Civic Intent as a way to understand how belonging, trust, depolarizing attitudes, and one's preferred news sources affect nonprofit trends in the US

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Introduction

In 2024, GivingTuesday Data Commons developed **Civic Intent**, a measure designed to detect societal changes in aspects of prosocial behavior that affect communities. This index tracks recent prosocial behavior and a set of beliefs that indicate a community-building perspective. The measure is stable, appears to apply across cultures, and is uncorrelated with many demographics such as income, employment, age, gender, language spoken at home, or ethnicity.

Using this index, we've uncovered patterns showing that generosity transcends political differences and fosters community belonging and trust—insights that have the potential to transform how the nonprofit sector articulates its impact to the public. Based on a combination of the most strongly correlated attitudes and behaviors from our larger GivingPulse survey, we find that Civic Intent means having each of the following traits: good intentions towards those most in need, in order to strengthen community, doing good regularly and recently, and generally trusting people.

Of the 16 measures we incorporate into Civic Intent[1], researchers can use agreement with 7 of them as a reasonable proxy; r = 0.93 with the overall index. These measures are:

♥ **Attitude:** It is moderately to very important for me to help those in need;

♥ **Depolarization:** I am helping to make my community a better, more civil place;

♥ **Depolarization:** I strive to help those most in need, even if that means helping those from my community less;

♥ **Giving:** Yes, I performed some act of generosity in the last 7 days;

♥ **Giving:** Yes, I recently gave in some form, weighted for recency;

♥ **Trust:** In general, most people can be trusted.

The purpose of this paper is to explain the development of this composite measure for prosocial civic engagement, offer some validation evidence, and briefly cover four associated measures that are relevant to how nonprofit organizations in the United States can improve the communities they serve.

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[1] We also tested 4-week recall during a 7-month trial period with GivingPulse, before concluding that a shorter recall window better matched other published incidences.

Comparing Civic Intent to Civic Engagement and Prosociality

Despite decades of research, there is no common definition for civic engagement[2]. One view is that civic engagement is any form of active, respectful, and inclusive societal interaction[3]. This excludes community organizing that harms one specific group demographic, and other polarizing, partisan community efforts—an important distinction that rewards some interactions and punishes others. Many definitions of participation include voting, voter registration, and petitioning leaders. In developing our definition, we opted for a broader definition.

Our goal was to consolidate various measures of humanity that inspire one to build community and increase social ties, regardless of one's legal status, so that we can grow generosity through meaningful, prescriptive guidance to nonprofit organizations and influencers across the social sector. Since we are interested in tracking real work being done in communities, we emphasized recall of recent deeds over positive self-appraisals. This differs from other well-known prosociality measures, like the [PTM/PTM-R](#)[4]. These prosociality scales measure tendencies, not incidences. The PTM approach leads to more noise in our use case, because it scores people who see themselves as the sort of person who cares about others and might do good (but actually rarely does) the same as do-gooders who *recently* helped someone. Civic Intent measures a narrower form of prosociality that we think is more useful for driving social change, as we can distinguish between these two types of respondents. People are more likely to accurately recall recent activities and are less prone to self-appraisal errors when questions are narrowly time-bounded[5].

We discarded definitions that required citizenship as these were too limiting for our purposes. Historically, political agency and civic participation in the US has been tied to privilege (e.g. election day is not a national holiday, and voter turnout correlates with household income[6]). The behaviors and attitudes retained in Civic Intent could apply to anyone, anywhere, regardless of origin or creed. As a result, we provide a more robust indicator for tracking whether people are actively working to make their communities better by intent that has little to no correlation with age, wealth, gender, and ethnicity, and employment status.

All of these adjustments to our index are in pursuit of one overarching question: are individuals who score higher on the Civic Intent scale actually more likely to strengthen their communities? To that end, we examined our survey to find positive correlations with social behaviors and forms of engagement we did not include, and practically no correlation with demographic variation.

