



CENTER FOR INFORMATION & RESEARCH  
ON CIVIC LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT  
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RESEARCH BRIEF

# Expanding Broadband for Equitable Democracy

OCTOBER 2023

## The Problem: Inequities in Broadband Access Threaten to Deepen Inequities in the South

Fast, reliable, and affordable access to the internet is a vital resource for communities. It is critical for accessing information for health, education, and work, and it also enables social connection.

Despite its importance, in 2021 over a quarter of American households (28%) did not have access to fixed broadband (i.e. high-speed internet via cable, DSL, or fiber).<sup>1</sup> Even if some of these households had access to the internet through other means, the gap in access is critical to address, as fixed broadband allows residents to engage on the internet in ways that are not possible with internet at dial-up speeds or internet via cellular data or satellite.<sup>2</sup>

**The gap between those with and without access to fixed broadband is also concerning because it threatens to deepen existing inequities in social inclusion.** Our research finds that the South, as a region,<sup>3</sup> has lower access to broadband. Within the South, we find that broadband is disproportionately out of reach for those who are poor, for communities of color, in rural communities, and for those belonging to one or more of these groups.<sup>4</sup> Therefore communities that may already face social exclusion due to poverty, racism, and rurality are at greatest risk of further marginalization due to a lack of broadband access.

## The Opportunity: Advance Social Inclusion Through Broadband-Powered Civic Participation

Civic participation encompasses actions like voting, volunteering, writing to elected officials, and community organizing that individuals take to learn about and improve conditions in their community. These forms of participation can also advance social inclusion. Because people with lower access to broadband may already face the greatest levels of social exclusion, expanding broadband access with attention to providing support for civic participation in these communities has the potential to enable engagement, increase inclusion, and transform communities.

**The funding for broadband within the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act recognizes the links between broadband and civic participation, and calls on states to attend to this relationship.** There is emerging evidence that expanding access to broadband can bolster civic

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<sup>1</sup> (US Census Bureau 2022)

<sup>2</sup> (Ali 2021)

<sup>3</sup> We used the [divisions used by the U.S. Census](#) to define regions, including the South

<sup>4</sup> ("Less Internet Access Available for Rural Residents in Counties with Persistent Poverty in the U.S. Deep South and Southwest" 2022); (Harrison 2021)

participation—especially if broadband is approached as one of several community strengths that shape civic participation.

Important civic information—including the latest national and local news, information about issues affecting one’s community, and resources about how to vote and engage in other political actions—can be found online. However, this does not necessarily mean that access to broadband will guarantee civic participation. Recent CIRCLE research found that civic information was most strongly linked to civic participation when individuals were also a member of organizations.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that, in order to engage in civic participation, community members also need resources for learning about how to get involved, spaces to discuss and solve problems, and opportunities to connect with other members of their community.

[Our work mapping media ecosystems across communities](#) further demonstrates that **broadband is just one of several strengths in a community that shape civic participation.** We found that voter turnout was highest among communities with a constellation of multiple digital and media-related community strengths that include broadband. A major takeaway from this research is that a community with high levels of broadband but low levels of access to other community assets will usually not have high levels of civic participation.

Attending to the connections between broadband access and civic participation is particularly necessary in places where the deepest inequities exist, like the South. Currently, the communities in the South that are most likely to lack access to broadband are communities that also experience social exclusion, and therefore face barriers to full representation in our democracy. By investing in broadband in ways that capitalize on other community strengths for civic participation, we can build or expand opportunities for the most marginalized members in a community to contribute to a more equitable democracy.

**This brief provides new evidence of the connections between broadband and other community strengths, and makes recommendations for expanding broadband with attention to civic participation.**

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<sup>5</sup>(McGee et al. 2022)

