although false and unsubstantiated claims about our electoral processes originate from some of our country's top leaders, ordinary people can and should play a central role in our collective response to restore widespread belief in the excellence of our electoral systems. That requires reaffirming and renormal-

izing the value of civic engagement.

The privilege of executing the business of self-government – translating what people want and need into public policy that our leaders propose, enact, and implement – is presently complicated by a threat to whether we will continue to abide by a predetermined set of rules, procedures, and norms. This is one of the reasons motivating us to launch the State of Latinos, an initiative for crafting high-quality reports on public policy matters written with accessible language, using straightforward evidence, and drawing from experts beyond credentialed academics.

Thus, we assume the responsibility of convening a wide range of experts, including those from the community, who are model stakeholders in our democracy. In a context o

## How we produced this report.

## Lessons learned

INSERT INSIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY EXPERTS

- take away 1
- take away 2
- take away 3

# About the State of Latinos Project

## Project Overview and Aim

Affiliates of the ASU Center for Latinas/os and American Politics Research (CLAPR) in the School of Politics and Global Studies curate the

State of Latinos (SoL), a series of reports and other expert-informed statements organized by policy area and co-produced by academic and non-academic experts. For each policy issue area we address, we convene a variety of collaborators including practitioners, elected

<sup>1</sup>David DePape was sentenced to 30 years in prison for breaking into the home of Paul Pelosi and fracturing his skull with a hammer. Mr. Pelosi is the spouse of Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi, who is currently serving in the U.S. Congress House of Representatives for California's 11th district. Read more about this attack in a CNN report here.

<sup>2</sup>See the report by the BBC about Michigan-based militia members planning to overthrow the Michigan state government by abducting the Governor, Gretchen Whitmer, from her home.

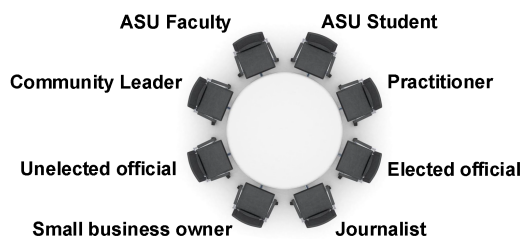
<sup>3</sup>See the investigation by CBS 60 Minutes on the fall out that Stephen Richer, Maricopa County, Arizona's recorder.



officials, students, faculty, journalists, community organization leaders, and small business owners with the aim to capture a robust snapshot of the state of Latino life.

The aim of the SoL is long-term university-community partnerships in thought leadership, student career development, and action-oriented public policy discourse. Although research is central to the academic profession, expert authority also originates from multiple professions and crafts. By combining the knowledge bases and networks of academics and non-academics, and organizing policy-focused teams with distinct perspectives, values, and skills, we boost the overall quality of our reports and analyses.

Seats at a roundtable capture the spirit of convening a wide range of issue area experts as co-equals and co-producers of statements that are high quality, evidence informed, and oriented towards meaningful action. Organizing disparate professionals by policy passion strikes a balance of depth and breadth that gives our reports a credible claim of accurate and comprehensive, though not necessarily exhaustive, insights.



Most college students want to improve their world as non-academic professionals, and most community policy advocates and public officials want their positions informed by rigorous evidence. For students, the SoL complements classroom activity and training with policy-focused networking and action-oriented discourse training, combining technical writing with accessible data analytics and expert takes. For non-academic community

experts, the SoL is a platform to articulate and signal-boost their policy expertise, and an early peek at a selection of future leaders as they develop their skills and policy passions.

## The long-run plan for SoL

Our sights are set on sustaining a university-community collaboration in co-producing evidence-based public policy narratives, that simultaneously fill outstanding needs in cultivating high-impact career development experiences for ASU students.

Our compass and map for launching and expanding SoL is the ASU charter. We ground our efforts in assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities we serve, and a commitment to measuring our success in terms of who we include and how they succeed. We commit to periodic assessments to ensure that community partners continue to benefit from their contributions, that student skill development and employment prospects increase, and that our collective effort continues to provide accessible, timely, and reliable analyses of how Latinos shape and are shaped by public policy.

By recasting expertise as an asset developed in disparate professions, the SoL expands who has authority to scrutinize evidence, state community needs, shift narratives, identify solutions, mobilize civic engagement, and facilitate career pipelines for future leaders. By intentionally practicing ASU's commitment to scaling accessibility, prizing interdisciplinary approaches, and connecting with communities through mutually beneficial partnerships, we position participants and supporters of the SoL to create transformative social change and improve the quality of life for Latinos and the communities where they live, work, and play.

# Why is the Issue of Civic Engagement Important?



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## Why civic engagement matters for everyone

Civic engagement matters because it is how people meet the needs and interests of their communities. We invite readers to imagine civic engagement as a tool-box that includes a variety of ways to influence decision-makers or directly decide the policy outcomes of government.<sup>4</sup>

Although democracies offer different ways for people to participate in politics, voting, and activism probably come first to mind. We might think of voting as a conventional form of political participation, different activism and protest. The power of ordinary citizens to cast a ballot is special and certainly sets democracies apart from other forms of government. However, in the United States so-called unconventional forms of participation, like protest and civil disobedience, are constitutionally protected rights as well. In fact, protest and civil disobedience are central to our republic's origin story.