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[2] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17448689.2025.2508191#d1e129
[3] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17448689.2025.2508191#d1e129
[4] https://hdfs.missouri.edu/center-for-children-and-families-across-cultures/ptm/
[5] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167629614000083
[6] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23780231251338441

Civic Intent is correlated with (but not defined by) a variety of social behaviors, engagement in activism, and feelings of community belonging:

- Social behavior
    - Recently heard something positive about a charity r = 0.37
    - Recently heard anything, positive or negative, about a charity r = 0.35
    - See many reminders, solicitations, and publicity for giving to nonprofits r = 0.28
    - Seeking advice from others about giving r = 0.26
    - Being aware of GivingTuesday r = 0.22
    - Heard about a recent crisis or disaster in the news r= 0.16
- Community belonging (the average of 4 questions) r = 0.25
- Engaged in any form of activism recently r = 0.25

As expected, social behaviors correlate with the prosociality-focused Civic Intent measure. Activism is also a correlated social activity. Community belonging is somewhat correlated with Civic Intent. Increased belonging might be a result of prosociality, or it might be the reason people choose to engage locally.

Civic Intent has practically zero correlation with key demographic covariates:

- Age r = -0.04
- Gender r = 0.003
- Wealth
    - Household annual income r = 0.04
    - Disposable income r = 0.04
- Language spoken at home r = 0.01
- Ethnicity White (vs non-white) r = -0.02
- Full-time Employed 0.07
- Pew Political Type, average across 9 types: r = 0.002

The strongest of these is r = 0.07 for being full-time employed, but remains practically unrelated.

Political lean and regionality: We found that Civic Intent largely transcends political worldview. The average Civic Intent scores on a 0-100 scale varied by less than 6 points across the Pew Political Typology[7]. Among Pew political types, Civic Intent is most strongly correlated with the Ambivalent Right (r = -0.10) and Establishment Liberals (r = 0.09). In other countries, we found that culture appeared to explain more of the variability in Civic Intent than it did political worldview[8]. We also found that people in Kenya and India had much higher Civic Intent than other countries, an observation consistent with the World Giving Index (WGI) finding that these places are among the most generous in the world.

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[7] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology-2/. For the full 170 page report, see
https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/11/PP_2021.11.09_political-typology_REPORT.pdf
[8] See our 2025 State of Generosity report for more details.

Validation

In practice, using confirmatory factor analysis[9], we find that both recent behaviors and good intentions matter in creating a score that tracks what it purports to measure. Removing either of these components leads to a less sensitive index.

The population is normally distributed, with a slight positive skew, and an average of 60 out of 100. Most people want to do good and have done something recently. In contrast, our adapted measure for community belonging (from the American Immigration Council's belonging barometer) is normally distributed, with the mode being an ambiguous sense of community belonging[10]. Figure A.1 (from our 2024 Civic Intent report) illustrates the extent to which each underlying question contributes to Civic Intent. A robust indicator should have a large spread in the percent who agree and ideally be centered around the average score. For each question shown, the average Civic Intent score of those who disagreed is shown in red, and green for those who agreed. The percentage of the whole sample who agreed is displayed alongside it to the right. Questions are ordered so that those affirmed by the largest portion of society are at the bottom, and the smallest portion at the top. Thus, the questions can be seen as an empirical ladder of engagement, with the easiest to clear rungs at the bottom (e.g. I have performed a random act of kindness before), and the acts of a leader at the time (e.g. I initiated a helping effort in the past 7 days). Blue numbers on each line are the spreads - the difference in scores between agree/disagree.

