



# THE MEASURE OF A CITIZEN

**Civic Engagement in Utah** 

### THE MEASURE OF A CITIZEN

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### Research Report 789

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Utah Foundation's mission is to produce objective, thorough and well-reasoned research and analysis that promotes the effective use of public resources, a thriving economy, a well-prepared workforce and a high quality of life for Utahns. Utah Foundation seeks to help decision-makers and citizens understand and address complex issues. Utah Foundation also offers constructive guidance to improve governmental policies, programs and structures.

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### INTRODUCTION

Social capital stands in the shadows of a wide variety of public policy and economic concerns. Low social capital levels often lead to poor economic and social outcomes, both for individuals and for populations. Policymakers seek to ameliorate these poor outcomes through endeavors that span educational efforts, election reforms, public assistance programs and law enforcement interventions. As social capital declines, the challenges become more acute – and social scientists across the political spectrum affirm that social capital in the U.S. is in long-term decline. But in places where social capital is comparatively robust, it can translate into heightened economic prospects and lower demands on the public sector.

Despite the importance of social capital, public attention to the factors affecting social capital may receive inadequate attention from the public and policymakers. The Utah Social Capital Series seeks to change that.

Simply put, social capital refers to the bonds between people and among networks, which they can use to benefit themselves and the group as a whole. While social connections can be negative (think of the criminal bonds and networks that exist among gangs and organized crime), this report focuses primarily on positive social capital that benefits societies and participating individuals. Because there are many different contributors to the social capital of a community, the Utah Social Capital Series casts a broad net analyzing roughly 30 metrics across seven topic areas. (See the sidebar on the next page.)

This first installment in the series focuses on civic engagement. It presents data and analysis on three key measures: voter turnout; citizen attendance at public meetings; and the number of advocacy organizations.

### **BACKGROUND**

Robust citizen engagement in the democratic process and in civic improvement has long been seen as a barometer of the vitality of the American republic. At the state and local levels, civic engagement has significant implications for the effectiveness and efficiency of government, the quality of services government delivers and the responsiveness of public officials to the priorities of the public.

### **KEY FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT**

- Voter turnout in Utah has improved in recent election cycles after having languished near the very bottom nationally. The state rank surged to 13th among the 50 states in the 2018 midterm election. However, in the 2020 presidential election cycle, Utah ranked only 39th nationally and sixth among the eight Mountain States.
- Citizen attendance at public meetings is a strong point for Utah. In 2019, Vermont and Maine were the only states in the nation that outperformed Utah on meeting participation.
- When it comes to the number of advocacy organizations, Utah has consistently trended below the nation at large during the past decade. In 2020, Utah's 2.6 advocacy groups per 100,000 people ranked 43rd in the nation.
- Across all three measures of civic engagement, Montana appears to be the most consistent strong performer among the Mountain States. Nevada is the most consistent poor performer.



### FORMAT OF THE UTAH SOCIAL CAPITAL SERIES

Social capital takes many forms. With this series, the Utah Foundation seeks be comprehensive, gathering data on roughly 30 metrics. We sorted them into seven categories:

- Civic Engagement
- Social Trust
- Community Life
- Family Health
- Social Cohesion
- Future Focus
- Social Mobility

In determining the metrics, we explored other social capital analyses, including the indices created by Joint Economic Council and by Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam. From these, we culled certain metrics that are not reproduced at regular intervals, which could inhibit comparisons over time. We also added a number of factors either because they would be of particular interest to Utah or because they allow us to flesh out our analysis of certain topic areas. Our analysis compares Utah to the U.S. at large and to the other Mountain States (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico and Wyoming). It also examines trends over time. There is no absolute consensus on how to measure social capital.