Our broader point is that democracy should be thought of as a verb, something that involves constant opposition. That means that democracy always needs care and stewardship. Civic engagement, then, cannot and should not be limited to election day.<sup>5</sup> A healthy democracy requires that people learn what their community needs, take inventory of the best solutions, and press elected officials to respond to those needs with those solutions.

Christian Avila, one of the community expert co-authors of this report, underscores the importance of sustaining civic engagement in between elections in their statement below. That insight squares with a key lesson from social movements that champion government responsiveness to the needs of communities every day of the year. Voting and protest, along with signing a petition, calling elected representatives to affirm or critique roll call votes, donating to election campaigns, attending meetings of official government meetings, and even running for office are all ways that

ordinary people convey what they want from the government.

Indeed, Arizonans sometimes combine these different forms of civic engagement to move the needle on policy change. Living in one of only twelve states in the U.S. that allows citizens to collect signatures to qualify a measure to be placed on a ballot for voters to decide, Arizonans have directly legislated a variety of issues since 1912 when it established statehood. Arizona voters were the first to directly pass a law that extends the right of women to vote. They have also enacted dozens of exemptions to tax laws, prohibited cockfighting, allowed recreational cannabis use, and providing in-state tuition for undocumented high school students in Arizona. Voters in the Copper State know how to mobilize campaigns to collect adequate signatures, launch advertising blitzes to boost information on issues, and organize canvassing for turnout in support and opposition, sometimes returning in later elections to affirm or undue the majority preference in prior elections.

## Why civic engagement may be different or especially important for Latinos

The story of civic engagement for Latinos in Arizona follows an arc that stretches from exclusion to contested inclusion. Organizing by advocacy groups, including those associated with the Chicano rights movement, secured for Arizonans a host of civil liberties associated with access to K-12 public education, due process rights during the course of contact with law enforcement (ie. Miranda rights), and access to the ballot. Across these disparate issue areas, ordinary people invested their time, talent, and treasure to affirm equality of citizenship for Latinos.

Several repositories of Arizona history detail Latinos as civic actors. For example, the State of Arizona Research Library, managed by

<sup>4</sup>See F. Harris and D. Gillion (2010), "Expanding the Possibilities: Reconceptualizing Political Participation as a Tool-box," in Jan Leighley (Ed). *The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and American Political Behavior*. Oxford University Press

<sup>5</sup>See John Medearis. 2015. *Why Democracy is Oppositional*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA.

<sup>6</sup>See Arizona Secretary of State Archives and Public Records for a summary timeline of voting rights history, with high-



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the Arizona Secretary of State, includes collections of official government records.<sup>6</sup> Deeper dives by Arizona PBS showcase the origin story of community based organizations, like Chicanos Por La Causa, and their evolution from housing referral services to dedicated initiatives for economic and workforce development.<sup>7</sup> And even more curated materials on Latinos as civic actors is archived at Arizona State University in the Chicana/o Research Collection.<sup>8</sup>

A crucial lesson from many of these knowledge banks that center Latinos is a reminder that Latinos are not a monolith; a rich and vibrant tapestry of immigration experience, language proficiency, variation in socio-economic status, and political views is a hallmark feature of past and contemporary Latinos. As one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States, Latino political power is often assumed to track evenly with population increases. Every 30 seconds a Latino turns 18 and becomes eligible to vote, which means that voting will likely be their strongest tool in affecting the change that they want to see. However, the work of translating demographic share into presence in election outcomes and policy making is not automatic and takes great care.

That is why it is important that organizations and policymakers do the work in trying to understand what Latinos want politically and how best to mobilize them. Not all Latinos that are eligible to vote are exercising their right to do so, with only about 14 percent of Latinos making up the votes even though about 26 percent of them are eligible to vote. In particular, for Latinos, there seems to be a disconnect that is causing many of them not to vote or even register to vote in the first place.

This may stem from the fact that politicians tend to treat the Latino community as a monolith, even though they are not. It is important that people, especially politicians, understand this fact about the Latino community to better serve their interests.

Organizations such as Chicanos Por La Causa and Voto Latino have been successful

in getting Latinos registered to vote and making sure they turn out to vote. Various other organizations such as Lucha, Mi Familia Vota, and Poder Latinx exist to address the needs of Latinos. Lucha is a nonprofit organization that advocates for tenants' rights and for better housing services which is important considering the long history of racism and discrimination Latinos experience when trying to buy or rent a home. Mi Familia focuses its organizing on mobilizing the Latino electorate and trying to improve local infrastructure in the communities they serve.