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[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmatory_factor_analysis
[10] See our 2024 Civic Intent report for more details on how belonging and Civic Intent correlate with social awareness and demographics, specifically Figures A.2, A.3, and A.4.
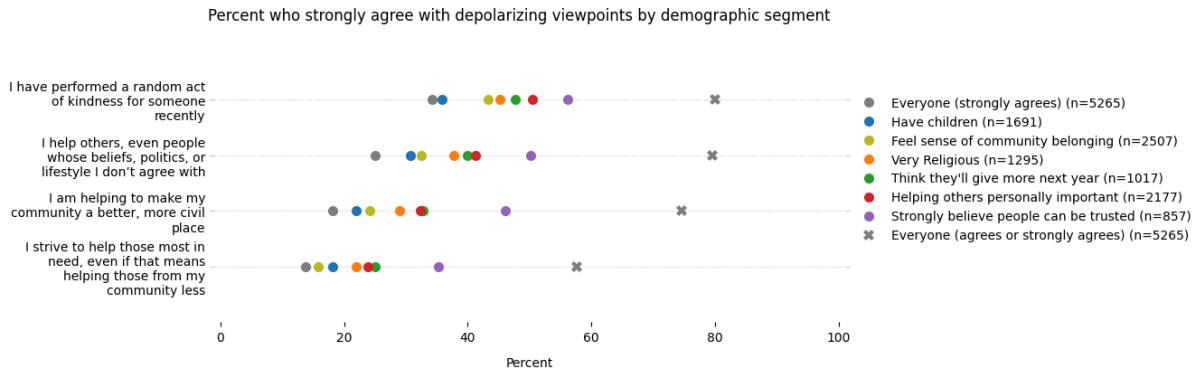
Figure A.1: Components of civil intent, showing average scores for those who reject (red) or affirm (green) each statement and percent who affirmed it
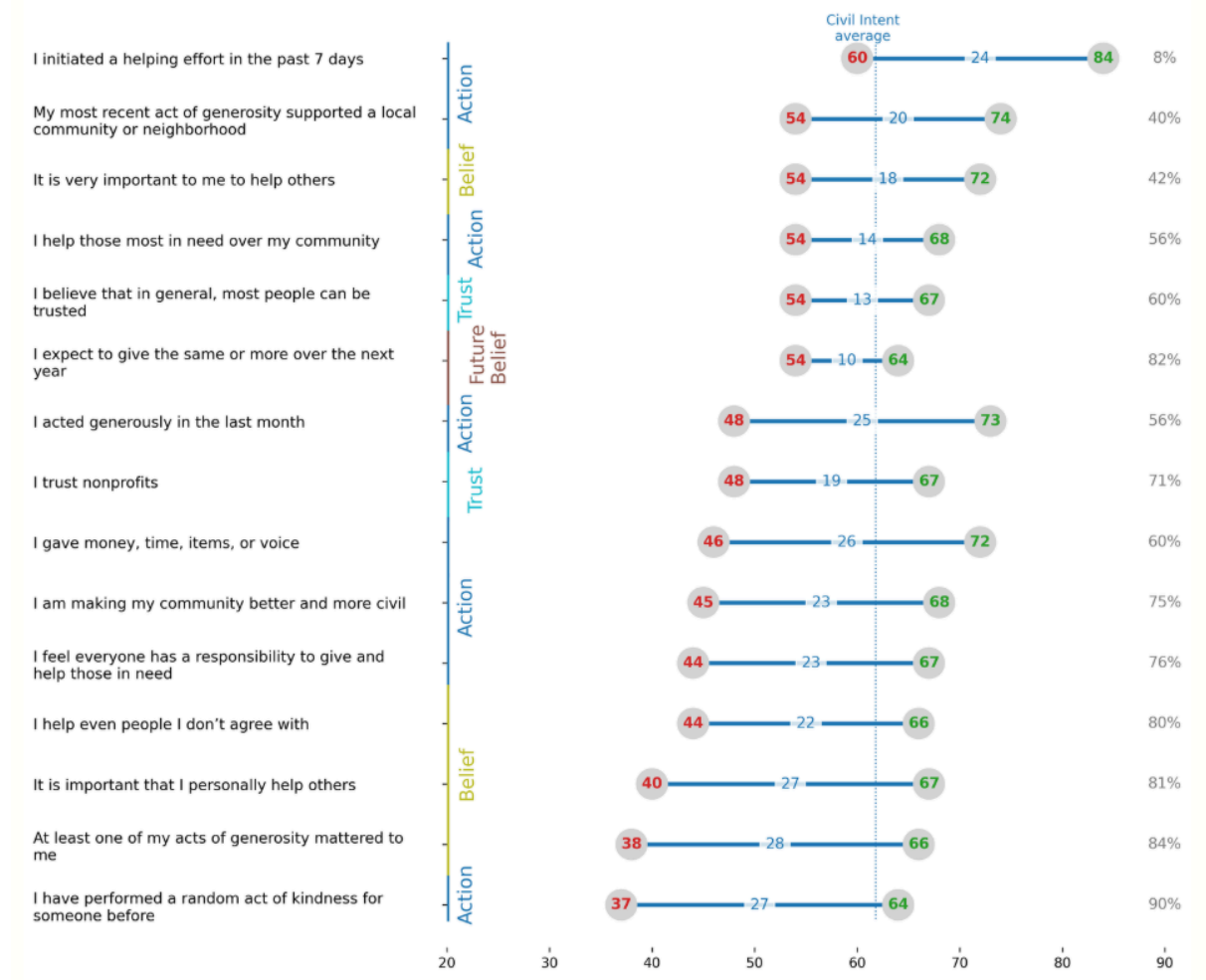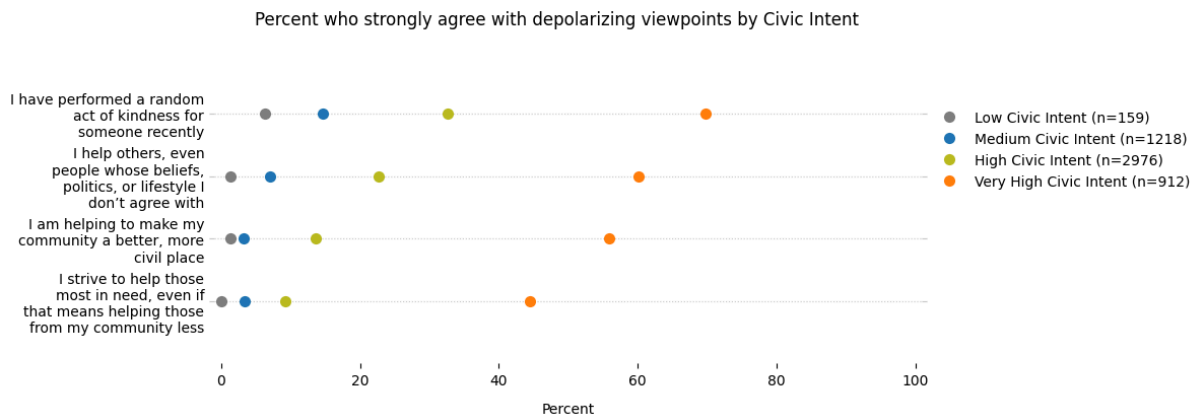
Depolarizing Attitudes are a crucial component of Civic Intent