Citizens displaying a high degree of civic engagement also tend to be accustomed to collaborating to achieve common goals. A decline in civic engagement, by contrast, can reduce the accountability of the public sector and produce a negative public spirit.<sup>1</sup>

### **VOTER TURNOUT**

The U.S. Declaration of Independence claimed that governments derive their "just powers from the consent of the governed." While voting does not directly illustrate social ties, it is the most fundamental method of political participation in a democracy,<sup>2</sup> and many studies draw connections between the activity of citizens in the political sphere and their activity in the community sphere.<sup>3</sup> While there is some debate on whether social capital improves voter turnout or whether voter turnout improves social capital, the links between the two makes voting a good measure of a community's social capital.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more importantly, when electoral participation declines, it can indicate disengagement from the local community and society.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1970s, significant national declines have occurred in both the share of the voting age population registered to vote and in voting rates.<sup>6</sup>

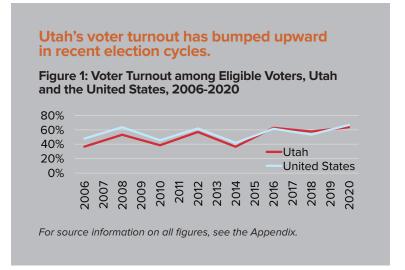
The Utah Foundation analyzed U.S. Census Bureau data on voter turnout for federal elections. When looking at voter turnout over several cycles, there is a clear

Since the 1970s, significant national declines have occurred in both the share of the voting age population registered to vote and in voting rates.

pattern of higher turnout in presidential election years and lower levels of turnout during midterm elections (known as surge and decline in political science). This pattern holds in Utah. Presidential election years should be compared primarily to presidential years, and midterms should be compared to midterms.

### **Utah Turnout Over Time**

Utah's voter turnout has seen some marked increases since 2014. This is likely due in part to Utah's expansion of vote by mail. Beginning in 2015, Utah municipalities began adopting vote by mail elections, and a subsequent Utah Foundation report documented substantially higher turnouts among those municipalities. While the expansion

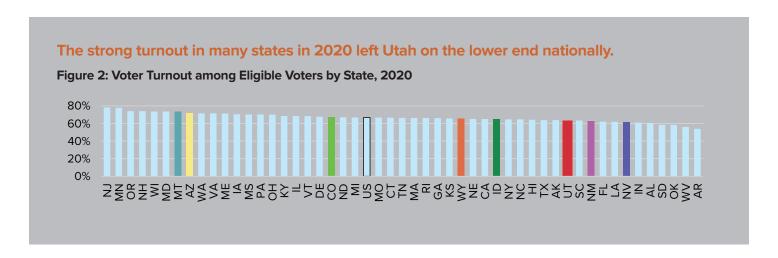


of vote by mail elections seems to be responsible for boosting turnout, research based on Oregon's experience indicates that the higher levels of turnout may diminish over time.<sup>9</sup>

From 2006 to 2016, turnout in presidential and mid-term elections in Utah had generally been stable. But in 2018, voter turnout was exceptional. That year, turnout was 57%, compared to 37% four years earlier. The 2018 midterm surpassed even the presidential election cycles of 2008 and 2012. One reason for the higher level of turnout may have been high-profile propositions on the ballot, covering topics such as medical use of marijuana (Proposition 2), Medicaid expansion (Proposition 3) and the creation of an independent redistricting commission (Proposition 4), all of which passed. However, in 2020, Utah saw turnout below the national average, even though the state surpassed the U.S. turnout in 2016 and 2018.

### **Utah and the Nation**

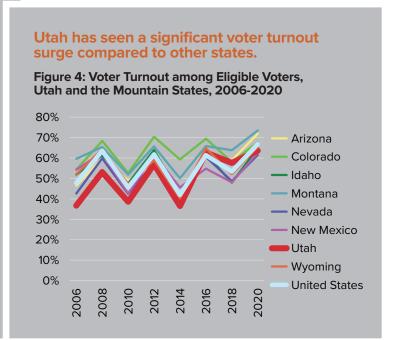
Utah's recent spikes in voter turnout largely tracked the nation. Yet Utah's 2020 turnout (64%) was lower than the national average (67%), placing Utah 39<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states. Still, this is an improvement over the first part of this century. Before 2016, Utah's voter participation was among the very lowest in the nation – never more than 45<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states plus Washington, D.C. However, since the expansion of vote-by-mail, Utah's voter turnout has improved, with the state rank peaking at 13<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states in 2018.



