

Trust for Civic Life: America's Civic Future Starts in Local Communities

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To advance Strategy 4 of the Our Common Purpose report and its first recommendation, the American Academy convened a working group in 2021 to incubate a national trust for civic infrastructure that could help dramatically expand civic bridging capacity. In 2024, the Trust for Civic Life was launched with the goal of deploying \$50 million across five hundred communities in rural America by 2028. This essay covers where the Trust is now by exploring some of the primary successes and challenges from its first few years of operation. Discussion draws on annual survey reports of hundreds of rural leaders and community members and spotlights recent grantees who are exemplary builders of civic infrastructure.

In the center of an idyllic college town surrounded by lentil fields sits a red brick building where anyone can enjoy a free community meal one Monday night a month. Anyone joining the three-course dinner, which is cooked and served by a rotating group of volunteers, should expect to sit across the table from someone outside their usual social circle. The crowd is full of notable contrasts, with college students sitting across the table from local leaders in suits, and conservative churchgoers holding trays for business owners who display gay pride banners at their place of work. No one is required to talk, but everyone is expected to participate.

This is a Welcome Table event at the 1912 Center in Moscow, Idaho. Since the community center began hosting these dinners in 2019, the gatherings have been quietly building a sense of local connection in a town that is known as the headquarters of a highly influential white Christian nationalist congregation, and at the center of a region with a long, storied history of extremist violence.

The dinners are not an aggressive or head-on counter to antidemocratic sentiments circulating across the community, but they are defying them nonetheless. People who did not think they could be in the same room have come to realize they all want a vibrant and connected town. Those who had never been “civically engaged” are now regularly committed to serving their community once a month. One resident who used to drive through the streets waving a Confederate flag

stopped after he became a regular at the community dinners. “We all have a lot of things in common,” said Jenny Kostroff, executive director of the 1912 Center. “And if you start with those little things, it starts to percolate up where you’re going to have greater levels of trust.”

The program is not the only attempt to bring neighbors together across divides. Throughout rural America, a constellation of locally led efforts like this are giving people reasons to trust each other, build common ground, and work on the problems that stand between them and the quality of life they desire. Volunteers in Central Appalachia are converting empty churches into public spaces their community did not have before. Neighbors in a rural Minnesota town got tired of having nowhere to shop and formed a grocery co-op together.¹ In the Adirondacks, small, informal gatherings are defusing tensions between longtime residents and owners of vacation homes. These acts may not look like obvious democracy in action, but each time Americans step outside their immediate circles to build something alongside their neighbors, they are practicing the most fundamental habits of democratic life.

Unfortunately, these types of hyperlocal efforts are often disjointed, occur in isolation, or lack resources to stay afloat or grow over time. As a result, they have been almost completely ignored by or off the radar of national philanthropy or prodemocracy agents who are understandably looking for a major national fix to our major national challenges. They are precisely the little-known efforts that the Trust for Civic Life was created to find, fund, and scale across rural America.

When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published its landmark 2020 report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, researchers had expected to document a nation defined by anger and disengagement.² At that time, a record-low 28 percent of Americans were satisfied with how democracy was functioning, fewer than half reported any consistent civic participation, and affective polarization was accelerating faster in the United States than in any other peer democracy.³ Americans were withdrawing from the connective institutions like churches, civic organizations, and local associations that had long anchored shared community life.

But beneath the cynicism and exhaustion, researchers discovered something else. “As we . . . listened to Americans from many walks of life,” they wrote in the report, “we heard a yearning to believe again in the American story, to feel connected to one another.”⁴ There was a desire for a shared purpose and to believe their participation mattered, but the right civic infrastructure to enable and unlock it was missing.

That finding reframed the crisis threatening American democracy not purely as a political or systems issue but as a relational and cultural crisis in need of urgent repair. Through Strategy 4, “dramatically expand civic bridging capacity,” and its first recommendation to establish a national trust to scale up civic infrastructure, *Our Common Purpose* issued a direct challenge to the philanthropic community

to make a serious, sustained investment in the people, places, and programs that would bring Americans together and enable civic participation across the country.

The Trust for Civic Life was founded in 2024 as a direct answer to that challenge. The goal of this young grantmaking collaborative is to deploy \$50 million across five hundred communities in rural regions of the United States by 2028, supporting locally led work like the 1912 Center and hundreds of other community efforts nationwide. In under two years, the Trust has grown into a collaborative network of twenty-three national funders and philanthropists and has established a new grantmaking approach that invests in efforts that spark and sustain civic renewal in hard-to-reach areas of the country. Already, three hundred thousand Americans are participating in local civic life through programs and projects directed by Trust for Civic Life grantees. The task ahead is to scale what is working.