Among good intentions, people who actively seek to depolarize their communities are defined as having higher Civic Intent. We hypothesized that these beliefs were a necessary part of improving one's community and examined correlates of those who held these beliefs. We asked four questions about depolarizing beliefs and behaviors – using two negatively framed and two positively framed questions – and found that people who affirmed these questions also typically shared other prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

For one full year of data (beginning Q3, 2024 through Q2 2025, n=5,265), we find that most people agreed with each of these statements, but less than a quarter of everyone strongly agreed. Among cofactors that increased the likelihood of a person agreeing, we see that strong trust in other people, believing that personally helping others is important, and thinking they'll give more in the next 12 months were among the strongest drivers of depolarization. Having children or having a sense of community belonging were weak drivers. Feeling very religious made a modest contribution.

Percent who strongly agree with depolarizing viewpoints by demographic segment

Legend:
- Everyone (strongly agrees) (n=5265)
- Have children (n=1691)
- Feel sense of community belonging (n=2507)
- Very Religious (n=1295)
- Think they'll give more next year (n=1017)
- Helping others personally important (n=2177)
- Strongly believe people can be trusted (n=857)
- Everyone (agrees or strongly agrees) (n=5265)

These questions about depolarizing views were used in part to calculate Civic Intent. They were honed to provide a discrimination scale for how strongly a person was willing to invest in reducing polarization. As shown, people varied in how much they agreed with each question. Nearly everyone in the lowest quartile of Civic Intent scores (0-25 out of 100) disagreed with every depolarization question, and the majority of those with very high Civic Intent (75-100 out of 100) agreed with three of four questions, the most challenging one being about helping those most in need over those in one's own community.