# In 2020, Utah ranked sixth among the Mountain States in voter turnout. Figure 3: Voter Turnout among Eligible Voters in the Mountain States, 2020 74% 65% 66% 68% 72% 63%

### **Turnout in the Mountain States**

In 2020, Utah was sixth among the eight Mountain States for voter turnout. Prior to 2015, Utah was consistently among the lowest, but since 2016, Utah has improved. Utah has also seen one of the most significant surges in turnout among the Mountain States in recent cycles. Montana and Colorado are consistently among the top Mountain States. However, in 2020, with Arizona emerging as a key swing state, it surged to the top 10 nationally, right behind Montana. Nevada and New Mexico now have the lowest turnout in the region.



### ATTENDANCE AT PUBLIC MEETINGS

Because of various practical and political factors affecting voting, turnout numbers may overstate the extent to which citizens participate in public life, particularly given the fact that Utah voters can now vote by mail from their own homes. A much stronger measure of political participation is whether individuals make their voice heard in local forums, such as public meetings. At the local level at least, public meetings can be seen as a core component of the democratic process. They allow citizens the opportunity to convey information directly to local officials and facilitate civic participation. Participation in local public meetings can be a significant indicator of the level of participation in political and community life, as well as the links between individual citizens and their local leaders.

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# In 2019, Utah reported the nation's third highest level of participation in public meetings.

To measure meeting participation, the Utah Foundation relied on data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau through the Current Population Survey. Data were available beginning in 2010, but they have undergone small changes in frequency of collection and the questions asked. See the Appendix: Technical Data for full details.

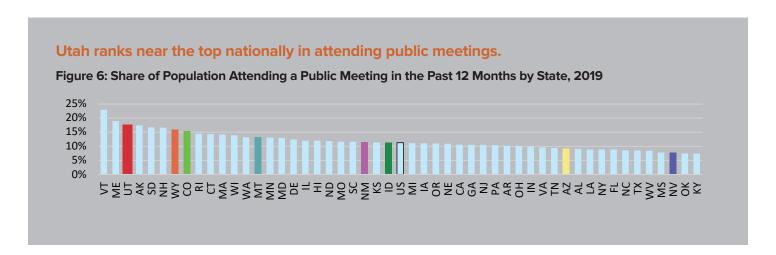
### **Utah Meeting Attendance Over Time**

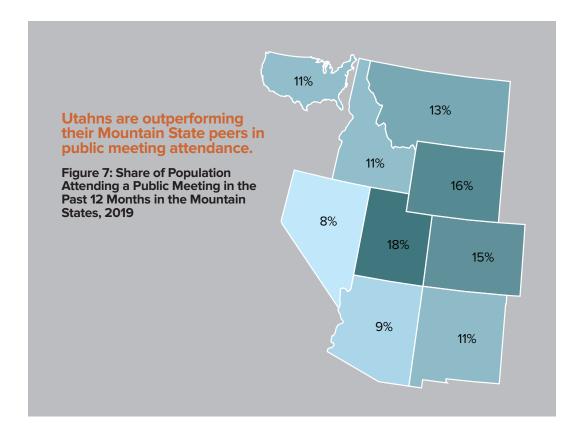
The share of individuals reporting attendance at a public meeting (in the previous 12 months) varies from year to year. During the past 12 years, approximately 15% of Utahns, on average, reported attendance each year. Data from 2017 (16%) and 2019 (18%) are both above this longer-term average.

### Utah and the Nation

Around 10% of Americans consistently report having attended public meetings in the past 12 months. Utah regularly reports higher levels of participation. In 2019, Utah reported the third highest level of participation in public meetings, just after Vermont and Maine. Although 2019 did represent an

above-average year for Utah, looking at historical averages back to 2010, Utah ranks 5<sup>th</sup> among states in terms of participation in public meetings.





