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The Six Sources of Youth Civic Engagement Influence in Low Media Ecosystem Communities

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Executive Summary

This study examines how youth civic engagement persists in low media ecosystem communities where formal media infrastructure, digital access, and civic information channels are limited, yet youth voter participation remains higher than expected. Building on previous county-level research on media ecosystems and youth voting, this project shifts attention from broad structural patterns to the lived experiences, relationships, and community-based practices that sustain civic participation among young people. Rather than viewing low media ecosystem communities only through a lens of scarcity or deficit, we highlight the adaptive systems, trusted networks, and local institutions that help young people access information, develop civic motivation, and participate in public life.

The study focuses on three rural Southern counties: Chatham County, North Carolina; Marion County, Georgia; and Appling County, Georgia. Each was selected because it combined limited media ecosystem assets with youth voter turnout above the national average. Across the three sites, the research team partnered with local organizations including The Leadership Triangle, Empower Southwest Georgia, and the Jackson Sumerall Foundation to support recruitment, contextual interpretation, and community-grounded analysis. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, county-level background research, and social media analysis. There were 71 total participants across the three counties, including young adults ages 18 to 29 and community stakeholders.

The findings show that youth civic engagement in low media ecosystem communities is shaped less by formal media density alone and more by a combination of personal, social, and structural influences. To explain this pattern, the study introduces the Six Sources of Youth Civic Engagement Influence in Low Media Ecosystem Communities Model. Adapted from the Six Sources of Influence framework (Patterson et al., 2011),

the model identifies six interconnected sources: Civic Interest, Civic Capacity, Civic Influence, Civic Support, Civic Culture, and Civic Access. Together, they show that young people's civic participation depends on both motivation and ability across personal, social, and structural levels.

Several core findings emerge across the three counties. First, family and community belonging are among the strongest drivers of youth civic participation. Young people often described voting, advocacy, and community involvement as rooted in family expectations, local identity, and lived experiences with social and economic issues. Second, word-of-mouth, church networks, trusted peers, mentors, and family members function as critical information systems. These interpersonal pathways are often invisible in large-scale datasets, yet they are central to how civic information actually moves through these communities. Third, physical and analog communication tools, including local newspapers, flyers, bulletin boards, and signage remain highly effective. In communities where broadband access, diverse news sources, and formal digital infrastructure are limited, printed materials and physical public information points help fill major gaps.

The study also identifies important barriers. Young people face limited job opportunities, time and caregiving constraints, housing pressures, and a lack of visible civic opportunities. Many participants also noted the absence of dedicated youth-centered civic spaces where young people can gather, organize, deliberate, and build leadership capacity. While Facebook serves as the dominant digital platform for local civic information, this reliance also creates vulnerabilities, including misinformation, platform dependence, and uneven access.

Overall, this study demonstrates that youth civic engagement in low media ecosystem communities is sustained through relational infrastructure: family influence, trusted messengers, local organizations, schools, churches, recreation departments, and informal networks. These communities offer lessons for civic educators, policymakers, funders, and local leaders.

Introduction

Youth civic engagement is widely recognized as a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. It reflects how young people participate in civic life, shape their communities, and develop as informed and engaged actors. Research has also consistently shown that access to information plays a role in shaping this engagement. For instance, CIRCLE's 2026 pre-election survey showed news websites and apps were the biggest source of electoral information among all youth, followed by social media and digital platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Additionally, media environments are central to how youth become active participants in local civic processes. A 2023 analysis conducted by CIRCLE of county-level conditions for young people to learn about elections and civic life showed that only 4% of U.S. counties have ecosystems with superb media and civic institutions. That small percentage of counties also had, on average, the highest youth voter turnout in the 2020 and 2022 elections.

To better understand this relationship, CIRCLE published a national study: Media Ecosystems and Youth Voting: Profiles of County-Level Support for Civic Participation. This study introduced a media ecosystems framework that examines how different combinations of community assets shape youth voter participation. Rather than isolating a single factor, the framework analyzes five domains: media density, nonprofit presence, library investment, digital access, and social media use. Through this approach, CIRCLE identified six distinct media ecosystem profiles across U.S. counties and demonstrated that youth civic engagement can emerge through multiple configurations of these assets.

Those findings complicated dominant assumptions about the role of media. While communities with strong digital infrastructure and social media use often show high levels of youth engagement, other communities achieve similar outcomes through different means.

In particular, counties with strong nonprofit networks or well-supported civic institutions also demonstrate high civic participation, even when digital access is limited. At the same time, communities categorized as having a Weak Media Ecosystem or being Digitally Disconnected tend to have lower youth voter turnout and are more likely to reflect broader structural inequities, including racial and economic disparities.