Percent who strongly agree with depolarizing viewpoints by Civic Intent

Legend:
- Low Civic Intent (n=159)
- Medium Civic Intent (n=1218)
- High Civic Intent (n=2976)
- Very High Civic Intent (n=912)

Based on a seven country survey using three of the depolarization questions shown below (administered in March of 2025, n=7000[11]), that were later scored and normalized to a 0-100 scale, we found that populations tended to have similar proclivities towards depolarization in five countries, with populations in India and Kenya both being quite more likely to depolarizing views.

- I am helping to make my community a better, more civil place.
- I help others, even people whose beliefs, politics, or lifestyle I don't agree with.
- I strive to help those most in need, even if that means helping those from my community less.

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[11] Countries: USA, UK, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Kenya, India with sample size of 1000 per country using an online panel.

Prevalence of depolarizing attitudes around the world
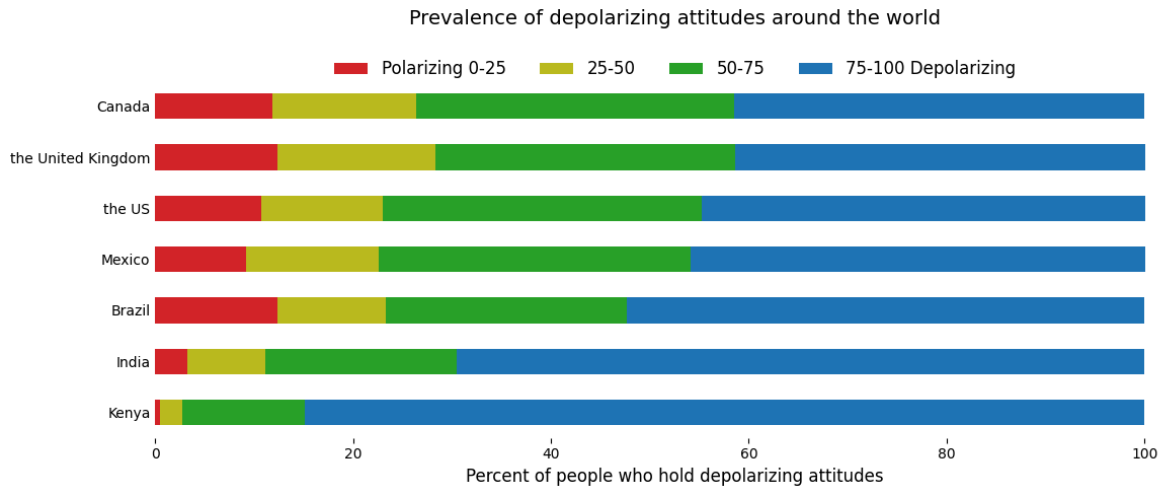
Civic Intent incorporates depolarizing views with other behaviors and attitudes, and generally leads to a similar breakdown into quartiles across countries, except in India and Kenya, where the majority claimed to engage in *many or all* modes of generosity we asked about. As a result, only 7-15% of those in Kenya and India had low or very low Civic Intent.