Some organizations have also targeted younger generations of Latinos to increase civic engagement. Gen Z Latino voters and activists are working to make their voices heard and are trying to make their voices heard. A TikTok account run by Latino influencers called Gen-Z X El Cambio addresses social and political issues as they specifically pertain to the Latino community. This account provides a space for Latino TikTokers to make videos on issues that they believe are important and ones that the Latino community should hear about.

Civic engagement can also differ between socioeconomic classes. Socioeconomic class can determine how much time or energy a person has to dedicate to civic engagement, especially if that civic engagement is in the form of organizing and not voting. The act of voting is generally simpler than organizing, given the time and effort that organizing often takes. Voting is something that people can do via mail-in-ballot or in person, which may only take an hour or so to do, whereas organizing is an action that often spans over weeks/months. Luckily for the Latino community Chicanos Por La Causa, Mi Familia Vota, Voto Latino, Lucha, and other organizations have helped to bridge that socioeconomic gap and have done the legwork in order to help the community increase their civic engagement.

While community organizing is crucial in effecting change on a large scale, like the Civil Rights Movement, voting remains an important way for people to participate. Voting is

lights of Arizona's early-mover position on women suffrage, the African American freedom struggle, indigenous people's rights, Chinese exclusion, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. "Voting Rights Timeline," accessed on August 1, 2024, available at: <https://azlibrary.gov/branches/state-arizona-research-library/research-center/voting-rights-timeline>

<sup>7</sup>See the special, "Explore 50 years of activism by Chicanos Por La Causa," available online at <https://azpbs.org/2019/05/explore-50-years-of-activism-by-chicanos-por-la-causa/>

<sup>8</sup>See ASU Library Collections available at <https://lib.asu.edu/collections/chicano>



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how people use their voice to elect those that they feel most represent their values and belief systems. This is especially important now given how polarized politics have become, wherein people are often voting for wildly different things given the party that they are voting for. Activism is another form of civic engagement that allows people to push for changes that would benefit their communities.

An example of this is Arizona Proposition 308, a ballot measure that was passed in the 2022 Midterm Election in Arizona. This initiative was passed by voters and allows for undocu-

mented students that graduated high school to qualify for in-state tuition and not have to pay out-of-state tuition costs. This ballot measure would not have made it on the ballot without the work of organizers who did the work in helping to educate people in the state of Arizona as to what the measure is, and what it could do for undocumented students trying to receive a higher education. Without the work of organizers and organizations like Aliento, Prop 308 might not have been passed leaving undocumented students still having to pay tuition similar to that of out-of-state students.

## What is the current situation on civic engagement?

### Overall situation

Although most Americans report faith in our electoral processes, the state of our democracy in the United States is currently under duress. In the 2020 elections cycle, for the first time in our nations history, a candidate, then-President Donald Trump, resisted and encouraged his supporters to prevent the peaceful transition of power. After voters had cast an election winner, supporters of Trump attacked the nation's capital and attempted to stop a joint session of Congress from counting the Electoral College votes to formalize the victory of President-elect Joe Biden. Although Trump's and his allies' attempt to overturn the elections results was unsuccessful, a sizable segment of the United States electorate continues to question the fairness and integrity of the people charged with, and the systems and rules used for, conducting elections and tabulating results.

According to a survey of Arizona's registered voters conducted by the ASU Center for Latinas/os and American Politics Research in 2022 about 1 in 3 said they believe that voter fraud is a major problem that has changed election results.<sup>9</sup> That breakout matches a similar skep-

ticism collected at the national level, where about 21% of registered voters say they are not too confident and 15% are not confident at all that "across the country the votes will be accurately cast and counted in this year's election."<sup>10</sup>

In the United States, civic engagement is not compulsory. No one can make you participate in politics. Yet, it is also the case that Americans share civic norms or expectations about how we should behave in politics. One such expectation comes from the idea that we should not squander the democratic privilege to speak our minds, organize with others to address common problems, vote for ballot propositions, elect candidates to represent us in office, and even run for office ourselves. To the extent that people in the United States feel an obligation or civic duty to participate in politics, it is not one that is enforceable by law, but is nevertheless real as a positive social pressure to take part in our own self-governance.

The Maricopa County Recorder's Office, in 2022, published a report named Correcting the Record: Maricopa County's In-Depth Analysis which was a direct response to the Arizona Senate's inquiry about the validity of the 2020 General Election. The report found that claims

<sup>9</sup>See page 49, Q54, available at <https://links.asu.edu/Oct2022CLAPrcrosstabs>

<sup>10</sup>See Justice McCarthy, 2022, "Confidence in Election Integrity Hides Deep Partisan Divide," a report on results from a 2022 poll by Gallup, available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/404675/confidence-election-integrity-hides-deep-partisan-divide.aspx>



of election fraud were false and used state and federal election laws to dispel those claims.