However, with a notable disparity gap within digitally disconnected and low media ecosystem communities, the data also presented some counties that were outliers where youth civic engagement remains high. While that previous study identifies these patterns at the county level, it does not fully explain how or why these communities succeed with youth voting above the national average. It leaves open key questions about the lived experiences of young people in these contexts. That study was limited by its reliance on national data, which cannot fully account for the local practices that sustain engagement, and the informal or community-based systems that compensate for limited media access in these communities.

This study seeks to address that gap by shifting from macro-level patterns to a deeper examination of youth experiences within communities with a low media ecosystem, yet high youth civic participation. It explores the services, practices, and resources that shape youth civic engagement in low media ecosystem communities. Rather than framing these communities through deficit, this work centers their strengths, adaptations, and forms of resilience. Specifically, this study examines what motivates young people to engage, what knowledge and resources they draw upon, and how community-based institutions and relationships support civic life in the absence of robust media infrastructure.

To guide this analysis, this study introduces the Six Sources of Youth Civic Engagement Influence in Low Media Ecosystem Communities Model.

Adapted from the Six Sources of Influence framework (Patterson et al., 2011), the model expands the original by situating motivation and ability within the specific social, cultural, and structural conditions of low media ecosystem communities. It moves beyond a general behavior change framework to center youth civic engagement as a context-dependent process shaped by access, relationships, and community-based assets. By integrating insights from this study with prior research on media ecosystems and civic education, the model highlights how participation is produced through intersecting personal, social, and structural influences rather than a single condition. This expansion contributes to the field of civic education by offering a more nuanced framework for understanding how engagement develops in marginalized contexts and by identifying leverage points for educators, institutions, and policymakers to better support youth civic learning and participation.

Background

The three counties identified for the study were outliers in prior findings from ***Media Ecosystems and Youth Voting: Profiles of County-Level Support for Civic Participation***. These counties were classified as low media ecosystem communities yet demonstrated higher than expected youth voter turnout. We selected Chatham County, Marion County, and Appling County as focal cases. While each county is situated in the South, they reflect a different regional, demographic, and economic context while sharing similar constraints in terms of media infrastructure. Two of the three counties are in Georgia, as a large percentage of the outliers from the previous study were Georgia counties. Together, these counties allow for cross-case comparison to show key similar themes in the contributing factors supporting youth civic participation.

To ensure a deeper understanding of each community, we partnered with local organizations that hold long-standing relationships and knowledge of the area. These partners were The Leadership Triangle in Chatham County, Empower Southwest Georgia in Marion County, and Jackson Sumerall Foundation in Appling County. Partnerships were critical to the study design as they provided historical context, supported participant recruitment, and grounded the research in community-informed perspectives. This approach allowed us to better understand how local history, institutions, and relationships shaped youth civic life in these communities.

Summary of County Characteristics

County	State	Population	2022 Youth Voter Turnout	Economy	K-12 Schools	Public Libraries
Chatham	NC	~83K-84K	43%	Mixed, regional economy	20+	3
Marion	GA	~7.5K	33%	Rural, agriculture, public sector	3	1
Appling	GA	~18K-19K	31%	Agriculture, manufacturing, logistics	6	1

Catham County, NC

Chatham County, located in central North Carolina, is the largest of the three counties explored in this study. Its location is within commuting distance of the Research Triangle, with universities like UNC Chapel Hill and North Carolina State. The county has a population of approximately 83,000 to 84,000 residents. Its economy reflects a mix of local industries with employment in healthcare, education, retail, and small business. Many residents commute to nearby urban centers for work. The county is demographically diverse. Approximately 60% of residents identify as white, 20% Black, 12% Hispanic or Latino, and 8% Asian. This diversity shapes the social and civic landscape, particularly in how communities engage with local issues and institutions. Chatham County has over 20 public schools and three library branches. These institutions serve as key access points for information and community engagement. Youth voter turnout in the county was 43% in the 2022 midterm election, which was almost double the ***national turnout rate of 23%,*** and high given its classification within a lower media ecosystem profile.

Marion County, GA

Marion County was the smallest county out of the three explored in the study. It is situated in southwest Georgia with a population of approximately 7,500 residents. The local economy is centered on agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and public sector employment. Economic opportunities are limited, and many residents rely on local institutions for services and support. The county has approximately 55% white residents, 34% Black residents and 7% Hispanic or Latino residents. Social networks and community relationships play a central role in daily life. Marion County has three public schools and one library branch. Access to media and digital infrastructure is limited, which contributes to its classification as a low media ecosystem community. Despite these constraints, youth voter turnout in 2022 was 33%.