Civic Intent quartiles around the world
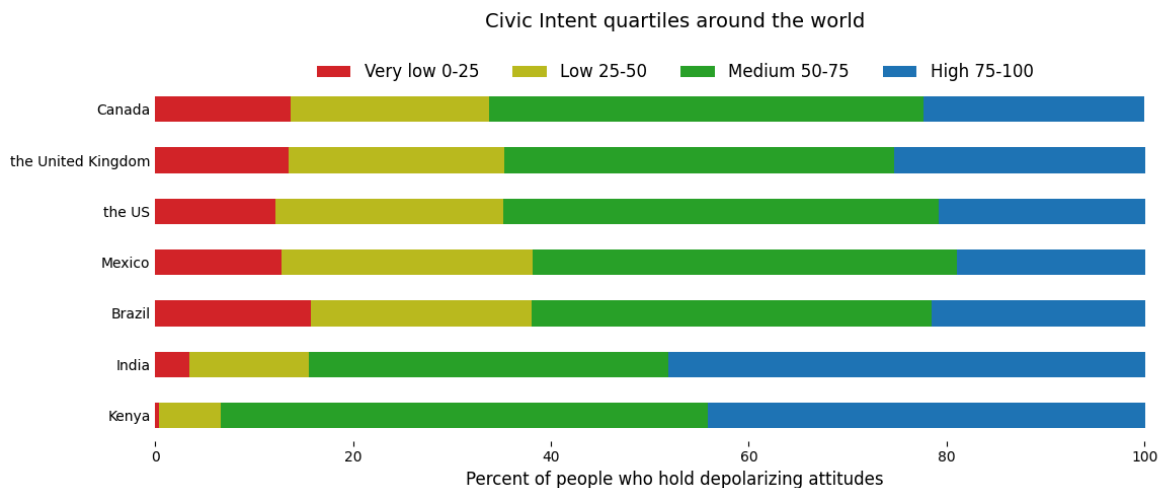
In the following sections we describe other behaviors and attitudes that relate to Civic Intent, but are not part of how it is measured: belonging, trust, activism, and one's preferred sources of news.

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Civic Intent correlates with Community Belonging and Trust

Effect of Civic Intent and demographics on percent
who agree with community belonging questions
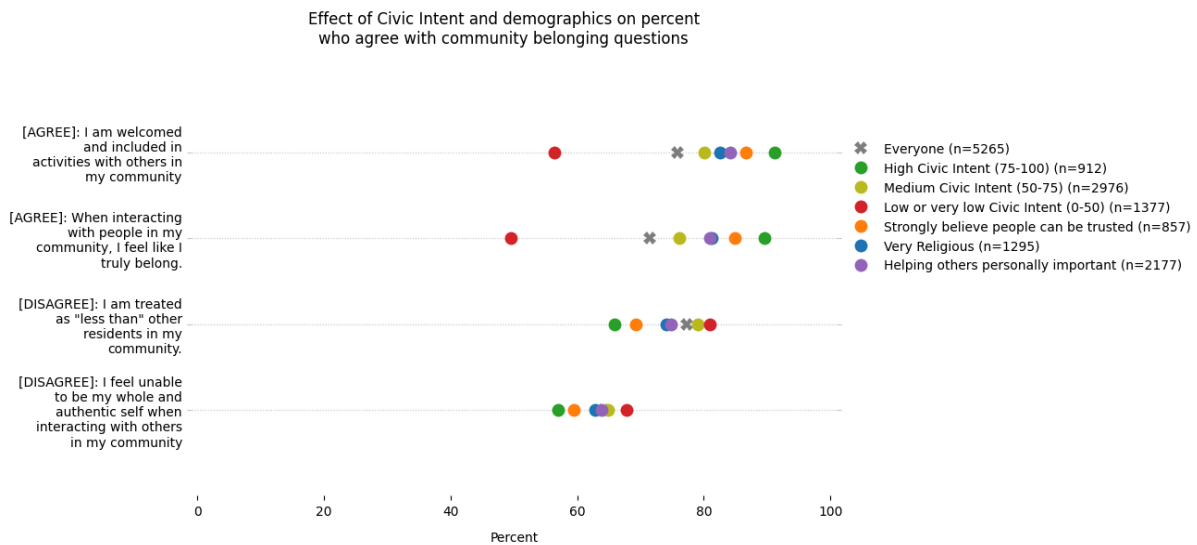
For the two positively framed community belonging questions (Welcomed and included; When interacting I belong), Civic Intent is correlated (r = 0.43 and 0.45), respectively. For the two negatively framed questions (Feeling less than, and unable to be authentic), there is a lack of correlation (r = 0.07 for each question) where we would have expected a negative correlation. Overall, the average of the four questions gives r = 0.25. The figure shows that the factors that increase depolarizing attitudes also increase belonging for positively-framed questions, but have less of an effect on the negatively framed questions. People with very high Civic Intent are much more likely to agree/disagree with both the positive- and negatively-framed questions, respectively. After Civic Intent, people with strong trust in others are more likely to report a sense of community belonging.