The report is available on the Maricopa County Recorder's Office's website, with a subsection that specifically addresses those claims and points to the specific state or federal law that disproves the corresponding claim. The website has a specific tab addressing the report and commonly asked questions about how elections are conducted, as well as on voting. There is also a "Transparency" tab with more information on elections and voting as well as a YouTube video featuring Stephen Richer, where he explains how votes are tabulated in elections.<sup>11</sup>

These efforts on behalf of the Maricopa County Recorder's office show their dedication in ensuring that the public can be confident in how elections are conducted. Sarah Frechette, a community expert, has expressed that she feels the Maricopa County's office is doing all they can to ensure the public that fraud is not happening within their election processes.

However, even with all the work that the office has done, there still is this level of mistrust between the public and Maricopa County. A full four years after the 2020 election, and local election administrators report that they continue to face threats about the outcome of the last presidential election.<sup>12</sup>

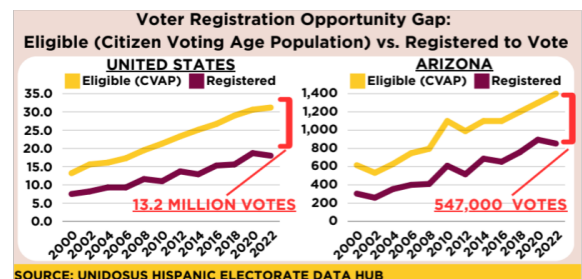
In some cases, members of the community are more willing to receive help and voting services from nonprofit organizations rather than from the Maricopa County's Recorder's office, even though the office is expert in providing information about voting and services relevant to voting. Maricopa County has immense resources that nonprofit organizations may not have access to, but also a direct line to what is happening in the Arizona House and Senate, which allows them to quickly respond to new legislation that addresses voting and elections. The county is an expert in these matters and is better equipped to handle concerns about voting given their capacity in being able to gather information about legislation coming from local government. These resources are what allow them to address civic engagement which

shows through the various ways in which they are trying to reach the public.

## Areas of difference and/or similarity for Latinos

Latinos and non-Latinos get involved in civic engagement through various activities to improve their communities. Improvement is different within each community due to the different barriers. A broad range of issues might not directly affect non-Latinos the way in which they affect Latinos.

As the US population grows, the number of eligible voters increases. Alongside that general trend a similar pattern of growth is traced in the figure below. Latinos have more than doubled their numbers of voters from 2000 to 2020, but have increased their numbers of registered voters at a slightly lower rate (from about 7 million to approximately 14 million registered). A similar trend appears for Latino voters across the nation as well as the state of Arizona.



Perhaps most concerning is the difference between the eligible voting age population and the number of registered voters. The gap between those two figures – referred to here as the voter registration opportunity gap – has grown in the two decades since 2000. One way to interpret the gap is to think of it as an indicator of the capacity of voter registration drives to keep up with population growth. Another way to interpret the gap is to think of it as an indicator of the extent to which voter registration drives are directed toward Latino

<sup>11</sup>See general information about voting and access the report, "Correcting the Record – The 2020 General Election" here: <https://elections.maricopa.gov/voting/just-the-facts.html>

<sup>12</sup>See CBS Report, "Arizona election officials subjected to violent threats undaunted in defense of elections", available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/voter-fraud-threats-maricopa-county-arizona-60-minutes/>





communities.

HAS ANYONE FROM A POLITICAL PARTY, CAMPAIGN, OR ANY OTHER ORGANIZATION CONTACTED YOU AND ASKED YOU TO REGISTER TO VOTE	LATINOS	WHITES
YES, I HAVE BEEN CONTACTED	52%	50%
NO, I HAVE NOT BEEN CONTACTED	48%	50%

SOURCE: 2022 ASU-NAU-UNIVISION MIDTERM SURVEY OF ARIZONA VOTERS

Overall, about one out of every two White and Latino registered voters in Arizona report not having been contacted. All the “get out the vote” (GOTV) efforts by various candidate, partisan, and non-partisan campaigns to mobilize voters still left uncontacted about half of Arizona voters in the 2022 midterm election. To the extent that contact mobilizes people to register and to vote, then investing in GOTV operations may go a long way to closing the voter registration and turnout gaps.

Multiple organizations in Arizona have heavily invested in the Latino community to improve voter turnout, given that only half of eligible Latino voters voted in the Arizona Midterm in 2022. Chicanos Por La Causa invested ten million dollars for the efforts. Voto Latino registered 55,000 voters for the 2022 election cycle across the United States. A collaboration between Voto Latino and Chispa registered more than 61 percent of Latino eligible voters which was an increase from the previous election cycle.

Research shows that these types of investments do pay off and provide information for voters about the ballot. While the exact allocation of resources is not clear, typical expenditures for voter turnout initiatives include hiring and compensating phone bankers, with organizations typically employing over 100 individuals for the task. Additionally, canvassers are also paid and trained in order to reach voters. Investments also cover a range of visual media, including billboards, banners, and other promotional materials.