The dominant approach to civic repair has traditionally focused on reforming government institutions, expanding voting access, and combatting misinformation. These are necessary tactics, but they also assume America's civic culture and shared identity flow down from Washington, D.C. They never have. The promise of American democracy has always been a ground-up proposition, as something that emerges from the habits, values, and actions of its citizens.

Doubling down on national fixes while neglecting local community life is no longer a strategy the country can afford. The foundational social traits that hold democracy together – such as trust, belonging, and a sense of agency – are not built through legislation or national campaigns but through repeated encounters and shared action with other people in daily life. A growing body of research supports this, and insights from hundreds of Trust for Civic Life partners confirm it. Local communities are not a secondary venue for civic life – they are the source.

The data on trust in America make this concrete. Americans' confidence in national institutions has collapsed, but the picture shifts dramatically at the local level. People consistently report much higher trust in the institutions that touch their daily lives, such as their library, their children's schools, and their local nonprofits. In *The Local Advantage*, a new survey of one thousand rural community members conducted by the Trust for Civic Life and the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, researchers found that 74 percent of people believe their community can work together to implement solutions and 50 percent believe their participation influences local decision-making. But less than 11 percent believed their input mattered in helping solve national problems.⁵

Polarization and division follow the same pattern. National statistics paint a picture of a country locked in irreconcilable political division. But in local communities, another story is unfolding. In the same survey, over 30 percent of respondents said they engage in regular acts to work across differences with others in their communities.⁶ A 2025 report from More in Common, a global nonprofit that works to

tackle us-versus-them divisions, found that the primary reason people gave for not reaching across differences was not unwillingness but the lack of opportunity.⁷

The consequences of investing in communities are significant and well documented. A 2023 Appalachian Funders Network study of 270 counties found that the single common factor in positive health and economic outcomes was local civic engagement.⁸ Strong local civic ecosystems also provide meaningful protection against extremism and crisis. Communities with deep civic foundations are more resilient when disruption comes, whether in the form of radicalization efforts or natural disaster.

Before launching the organization, the team behind the Trust for Civic Life spent a full year in conversation with more than sixty local leaders and community members across the United States to understand what efforts were sparking and sustaining local civic life, and where national dollars would have the most impact. The findings pointed to a clear and largely overlooked opportunity for renewing civic culture: engaging rural America.

Rural regions represent 20 percent of the U.S. population but receive just 3 percent of national philanthropic spending.⁹ Sixty percent of rural youth grow up in civic deserts – places with few organized opportunities for civic participation – while many of these same communities are managing economic distress, workforce decline, and the steady erosion of the local institutions that once held community life together.¹⁰

Despite the high need, the Trust team also found rural communities were not waiting to be rescued. In places where resources and assistance never arrived, civic life has taken its most durable form. Showing up, pitching in, and working across differences are not aspirational values in these communities, they are practical and necessary ones. As one leader in a four-hundred-person town in Western North Carolina explained, “Everyone has to help out because we all rely on each other.”

The reason these organizations had been overlooked by national philanthropy had little to do with their effectiveness and everything to do with how national grantmaking works. Most national funders are simply not structured to source, vet, and sustain relationships with hyperlocal organizations scattered across geographically dispersed rural regions. Finding a high-impact community organization in a rural county in an isolated geographic area requires time, local knowledge, and relationships that the standard national philanthropy is not built for.

The Trust for Civic Life designed its grantmaking to bridge that gap by building a pipeline into communities that national funders had been unable to reach and providing unrestricted grants that give local organizations the freedom to direct resources toward what their communities need and the efforts they already know work.

In just two years, the Trust has directed nearly \$27 million in fast, flexible capital to over 250 groups and projects across the country, with roughly 60 percent for

four underfunded priority regions: the Southern Black Belt, Central Appalachia, the Southwest border, and tribal communities.¹¹ Its first year of funding generated a two-to-one match by grantees, infusing these underresourced regions with nearly double the capital. In 2025, the Trust secured \$4 million in additional cofunding dollars for its grantees from regional philanthropic partners. These results reflect a highly intentional and rapidly expanding investment in the civic infrastructure and civic networks that create vibrant rural communities.¹²

Throughout continued conversations with hundreds of local leaders across rural America, one pattern kept emerging. Regardless of mission or organizational structure, the groups that were consistently driving civic participation and local problem-solving all played the same fundamental role: they created the conditions for people to show up as neighbors, work on problems they shared, and experience the kind of collective agency that national politics has largely stopped providing.