Activism

Activism – participating in any of the ten forms we tracked, within the last 7 days – is correlated with generosity and higher Civic Intent (r = 0.25). Participation in any one specific form has a weaker correlation with Civic Intent (average r = 0.08) than participating in any combination of the described forms in the table below. For ease of comparison, we've grouped people into four quartiles by their Civic Intent scores (0 to 25 is "very low," 25 to 50 is "low," 50 to 75 is "medium," and 75-100 is "high;" the US average score is 60). We see a greater percent participation in each form of activism in each rising quartile. This pattern is consistent for Q1-2025 data and Q2+Q3-2025 data.

Table: Percent participation in each form of activism versus very-low-to-high Civic Intent.

	Social media for cause	Signed petition	Boycotted	Contacted an elected policymaker or leader	Yard sign, bumper sticker, button	Public protest, sit-in, occupy, walkout against	Spoke at event	Attended rally, speech, event, or marched in support	Legal action	Civil disobedience	None of these
Civic Intent Quartile (Q1)											
High (75-100)	25	16	15	12	7	8	8	7	5	3	42
Medium (50-75)	16	12	11	6	4	3	2	3	2	1	61
Low (25-50)	6	7	10	3	2	1	1	0	0	0	75
Very low (0-25)	2	2	4	4	4	2	2	0	0	0	89

	Social media for cause	Signed petition	Boycotted	Contacted an elected policymaker or leader	Yard sign, bumper sticker, button	Public protest, sit-in, occupy, walkout against	Spoke at event	Attended rally, speech, event, or marched in support	Legal action	Civil disobedience	None of these
Civic Intent Quartile (Q2+Q3)											
High (75-100)	27	22	13	11	8	11	7	10	4	4	43
Medium (50-75)	17	14	14	7	5	3	2	3	0	1	62
Low (25-50)	10	10	12	4	2	1	1	2	0	0	73
Very low (0-25)	0	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	95

Virtual activism and in-person activism were both similarly correlated with higher Civic Intent (r = 0.21 vs 0.18). Boycotting had the weakest correlation with Civic Intent (r = 0.05). Nearly all in the lowest quartile were non-activists, and the majority of those with high Civic Intent (54%) had recently engaged in the past seven days.

These patterns also tend to hold outside the US. We ran a seven-country survey on activism and Civic Intent in March of 2025, using past-year-recall (n=7000[12]). We saw similar trends around the world, though incidences were higher due to the longer recall timeframe. In this sample, the percent who reported feeling community belonging, engaging in activism in any form, giving in any form (money, items, volunteering, or advocacy), and leadership[13] opportunities all increased for each rising Civic Intent quartile:

Civic Intent Quartile	Community belonging	Activism any form	Gave in any form:	Leadership opportunities
High (75-100)	87.4	87.1	100.0	75.9
Medium (50-75)	73.1	60.7	92.3	48.2
Low (25-50)	53.0	50.0	76.6	36.3
Very low (0-25)	31.0	25.3	33.1	30.2

In these countries, we observed a similar breakdown in activism versus Civic Intent quartile as seen in the US sample, except that in-person activism and leading activism events were

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[12] For our global sample we calculated Civic Intent using an modified, abbreviated version of our 16-question tool. This included the seven key questions we introduced earlier, except for the giving recency question. The recall period was past 12 months instead of past 7 days. And we used the three depolarization questions listed above. The seven-country average Civic Intent score was 57 and the distribution of scores per country tended to be much more positively skewed than seen with US data and the full questionnaire.

[13] We combined the following survey questions into a weighted "leadership opportunities" score: Is the respondent (a) a business owner? (b) the chief earner in their family? (c) employs more than 2 people? (d) a self-described senior decision maker in their workplace.

twice as prevalent among those with high Civic Intent (75-100) compared to medium (50-75). Boycotting and passive activism (online social media advocacy, displaying yard signs or buttons, and signing petitions) only rose slightly, compared with in-person.