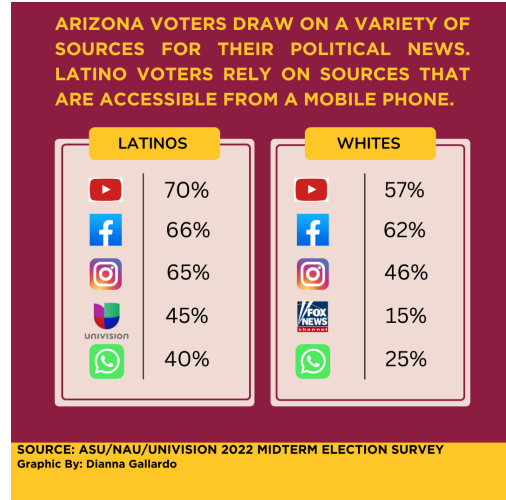
However we view this gap, it is clear that a reservoir of unmobilized voters exists in the electorate. For political campaigns and advocacy organizations, the gap represents a tantalizing source of potential political power, that if mobilized, holds the promise of determining the outcome of candidate contests, ballot initiatives, public bonds, and much more. For advocates of democracy, mobilizing voters may

help inject renewed confidence and support for our political systems, processes, and officials.

## Challenges to consider

Some challenges to civic engagement to consider include barriers to access, institutional barriers, and awareness and information. Another community expert contributing to this report, Luis Adrian Martinez, points out that people live very busy lives and civics competes for our attention with many other forces. Since not everyone is politically active or engaged with politics there is a chance that they miss developments in politics that will affect their lives.

Arizona’s voters collect their political news and information from a variety of sources. The surprising finding from the figure below is that traditional sources of news and information, like local tv and newspapers, do not appear in the top five sources. Voters today rely on heavily on social media sources, shown here to be the top three sources for Latinos and Whites in Arizona.



Social media and online platforms may increase civic engagement by making global and local events more visible. They also provide a familiar way for youth to connect with others, access information, and learn about specific issues within their community. Having a rich set of stories and sources at our fingertips through our personal devices makes it easy to see why civic engagement encompasses volunteering, community service, advocacy, activism, and participating in public meetings and forums.



Yet, layered on top of the challenge that these social media platforms are also sources of entertainment, escape, and social connection, the quality of political news and information they offer varies considerably. Excitement around the potential for these sources to increase access to useful information about politics is tempered by real worries that mis- and disinformation may turn people off from participating in politics, or worse, may provoke dangerous attitudes and behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

Arizonans have mounted multiple efforts to combat harm from misinformation going viral through social media channels. For example, *La Campesina*, a popular radio station in Arizona with roots in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, launched a new series of program-

ming to battle misinformation and explain how and when to cast a ballot. Leading a complementary push back against conspiracy theories is the a group of Arizona conservatives who have launched a nonprofit called Conservative Agenda for Arizona, aimed at restoring confidence in the voting process.<sup>14</sup>

We highlight these challenges and responses here to note the importance of Arizona as a positive example for the entire nation. It is true that much of the discord and distrust towards our elections and politics has fomented in Arizona. It is also true that our state has leaders that are willing to uphold the rule of law, roll their sleeves up to model constructive democratic comportment, and get back to the business of self-governance.

## What you should know as voters

### How to register to vote

- The first thing you should know as a voter is whether you are eligible to vote. In Arizona, you must be a US citizen, a state resident, and be at least 18 years of age by the next general election. After meeting these requirements there are two ways of registering to vote; the easiest is online voter registration through the Service Arizona Portal<sup>15</sup>
- The other way is through a paper registration form which can be mailed or dropped off in person to your corresponding county recorder's office. It is important to keep in mind that the deadline to register to vote in Arizona is typically 29 days before an election.
- In Arizona, there is the Active Early Voters List or AEVL which voters can sign up for to get a mail-in ballot for the upcoming election. Voters must remember that they will be removed from the AEVL if they

do not vote by early ballot in any election for two consecutive election cycles.

### Important things to note before casting a ballot

- If you are voting in person you must bring a form of identification such as an Arizona Driver's License, an Arizona ID card, a Tribal Enrollment Card, or Valid US federal, state, or local government-issued identification.
- Learn about what is on the ballot before going in to vote. There are many resources that are unbiased and list what is on the ballot. One option is provided by Arizona Cleans Elections available at: <https://www.azcleanelections.gov/voter-education-guide>
- If your work schedule coincides with voting times on election day in Arizona, your employer must grant you paid leave to

<sup>13</sup>See report by *New York Times* on how social media amplifies rumors because of how easy it is for anyone to share a post that can go viral without fact-checking. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/technology/misinformation-integrity-institute-report.html>

<sup>14</sup>See October 17, 2024 report by National Public Radio, "From rodeos to radio, inside the Arizona fight against misinformation," available at <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/16/nx-s1-5151811/election-arizona-latino-misinformation-trump-harris>

<sup>15</sup>See the official state of Arizona voter registration interface available through the Arizona Department of Motor Vehicles, available online at: <https://servicearizona.com/VoterRegistration/register?execution=e1s1>



go and vote. This applies to employees if they are scheduled to work less than three hours between the time that polls open or close. ARS-16-402

nal way is to vote in person at a polling place, the location of which can be found on your corresponding county recorder's office website.