The Trust has come to call these organizations “Civic Hubs,” and what defines them is not what they are but how they work. Always locally based and locally led, their credibility comes from years of showing up in ways that mattered to a community and working side by side with residents. Rather than arriving with a fixed agenda, Civic Hubs create the culture and conditions for communities to decide together what matters most and then act on it. Stephen Heintz, cochair of the commission that issued the *Our Common Purpose* report and a founding funder of the Trust for Civic Life, summed it up simply: “These are remarkable examples of citizens coming together and saying, ‘We’ve got to fix something.’”¹³

For funders, this distinction is the critical one. In communities that are geographically remote, politically complex, and historically underserved, Civic Hubs provide something no outside funder or nonprofit can replicate. They provide the trust, relationships, and local knowledge needed to direct resources toward opportunities and entry points that will resonate with residents and motivate them to become involved. They are one of the most effective vehicles available for getting national dollars into the hands of those closest to the most effective work.

Eighty percent of the Trust’s annual grantmaking flows to its Civic Hub grant program. Today there are forty-six active Civic Hub grantees, many of which were previously working in isolation and are now connected into a network – sharing insights, accessing new funding opportunities, and spreading effective models within and across regions. In July 2026, a new cohort of twenty Civic Hub grantees was selected and will continue to build out this network.

Concepts like “civic infrastructure,” “collective agency,” or “civic hubs” can feel abstract until you see them in action. The two grantee stories below showcase the realities of rural communities and what it looks like when

the right organization is present, trusted, and resourced to lead our country's civic renewal.

Chinle Planting Hope, Chinle, Arizona, 2024 Civic Hub Grantee. Tucked into the northeast corner of Arizona near a breathtaking river canyon, Chinle is a majority Native community of fewer than four thousand people, with two stoplights and dust storms fierce enough to stop traffic. For years, if a child wanted a place to run around, the only option was the indoor play structure at a former Burger King. Play came at the price of a soda or fries.

A handful of local parents decided that had to change. They started meeting in each other's homes, and without a formal roadmap or outside funding, began working on community pain points using whatever people, resources, and ideas they could find in Chinle. What started as a push for a playground grew into something much larger: a local problem-solving organization called Chinle Planting Hope (CPH).¹⁴

Today, CPH runs a community center with a bike repair shop that trains young people, a volunteer-run thrift store, a bookmobile that has put thousands of books into the hands of residents across the region, community gardens growing local food, and more. In late 2026, it will open the Imagination Station, an educational play and learning center with the potential to serve families well beyond Chinle. As a Civic Hub grantee, CPH put the majority of its flexible funding toward that building.

The numbers from its first year are striking: more than two hundred civic opportunities facilitated, including seventy-five bookmobile events, forty community-led solar installations for families living without electricity, and three hundred food boxes distributed to elderly residents. The organization estimates that more than two-thirds of the people it engages were previously disconnected from community life.

"Every program we started has been because there has been a need, or because someone in the community had a dream to share," said Amber Drinen, CPH's program coordinator. "You can have two people who are very different, and who vote for very different things, but they can still be interested in working on something together."

Nebraska Community Foundation, Omaha, Nebraska, 2025 Civic Hub Grantee. People who have never been to Nebraska often picture a long, flat stretch of interstate highway flanked by cornfields. But veer off the road in almost any direction and the state comes to life: winding rivers, vibrant main street murals, rodeo arenas glowing under night-lights. What defines Nebraska, as much as any landscape, is an instinct for neighborliness and cooperation. These are qualities that have long held rural communities together and now shape how they welcome rapid demographic change.

Nebraska is diversifying at twice the national rate, with many new residents arriving from Hispanic communities; yet nearly one-third of the state's population live in rural areas where opportunities to connect across social circles can be scarce.

The Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF) has spent thirty years helping those communities imagine and invest in their own futures. NCF operates as a statewide "mothership" by offering legal and financial expertise, leadership devel-

opment, and community training to 270 hometowns across the state, but its real power lies in what it deliberately does not do: give orders. Since its founding in 1994, NCF has reinvested more than \$594 million into Nebraska people and places, but the engine of that work is a network of fifteen hundred volunteers who serve as advisors, conveners, and catalysts in their own communities. In each town, the priorities are set locally. NCF provides the tools, frameworks, and connections to help communities act on what already matters to them.¹⁵

One of the foundation's signature programs helps communities build unrestricted endowments. These are funds that stay local and are entirely controlled by residents who learn to manage shared resources and make joint decisions about how the funds should be used. As one community leader put it, these endowments allow residents to "save something important, create something new, or adapt to the future."