## Major Findings and Recommendations

**Finding:** Broadband is an integral part of civic infrastructure—and civic infrastructure supports civic participation

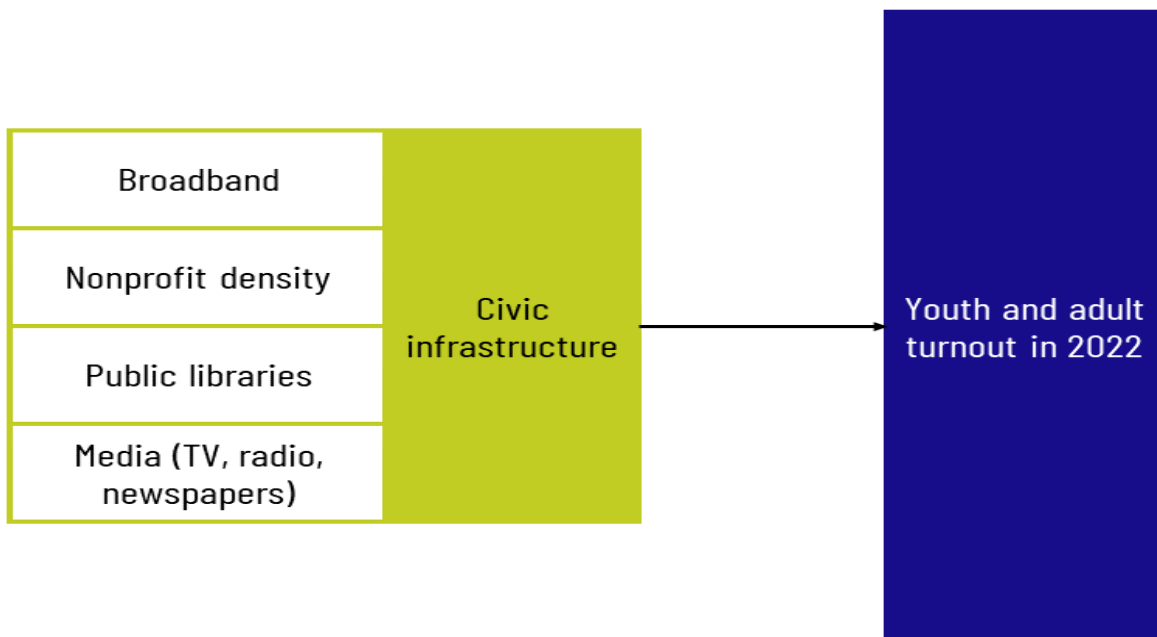


**Recommendation:** To maximize civic participation, connect efforts to expand broadband to existing civic infrastructure

Civic infrastructure describes the strengths in a community that provide pathways for residents to participate, have a say in important decisions, and take action to improve their lives.<sup>6</sup> Our research finds that broadband is an integral part of communities’ civic infrastructure.

We conducted an analysis of communities’ civic infrastructure using county-level data collated from the U.S. Census Bureau and other national datasets. **We found that broadband is an important component of a county’s civic infrastructure**, along with other strengths like nonprofits, public libraries, and the density of media outlets ([see the appendix for further details on the analysis](#)). Additional research has found that a community’s investment in education, health, and workforce development also contribute to a robust civic infrastructure.

Figure 1: Diagram of elements that make up civic infrastructure and impact on civic participation



<sup>6</sup>(University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute 2023)

Our latest analyses further demonstrates that the strength of counties’ civic infrastructures, including broadband, predict voter turnout. Among both youth (ages 18 to 29) and all adults (ages 18+), a stronger civic infrastructure meant a higher percentage of eligible voters in that county cast a ballot in the 2022 midterm election.

Therefore, we recommend that investment in broadband is carried out in connection with other features of a community’s civic infrastructure such as nonprofits, public libraries, and media outlets. **Together, this robust civic infrastructure that includes broadband can form the backbone of thriving civic participation in a community.**

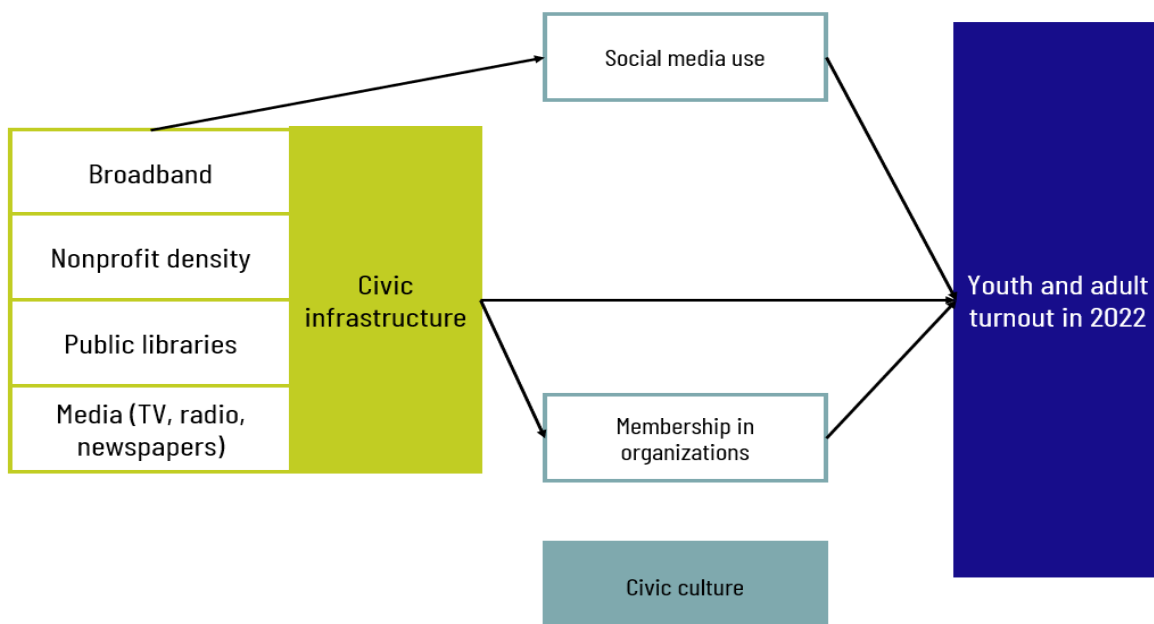
**Finding:** By strengthening civic culture, broadband can contribute to civic participation

**Recommendation:** When expanding broadband, leverage the existing civic culture in communities to bolster participation

Community members create and participate in civic culture: meeting to exchange information, discuss events and news, and talk about how to solve problems. The settings for these activities may be online—like social media networks or streaming platforms—or physical spaces at churches, schools, clubs, and other organizations.