## How to vote

There are three ways of voting in Arizona, the first is by mail-in-ballot if you are on the AEVL. The second way is to drop off a ballot received from the AEVL and go to a polling place in your corresponding county recorder's office. The fi-

## After Voting

After submitting your ballot, you can track it using your corresponding county recorder's office website. This is useful because there are certain times when voters' signatures don't match what is on file and they need to be revised.

# What do community experts think about civic engagement?

## Cristian Avila

The driving force behind my commitment is the issue of immigration. This issue is deeply personal and resonates with the challenges I have encountered in own life. Navigating the complexities of immigration has illuminated the systemic barriers that countless others face, shaping and limiting both my personal experiences and professional pursuits.

I am convinced that meaningful change in immigration policy will only be achieved through the collective power of our vote. Electing leaders who are committed to justice and reform is essential for advancing policies that reflect our shared values and aspirations. Our votes can drive the legislative changes needed to create a more equitable system for everyone.

Yet, civic engagement encompasses so much more than registering to vote and casting a ballot. It is about taking an active role in shaping our communities through a variety of channels. Volunteering, community organizing, and advocacy are powerful ways to make a difference.



**Laura Madrid**



“Civic engagement should go beyond just voting; it should involve year-round understanding of how the process works, knowing the elected officials. Be knowledgeable about how they vote on issues, and why, to track accountability. This ongoing engagement is crucial for empowering our communities and ensuring ALL voices are heard.”

**Sarah Frechette**

“The antidote to mistrust is participation. If you have questions, get involved! Be a temporary election worker, a poll worker, a political observer, or a Maricopa County volunteer.”



**Luis Adrian Martinez**



“Change happens when we find people willing to guide us without judgment, helping us see the power we hold. The right knowledge, shared with patience and understanding, can transform not only our perspective but the future of our communities.”



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# What are policymakers facing with respect to civic engagement?

## Here are things that they have tried and how well they have worked

## Some things to keep in mind

Legislators in States like Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, California, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Wisconsin, Texas, and Washington have implemented legislation to address the role of AI in elections. AI has been used to discourage people from voting for specific candidates, has spread voter misinformation, and has been used to create deep fakes all of which have had a negative impact on voters. AI that is used in this manner can lead to voter skepticism and undermine trust in the electoral process.

It is unclear if this legislation has had any impact on voters and in curbing misinformation. In 2022, the Arizona legislature passed SB 1260, which criminalizes individuals and organizations who provide voting assistance to Arizona voters if the person that they are helping is registered to vote outside Arizona. This law was designed to actively discourage eligible voters from voting and disproportionately targeted marginalized people. The bill would have a profound impact on the Latino community.

As Madrid highlights, many of us grew up helping our parents translate documents because they didn't speak English fluently. This kind of support extended to translating ballots so they can understand their voting option. While assisting our parents in this way is a normal part of our lives, this bill could have criminalized such help. Eventually, the bill was blocked by a federal judge on the basis that the bill hindered people's right to vote.

Improving civic engagement is not always the goal of some policymakers. Currently, in Arizona, there is an ongoing federal lawsuit that claims that there are up to 1.27 million voters who have moved out of state or died. The Secretary of State's office has fought back against those claims with their spokesperson, JP Martin, speaking to AZMirror in June 2024, stating, "voter registration monitoring is up to date and compliant with federal and state laws", but would not comment on an ongoing legal case.

Another case recently brought before the Supreme Court of the United States allowed a restriction on Arizona voter registrations which require proof of citizenship if registering to vote within the state using a state-created form. Actions such as these depress civic engagement by creating a barrier to entry into the political system, ensuring certain people are not able to participate in civic engagement.

The figure below collects the number of registered voters for the twenty most populous counties in the United States. While Maricopa County, Arizona is the fourth most populous county in the nation, it has the third largest number of registered voters. The five largest counties are Los Angeles County, Cook County, Harris County, Maricopa County, and San Diego County.

These counties have all experienced tremendous growth from 2010 to 2020, but they have also experienced slight decreases in that growth. The largest county, Los Angeles County, has grown by 2 percent from 2010 to 2020 and went from having 9.8 million people to having 10 million people. Cook County, the second largest, grew by 1.2 percent from 2010 to 2020, increasing in population from 5.2 million people to 5.3 million people, but then decreased between 2020 to 2022 to 5.1 million people. Harris County, the third largest county, grew by 15.6 percent from 2010 to 2020 with another additional increase of 2.13 percent from



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2020 to 2023. Their population growth has not decreased and continues to steadily grow by 1.3 percent each year.

Maricopa County, Arizona the fourth largest county in the nation, has grown by 16.1 percent from 2010 to 2020, going from 3.8 million people to 4.4 million people. Though the county's population growth decreased by 1.2 percent in 2020, growth increased by 1.5 percent in 2021 and in 2022. San Diego County, the fifth largest county, grew by 6.2 percent from 2010 to 2020 and went from 3.1 million people to 3.3 million people; however, since 2019, the county's population growth has steadily decreased from .1 percent in 2019, 0.6 percent in 2020, and to 1 percent in 2021.

