

# *civic engagement*

## **HOW RESIDENTS CONNECT AND PARTICIPATE IN HOUSTON-AREA POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS**

When Houstonians stay connected and civically engaged, we grow, trust, and achieve more as a region. Places with high levels of civic vitality have lower levels of unemployment, better schools, stronger health, and more responsive governments.<sup>1</sup> Our rich social fabric represents a variety of needs and perspectives that benefit from strong civic engagement and more equitable representation. Civic engagement can be thought of as having five components, listed by the increasing level of participation: philanthropy and volunteering, social connectedness, non-electoral participation, voter participation, and electoral participation. Combined, they provide a way to document the state of civic life across Houston and a community's capacity to meet the needs of its residents.



While Greater Houston remains one of the most charitable metropolitan areas in the nation, overall rates of participation mirror national trends. About half of Greater Houston-area residents reported donating \$25 or more to a charitable organization in 2018. However, according to Charity Navigator, Houston-area charities top the list for receiving the highest total contributions out of 30 major metros in 2017. Additionally, local survey data indicate the three-county area outpaces the nation in volunteerism, with rates rising since Hurricane Harvey. During and after the storm, an estimated 101,296 Houstonians from all walks of life stepped up to help their communities recover, assisting over one million individuals and nearly 9,000 animals.<sup>2</sup>

Despite neighbors indicating their generous support of neighbors, residents throughout our region still lack opportunities to connect. Compared to the state and

nation, the Houston area is significantly behind in the number of civic and social organizations available to residents. This correlates with an overall lack of trust within our communities; although levels are improving, the level of trust between neighbors in the Greater Houston area is 2.5 percentage points lower than the national average.<sup>3</sup>

Using our generosity to effect positive change where it's most needed requires open communication and empathy between residents in our diverse communities. Unfortunately, levels of political discussion between friends and family are low throughout our region. Levels are especially low among millennials, non-native residents, and those without a college education. Further, we lag behind the nation when it comes to contacting our public officials—one of the trademark features of American democracy.

Despite low levels of political communication, voter registration and participation rates are mostly increasing throughout the three-county area. Despite falling slightly throughout the state, the percentage of residents registered to vote and the percentage of total voters has increased in all three counties in both presidential and midterm elections in the past decade. However, certain barriers still keep some residents away from the polls, as Hispanic and non-college educated residents both report lower voter turnout.

What's more, the socioeconomic makeup of elected officials in Harris County often fails to reflect the diverse needs and perspectives of our communities. Despite their strong presence throughout our region, both female and Hispanic residents remain underrepresented among elected officials, especially in positions of significant influence like county commissioners court or municipal mayors.

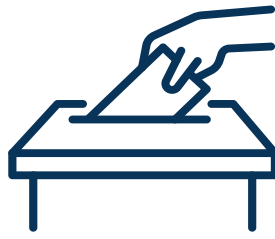
*The more we know about civic engagement in the Houston region, the more we can build trust and connection among our neighbors and ensure that the needs of all people are fairly represented in our political system.*

# 5 Subtopics of Civic Engagement

## NON-ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

**Only 15.8%**

of Houston millennials frequently discuss politics with friends and family.



## VOTER PARTICIPATION

**52.3%**

of Hispanic citizens in the Greater Houston area are registered to vote.

## PHILANTHROPY AND VOLUNTEERING

**56%**

of three-county area residents report volunteering.

Volunteer rates have spiked following Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

## ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION



**21% Women**

Despite making up about half the population, just **21%** of Harris County Commissioner elections included a female candidate and only **5%** of elections were won by a woman between 2004 and 2016.



## SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Only 43% say "most people can be trusted." Though still low, Houston-area residents' level of trust has grown eight percentage points between 2014 and 2018.

EXPLORE ALL FIVE SUBTOPICS FURTHER ON OUR WEBSITE.

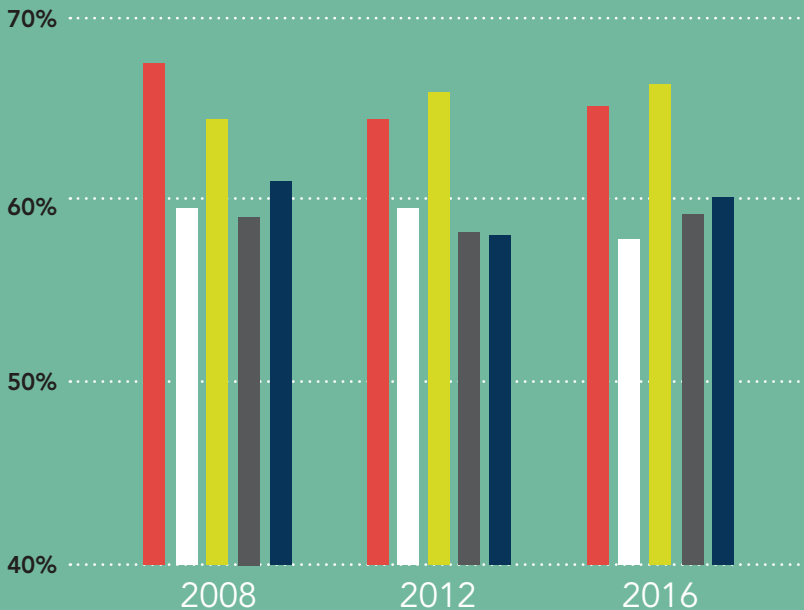
## VOTER TURNOUT

Between 58% and 66% of registered voters turned out to vote in the last two presidential elections across the three counties.

Trend over time:  M  H  FB  
 Compared to nation:  FB  M  H

Percent of Registered Voters who Voted in Presidential Elections

Fort Bend Harris Montgomery Texas U.S.



**50% Give**

## PHILANTHROPY

About 50% of residents in the Greater Houston area give \$25 or more to charity each year, on par with the national average for rates of charitable giving.

*Fort Bend County residents are more likely to give at nearly every income bracket, outpacing the state average by significant margins.*

Trend over time:   
 Compared to nation:

## LEGENDS

LOCATIONS:  FB Fort Bend  H Harris  M Montgomery  
 COMPARISONS:  Better  Worse  Same  No Info

See page 30-33 of 2019 Summary Report for references and data sources.