Relationships between broadband and civic culture are important to consider because both online civic culture (social media use) and civic culture through membership in organizations are related to civic participation.

Figure 2: Diagram of pathways to civic participation strengthened by broadband and civic infrastructure



In addition to the direct links between civic participation and broadband's role as part of civic infrastructure, our analyses reveal two additional pathways to participation that arise from increased access to broadband:

**1. Broadband → Social media use → Civic participation**

Not surprisingly, increased access to broadband is directly related to greater use of social media. Although not all uses of social media may be for civic participation, its potential as a tool for creating a participatory and inclusive civic culture likely explains why it is linked to civic participation (here measured as voter turnout). Therefore, investment in broadband can support online civic cultures that create pathways to participation.

**2. Broadband as civic infrastructure → Membership in organizations → Civic participation**

A community's civic infrastructure, which includes broadband, is associated with membership in organizations. That is, the stronger the civic infrastructure is in a community, the more access people have to opportunities to join organizations where they can connect with others. Likely because organizations are important spaces for building and maintaining a civic culture, the level of membership in organizations is linked to voting as a form of civic participation. This is an additional pathway through which broadband can support civic participation.

**Our data shows that broadband has the potential to open new pathways to civic participation via enhancing a community's civic culture.** When expanding access to broadband, we recommend investing in partnering with leaders and organizations in your community that are already building civic culture. Those creating and sustaining civic cultures in communities have knowledge of how people gather, how people learn about and act on issues in the community, and what gaps and threats exist to civic participation. This is important information that can be leveraged to strengthen the pathways between broadband and civic participation.

**Finding:** Each community has unique strengths for civic participation



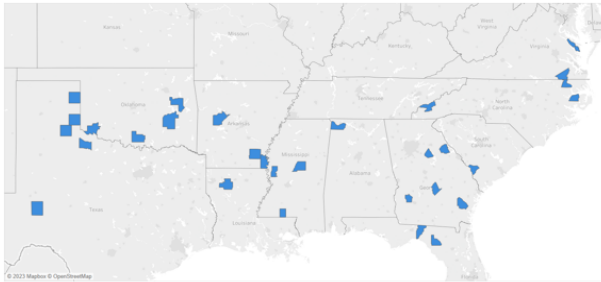
**Recommendation:** Develop approaches to broadband expansion that capitalize on communities' strengths

Communities already have strengths that support civic participation. Identifying and leveraging these assets can help broadband investment be an effective lever to transform communities.

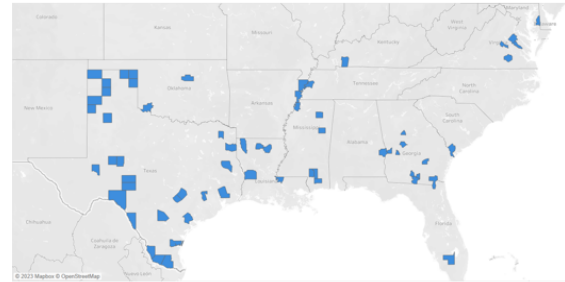
When we examined communities in the South with a high proportion of people of color, we found that counties where broadband access is lowest often have one or more strengths in other areas of civic infrastructure and/or civic culture that may contribute to civic participation. For example, some counties had a high density of, and high investment in, public libraries. Other counties had a high rate of social media use—an indication of strong online civic culture that can be further leveraged by broadband (see maps on the following page).

Figure 3: Maps of Southern counties with low broadband but other strengths in civic infrastructure or culture

Among counties in the South with a high proportion of people of color, these counties lack broadband access but have:



High density of and high investment in public libraries



High social media use

More detailed maps of the above and additional maps will be made available

**To forge a more equitable democracy through broadband expansion, it's important to capitalize on the existing strengths of a community that already support civic participation, while understanding that other areas may be underdeveloped or lacking.** Our analyses show that, while communities have different strengths for supporting civic participation, few communities have multiple strengths in place. This means a **“one size fits all” approach is unsuitable.** We recommend that efforts to expand civic participation through broadband implement community-specific approaches to identify and capitalize on existing strengths without assuming that the context in one community will be similar to another's. A map tool that will allow communities to view their existing strengths for supporting civic participation is forthcoming from CIRCLE.

## About this Research

This research was conducted, and the brief was produced, by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. CIRCLE is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life.

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