Still, administrating elections in places with large populations is tricky because the challenges to sustaining individual-level outreach (ie. mailers to specific voters for reminders and mail-in ballots) are compounded by the large share of individuals who share the same first and last name. Parsing out unique identification records requires careful attention and constant maintenance, which of course, adds

additional cost burdens to administrative budgets.

The population growth of these various counties will change the amount of people that are on the voter rolls, either increasing or decreasing with the growth rate. The people who make up the list of registered voters are extremely dynamic and require very careful management. And these tasks are especially burdensome and large in jurisdictions with the largest voter rolls like those in the figure below.

In addition to the sheer number of people that are registered to vote, election administrators are in charge of tracking voters who exit, either through death or moving away. The composition of voter rolls also changes with the addition of new voters, by way of moving in or becoming eligible to vote because they have turned 18 or just became citizens. Given that Maricopa County is the fourth most populous county in the country, and they are third when it comes to voter registrations, local election administrators are doing well to manage voter rolls.

## How can we make things better?

### Thinking outside the box

Cristian Avila points out that engaging with the community and working to meet people where they are is how we make things better. He emphasizes that we should not only engage with them in their physical locations, recognizing the geopolitical significance of doing just that, but also tailor our policy communication to the language and messaging that connects with that community. We can also ensure that people are equipped with the tools they need to get registered to vote and make sure they

Implementing programs in schools that allow for mock ballots and elections helps prepare emerging voters. One model of success advanced in the state of California is to pre-register voters who will be eligible to vote once they turn 18. Investing in our youth and guiding

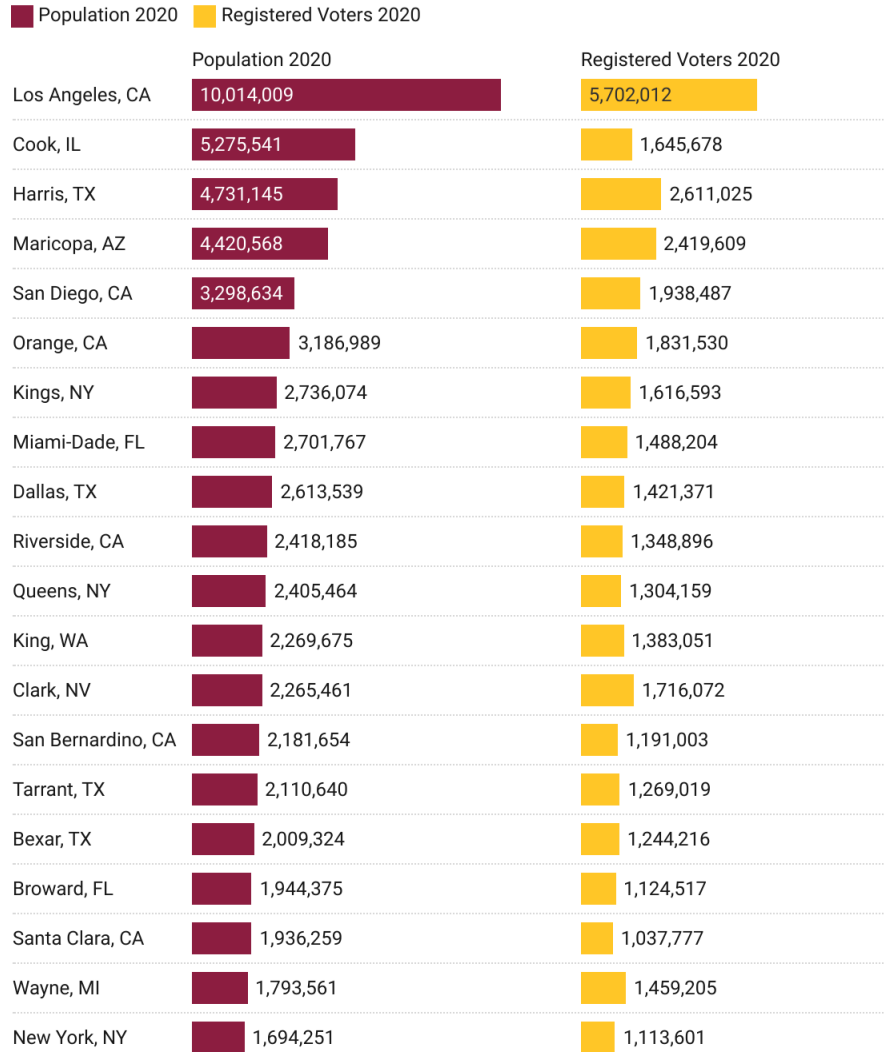
turn out.