### **Meeting Attendance in the Mountain States**

In 2019, a greater share of Utahns (18%) reported attending public meetings than in any other Mountain State. Over a 10-year period, Utah and Montana report averages at 15% while Nevadans and Arizonans are least likely to attend a public meeting with averages at 8% and 9% respectively.

### **ADVOCACY GROUPS PER 100,000**

Advocacy organizations are one of the primary methods for turning social capital into political capital through grass-roots mobilization and lobbying of policymakers.<sup>13</sup>

To be clear, much of the study of social capital focuses on the participation and activity in voluntary associations (those related to neither the state nor the market). This is not the case when analyzing advocacy organizations. Including this metric is more related to measuring the level of social capital leveraged to change politics. However, in so doing, we get a significant indication of the vitality of civic participation.

One limitation of this set of data is that not all advocacy organizations are created equal. While many may have local chapters that bring people together for meetings and discussions regarding local political engagement, others may have more handsoff interactions. While people in the latter type of organization may have ties to common ideals, their ties to each other may be more tenuous.<sup>14</sup>

The Utah Foundation calculated the number of advocacy organizations per 100,000 people based on tax records published by the Internal Revenue Service. See the Appendix: Technical Data for more details on how the information was collected and caveats to the data.

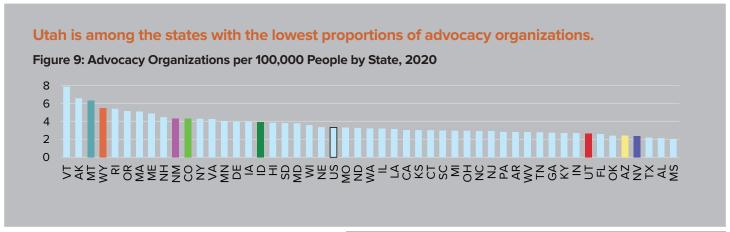
### **Utah Advocacy Groups Over Time**

Since 2009, Utah has averaged 2.4 advocacy organizations per 100,000 people. In 2020, Utah was slightly higher, at 2.6 organizations per 100,000 people.

### **Utah and the Nation**

Utah falls well below average in terms of the number of advocacy organizations per 100,000 people. In 2020, Utah's 2.6 advocacy groups per 100,000 people ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the nation.





### **Advocacy Groups in the Mountain States**

The Mountain States appear to be bifurcated. Utah, Nevada and Arizona have among the fewest advocacy groups per 100,000 people. The remaining Mountain States look much different, with numbers well above average. In 2020, Utah had the third-lowest number of advocacy organizations per 100,000 people out of the eight states. Montana and Wyoming had the most advocacy organizations per 100,000 individuals among all Western States, and they rank among the top states nationally – third and fourth respectively.

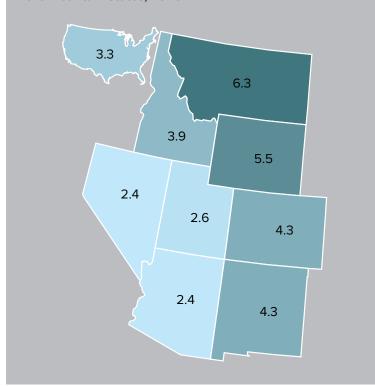
### **CONCLUSION**

When it comes to civic engagement, on one measure Utah performs well and is trending upward However, on the other two measures, the numbers look unimpressive.

After spending several of the earlier election cycles of this century with some of the nation's lowest turnout, voter participation began to improve. Still, among the eight Mountain States, Utah ranked sixth in 2020, and its turnout lagged well behind

## Utah has among the lowest number of advocacy organizations in the Mountain States.

Figure 10: Advocacy Organizations per 100,000 people in the Mountain States, 2020



Utah can look with satisfaction on having some of the nation's most robust meeting attendance.