With support from the Trust for Civic Life, NCF is expanding that model and adding staff capacity to meet growing demand, and is launching a new small grants campaign to fund locally designed "community sparks": civic experiments in bringing people together, especially those who have felt disconnected from community life.

Jeff Yost, head of the Nebraska Community Foundation, connects these hyper-local interventions to democracy: "Community dynamism is exactly what a democracy is built on. It's about people that live and work in a place doing the right thing, for the right reasons, over time – for themselves and for the others who live there."¹⁶

Two years of grantmaking and original research, conducted in partnership with the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University and with Indiana University, have sharpened how the Trust for Civic Life thinks about where to invest and why. One of the most significant findings is that action outperforms dialogue.¹⁷

The 2025 survey report *Action over Dialogue* found that taking action with other community members was closely tied to feelings of social trust, agency, and belonging. Meanwhile, dialogue alone appeared to have very little correlation to these three traits. This matters because the philanthropic sector has put significant money into dialogue-based bridge-building. The Trust's research – which compliments decades of social science, including social psychologist Muzafer Sherif's landmark work in the 1950s on intergroup conflict resolution – points toward collective problem-solving as the more reliable path.¹⁸ The Trust now directs all of its grantmaking to action-based efforts.

This research has also clarified where civic participation tends to start. Across the grantee network, the most effective on-ramps into community life have been informal and accessible ones, like a neighborhood work project, a local festival,

or a shared gathering space. Programs that lead with civic or democratic framing tend to struggle to reach the people who would benefit most. Programs that lead with something tangible that people actually want to do, and let civic habits grow from there, tend to work better. This finding is now shaping how the Trust identifies and evaluates grantees.

The challenges are worth naming plainly. Local context matters and strategies that work in one region don't transfer automatically to another. What works in a Southwest border community does not automatically translate to Central Appalachia or the Southern Black Belt, and the Trust has learned to treat that variation as a given rather than a problem to solve.

Underfunding at the local level in rural areas remains a serious constraint. Too many grantees are still spending time chasing short-term grants or tending to funder priorities rather than deepening the work that is producing results. And while the Trust has made progress connecting organizations that were previously working in isolation, significant gaps remain. Building coordination across communities, not just within them, is one of the Trust's key priorities going forward.

The Trust for Civic Life's initial five-year strategy was designed with a clear objective: by 2028, it will have invested \$50 million across five hundred communities, built a research base capable of translating local approaches into replicable models, and established a network of Civic Hubs with meaningful coverage across the rural regions that national philanthropy has long underserved. Most important, it will have produced something American philanthropy is in dire need of: a comprehensive, evidence-based roadmap for place-based civic investment.

That roadmap fills a critical gap. For decades, national funders have invested in civic life with a top-down lens through institutions, campaigns, and policy advocacy. The result is a well-funded national infrastructure and a chronically underfunded local one. There is no established framework to help funders identify the right local organizations, understand what kinds of support produce lasting impact, or see how community-level efforts can reinforce each other across regions. This roadmap will serve national and local philanthropy across the country and drive the strategic plan for the Trust beyond 2028.

Early evidence fuels the ambition of building this resource. With the Trust's Civic Hub grantees now engaging more than three hundred thousand rural Americans and reaching over 35 percent of rural counties across the country, it has demonstrated that the pipeline into these communities can be built, the organizations worth funding can be identified, and unrestricted capital directed to the right places produces impact that is both measurable and durable.¹⁹ The opportunity is for national philanthropy to join in expanding this effort to rapidly identify and amplify the infrastructure that works, spreading civic renewal across rural communities and increasing our collective investment in civic life.

What the Trust's two years of grantmaking and research have made clear is that the raw material for the nation's democratic repair – such as local leadership, committed groups, resourcefulness, ideas, and motivation – are all there. The Trust's own work with local leaders and community members has reinforced the original findings of *Our Common Purpose*. Across hundreds of rural towns, counties, and regions, people are rallying to improve quality of life and shared experience on their terms. Their yearning for a different American story is an opening, and communities are ready for the investment and infrastructure to make it real.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ENDNOTES

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