Civic Intent Quartile	Activism (any form)	In-person activism	Leading activism efforts	Passive (Petitions, online)	Boycotting	None of these
High (75-100)	87.1	65.8	49.6	58.5	25.7	12.9
Medium (50-75)	60.7	33.8	23.2	34.8	22.2	39.3
Low (25-50)	50.0	24.4	14.9	26.3	17.7	50.0
Very low (0-25)	25.3	11.2	7.9	9.6	7.8	74.7

Media Landscape / preferred news

In Q2 and Q3 of 2025, we asked respondents to list up to three preferred news sources and then categorized these media outlets on political bias using outside references[14]. As a form of validation, we found that respondents' political leanings in their media landscape closely matched their Pew political types, based on answering eight political worldview questions[15]. While there was essentially no difference in Civic Intent among those who preferred non-partisan, centrist news sources, we found that those with either left-leaning or right-leaning preferred news sources tended to have higher levels of Civic Intent. A larger percentage of these folks appear in the higher quartiles. In contrast, if none of the news sources listed[16] by a respondent matched any of the 250 mainstream, widely-viewed networks/newspapers/sites tracked by the bias watchdog organizations we consulted (e.g. "Smart TV", "ads", "ChatGPT") we treated them as a separate group: "Uncategorized media." This group shows the opposite trend of those with left- or right-leaning media preferences; a larger proportion of them fall in the "very low" Civic Intent group than in other groups. Note: the percentages in left, right, and center won't necessarily sum to 100 because a person can list preferred media in more than one category, and we found that 27% crossed into two media categories, and 4% preferred news sources across the whole spectrum. 8% preferred to get news from both a left-leaning and right-leaning source.

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[14]We consulted https://app.adfontesmedia.com/chart/interactive and https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart in determining whether a media outlet was left, right, or center-leaning. The cutoff between left/right and center was +/- 6 on the Allsides media bias chart.

[15] See https://www.givingtuesday.org/visualizations-library/?co-item=worldviews-by-generosity-profile-66a3a3 783307c169bcbe206b for questions and https://www.givingpulse.givingtuesday.org/civic-intent-2024 for its implications on Civic Intent.

[16] This group includes people who listed only a single news source that could not be categorized as left, right, or centrist. We found that preferring a single news source was also associated with lower Civic Intent.

	Sample (%)	Left-leaning media	Centrist media	Right-leaning media	Uncategorized media
Civic Intent (Quartile)					
High (75-100)	10	46	49	30	25
Medium (50-75)	54	35	49	27	23
Low (25-50)	30	35	51	24	24
Very low (0-25)	4	24	49	20	33

Conclusions: Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy

Civic Intent offers nonprofits a framework for communicating their value to policymakers, funders, and the general public more effectively. Our ongoing survey continues to demonstrate that people with positive, healthy feelings about their community and the future are more involved locally. We find that people who have good intentions and actively serve tend to have higher levels of interpersonal trust, frequently engage in some form of activism, and report greater community belonging. They can fall anywhere along the political spectrum and might prefer media with a left, right, or centrist perspective. These patterns appear to be mirrored in other countries.

How might Civic Intent aid in designing interventions? Understanding the relationship between trust, belonging, activism, and one's news environment relate to personal drive to contribute can help organizations better recruit and better support volunteers. Organizations are the means by which most people most often get involved, and the "being together" aspect of community work may be part of the intervention, in addition to the work. Having a single robust measure like Civic Intent could simplify measurement for a wide variety of interventions and enable cross-program comparability. Nonprofit organizations typically struggle to define comparable outcomes across interventions, and clearly define the expected psychosocial improvements from social programs[17] using a standardizable metric. While our Civic Intent approach requires further testing and refinement, this is one step towards a comparable, consistent "community building" metric. Additional refinements could yield an intuitive easy-to-explain concept that would help journalists report on positive change succinctly. Our research aims to uncover what matters most, and what's sufficient to measure, in order to recognize progress.

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[17] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8482971/ and
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258124457_Nonprofit_Organizations_and_Outcome_Measurement_From_Tracking_Program_Activities_to_Focusing_on_Frontline_Work