Montana's. However, the Beehive State has seen one of the region's most significant increases in turnout in recent years.

Utah has also seen a surge in citizen attendance at public meetings. In recent years, the state has far outperformed the nation at large on this count. In fact, in 2019, only Vermont and Maine outperformed Utah. While other Mountain States like Colorado, Montana and Wyoming have robust meeting participation, Utah clearly leads the region.

However, when it comes to the number of advocacy organizations, Utah has consistently trended below the nation at large during the past decade. Furthermore, the number of such groups per 100,000 Utahns has not grown significantly during that time. In 2020, Utah's 2.6 advocacy groups per 100,000 people ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the nation. Among the Mountain States, Utah languishes at the bottom with Arizona and Nevada. This contrasts sharply with other Mountain States, particularly Montana and Wyoming, which tend toward the top nationally.

Across all three measures, Montana appears to be the most consistent strong performer among the Mountain States. Nevada is the most consistent poor performer.

The measures of civic engagement in Utah reveal a mixed bag. The state can look with satisfaction on having some of the nation's most robust meeting attendance. Voter turnout has been low, but it seems to be moving in the right direction. The relatively small number of advocacy organizations, meanwhile, merits closer study to determine both the underlying reasons and the implications for civic life and social capital.

### APPENDIX: TECHNICAL DATA

### **Voter Turnout**

Data on voter registration and participation are collected by the U.S. Census Bureau for every presidential and mid-term election.<sup>15</sup> Utah Foundation analysis focused on the share of U.S. citizens who voted rather than the share of the population that voted because the number of citizens represents the theoretical maximum of individuals who are eligible to participate in the voting process.<sup>16</sup>

### **Share of Citizens Reporting Public Meeting Attendance in Past 12 Months**

Public meeting attendance data are gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau through a supplementary section of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The supplement was issued annually from 2010-2015, and biannually since 2015. 2019 represents the latest data available. Prior to 2016, the question was worded "In the past 12 months, did you attend a public meeting, such as a zoning or school board meeting, to discuss a local issue?" After 2016, the question was changed to "Now I'd like to ask about some of your involvement in your community. Since September 1st [the previous year], have you attended any public meetings in which there was discussion of community affairs?" The data were gathered from the CPS microsample. Respondents could reply yes, no, do not know, refuse, or simply provide no answer. Utah Foundation calculations posed the share attending as the share who replied "yes" out of all these available responses.

### The Number of Advocacy Organizations Per 100,000 People

Advocacy organization information is gathered from the IRS Business Master File which lists nonprofit organizations registered or active with the IRS. The Utah Foundation used the files hosted by the Urban Institute.<sup>17</sup> To ensure that we counted only active organizations, we restricted the count to nonprofits filing within the previous two years and those filing with more than \$0 in gross receipts.<sup>18</sup> Nonprofit organizations are categorized based on the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) code. In order to look at just advocacy organizations, we restricted the count to those where the first NTEE digit is "R" which represents "Civil Rights, Social Action, Advocacy" organizations, and organizations where the second and third digit is "01" which represents "Alliances & Advocacy" organizations across other major group areas. In 2017, several states were missing data. In these cases, the data were calculated by averaging their 2016 and 2018 numbers.

The NTEE classification used to identify the type of organization is not complete in the IRS file, so the NCCS systematically created a version of the NTEE classification to fill in the gaps. Because these were not reported by the organizations themselves, there is a possibility of misclassification.

### **ENDNOTES**

- 1 When looking at differences across regions in Italy, Robert Putnam, a social scientist who has studied social capital extensively, has concluded, "Citizens in civic communities demand more effective public services ... and they are prepared to act collectively to achieve their shared goals. Their counterparts in less civic regions more commonly assume the role of alienated and cynical supplicants." Putnam, R., Leonardi, R., and Nanetti, R., *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 182.
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- 14 Putnam, Robert D., Bowling Alone, op. cit., p. 53
- 15 U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2018," www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-583.html.
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