Appling County, GA

Appling County is located in southeast Georgia and has a population that ranges between approximately 8,400 and 19,000 residents. The economy is primarily rooted in agriculture and manufacturing. These industries shape both employment patterns and community structure. The county's population is approximately 60% white, 30% Black, and 10% Hispanic or Latino. As in Marion County, social and familial networks are central to community life. Appling County operates six public schools and one library branch. Access to broadband and local media remains limited. Youth voter turnout in the county was 31% percent in 2022.

Methodology

This study uses a collective case study design to examine youth civic engagement across multiple rural communities. It focuses on how engagement is sustained in places with limited media infrastructure. The study is bounded by three key conditions:

1) Each community has youth voter participation rates above the national average.
2) Each community is also classified within a low media ecosystem profile based on prior findings.
3) Each community is located in the South.

The study is grounded in a community-based participatory approach. We partnered with local organizations in each county to guide the research process. These partners supported recruitment and provided local context on the history and current landscape of their communities. This approach ensured that the research reflects the lived experiences of each community and produces findings that are useful to practitioners.

The research study also draws on a Community Storytelling Networks framework which centers how information, relationships, and shared narratives move within communities. It also integrates Ecological Systems Theory, which examines how individual behavior is shaped by layered environments such as family, institutions, and broader social systems. Through these two lenses, the study adapts the Sources of Influence Model to examine how motivation and ability shape civic participation across personal, social, and structural levels in the communities explored.

Participants

The participant pool included youth ages 18 to 29 and community leaders who support civic life in each of the three counties. Participants were recruited through local community partners who used their networks to identify individuals that met the study criteria. Recruitment included email outreach, social media posts, and flyers distributed in community spaces such as libraries and community centers. Data collection took place between March and November 2025. There was a total of 71 participants across all three counties.

- **Appling County: 27 participants**
- **Chatham County: 24 participants**
- **Marion County: 20 participants.**

Data Collection and Analysis

The study used multiple data sources to support triangulation. These sources included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, county-level background data, and social media data scraping. Interviews and focus groups allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives on civic engagement. Background data provided context on each county's demographic and structural conditions. Social media data offered descriptive insight into the type of information that circulates within each community.

Data analysis used a hybrid thematic coding approach. This method combined deductive coding, guided by the study's frameworks, with inductive coding, grounded in participant responses. Code referencing was used during analysis to highlight coding frequency, or the number of times a specific code appeared within a category. These frequencies helped identify patterns in the data and provided a consistent way to compare codes across cases and categories. The approach allowed us to identify patterns across cases while also capturing themes that emerged directly from the data. Through this process, we examined how motivation, access, relationships, and community practices shape youth civic engagement in low media ecosystem communities.

The Six Sources of Youth Civic Engagement Influence in Low Civic Media Ecosystem Communities

The Six Sources of Influence Model (Patterson et al., 2011) is a behavioral change framework that examines how personal, social, and structural sources of motivation and ability shape human behavior. This study adapts that model to examine how motivation and ability influence youth civic participation in communities with limited media infrastructure. Motivation refers to the internal and external factors that inspire youth to engage, while ability refers to the knowledge, skills, access, and opportunities that make engagement possible. The adapted model includes six interconnected frames across three levels: personal, social, and structural. These include Civic Interest and Civic Capacity at the personal level, Civic Influence and Civic Support at the social level, and Civic Culture and Civic Access at the structural level. Together, these frames offer a concrete understanding of why youth engage and how they are able to do so within low media ecosystem communities.