One other thing that we can advocate for is increasing the number of precincts there are in order for people to be properly represented. Looking at the amount of precincts by registered voters in Arizona, there is not enough precincts in order to accommodate the growth that Arizona's counties are experiencing. One of the counties that is suffering from this is Mohave County, which only has 24 counties with 139,298 registered voters. By increasing the number of precincts the amount of voters represented in these areas will be proportional and allow people to have their voices heard.

them through the voting process and political landscape helps them become well-informed and more knowledgeable about the political system and their place in it.



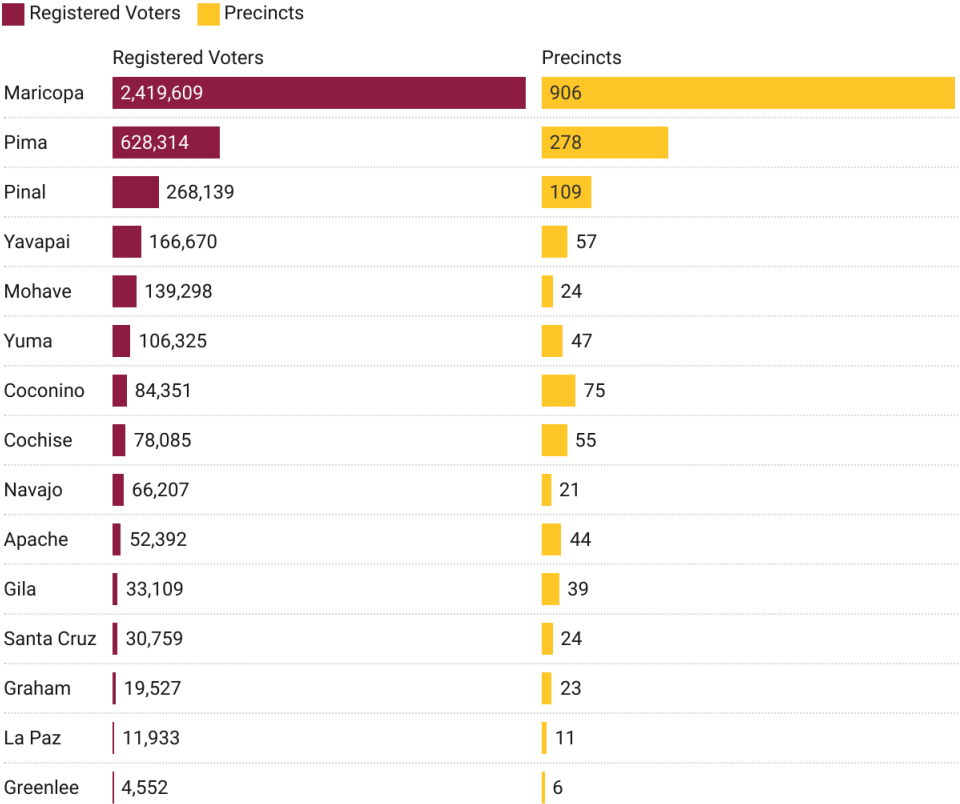
## Population VS Registered Voter By County 2020



Created with Datawrapper



## Registered Voters Vs Precincts by Arizona Counties 2020



Created with Datawrapper





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## What can be done about civic engagement, sooner rather than later?

More of the work that we can do includes lobbying our elected officials to extend voting hours and expanding polling locations in needed areas. Another suggestion is lobbying to make voter registration automatic, creating an opt-out system instead of the cur-

rent opt-in system. When we intentionally allocate resources to our community, we build a genuine relationship rather than establishing transactional connections for elections. This path makes way for a meaningful commitment to advancing our communities, where the provision of resources becomes standard and the community actively engages in politics. By fostering this connection, we set off a domino effect that leads to widespread improvement, with education being a key area.

## Concluding remarks

A profoundly important lesson of democracy is that self-governance is a constant effort. There is no autopilot in a government that is by the people and for the people. Civic engagement, then, is really about civic service.

The commitment to decide for ourselves what we need as a political community requires at least two companion commitments. One is a commitment to uphold institutions that are necessary for procedural democracy, things like transparent, free, and fair elections, an independent judicial system, separation of powers, etc. The second is a commitment to socialize and prepare emerging citizens as stewards of public trust.

When humans create institutions, they do so to create stability and reduce uncertainty. The United States can certainly claim credit for making some of the sturdiest institutions for standardizing the business of self-governance. However, institutions by themselves cannot sustain the entirety of a democracy enterprise. Each generation in a polity must practice fidelity to systems of rules *and* teach their suc-

cessor generations about the value of caring for those rules.

Scholars can teach us a lot about politics. So can community leaders. Our aim in this report was to say something valuable about civic engagement, and maybe more importantly, to launch a partnership between university and community members that redefines who gets to be seen as an expert and make new knowledge.

We believe that a well-developed university-community teamwork approach is crucial at a time when a small but growing and concerning share of the population tells us that they view scientific research and public leadership with great distrust and skepticism. Perhaps by modeling how people from different areas of society can successfully complete one research project, we can inspire others to roll their sleeves up to continue the work of caring for our democracy and for our collective communities.



# Acknowledgments

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