Frame 1: Civic Interest

Frame 2: Civic Capacity

Frame 3: Civic Influence

Frame 4: Civic Support

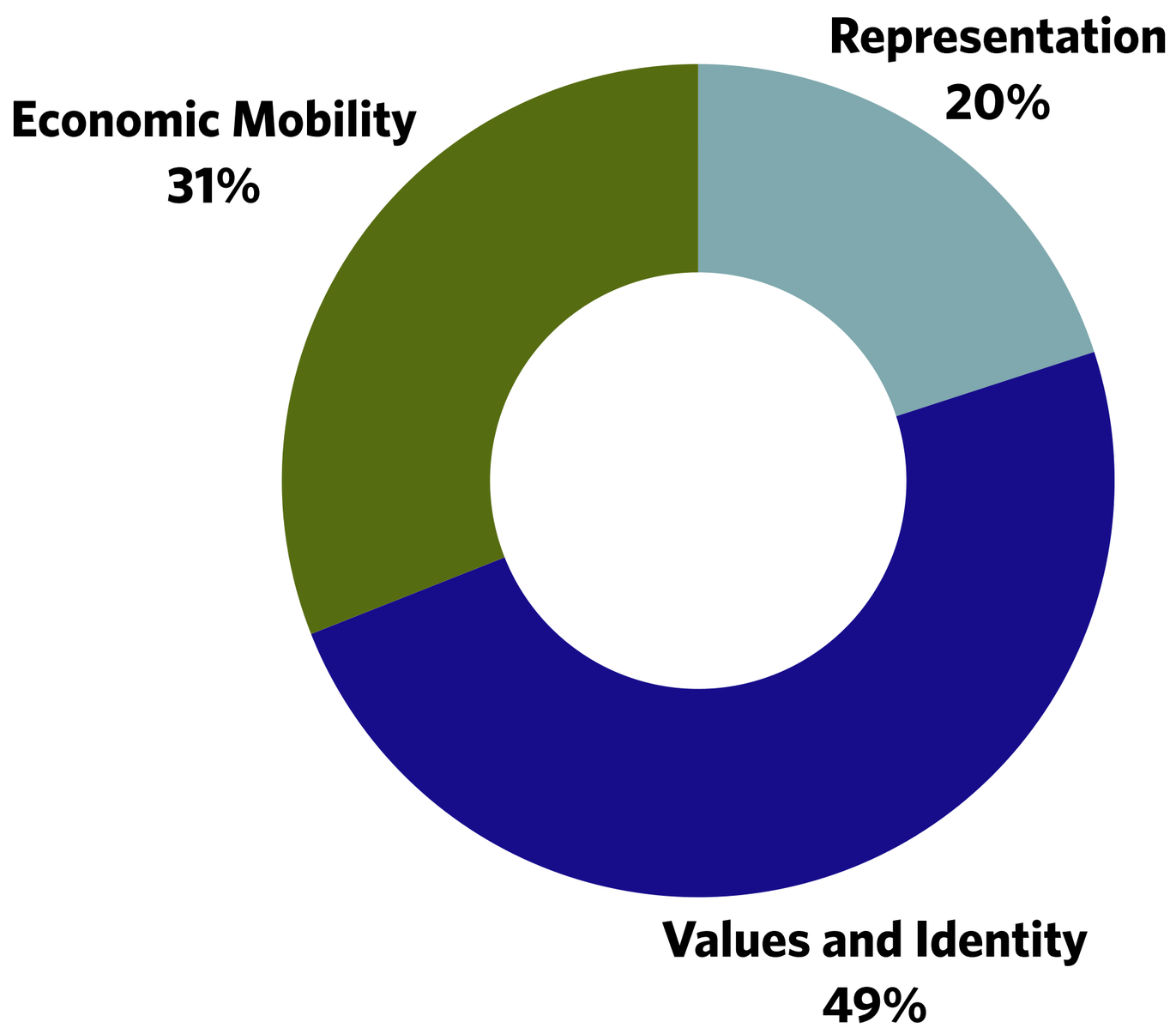
Frame 5: Civic Culture

Frame 6: Civic Access

Frame 1: Civic Interest (Personal Motivation)

The first frame examines Civic Interest, or the personal motivations that inspire young people to engage in civic life. Civic interest reflects how youth perceive civic participation as meaningful and relevant. It considers how youth participation is connected to their identities, values, and their lived experiences.

CHART 1: Civic Interest



Personal motivation emerged as a significant driver of engagement, accounting for 71 coded references. The most common source of civic interest was values and identity (49%), followed by the desire for economic mobility (31%). Civic interest was deeply connected to young people believing they have a civic responsibility to their communities through enforced values.

For instance, in Chatham County, one participant reflected on their civic outlook, explaining,

"I've always been encouraged to vote... it's our civic duty".

Important differences emerged across counties. Chatham County accounted for more than half of civic interest codes (58%), particularly within the categories of representation and values and identity. As the most rapidly growing and demographically diverse county in the study, Chatham participants frequently discussed the importance of ensuring that community decisions reflected the needs and perspectives of different populations. In contrast, Appling County demonstrated a different pattern of motivation. While representation was discussed less frequently, participants overwhelmingly connected civic engagement to the desire for economic mobility and values-based commitments, each accounting for nearly half of the county's civic interest references.

With all three counties facing economic challenges and limited local opportunities, youth often framed participation through the lens of improving future prospects for themselves. Civic engagement was frequently tied to aspirations for community growth, workforce development, and creating opportunities that would allow young people to remain in or return to the community. These findings suggest that in low media ecosystem communities where economic constraints are highly visible, civic participation is highly motivated by practical concerns related to their quality of life and economic sustainability. According to a 2026 report from CIRCLE, socioeconomic factors have a large influence on young people's sense of political efficacy and their belief in democracy. Rather than viewing civic engagement as separate from personal advancement, youth often understood community improvement and economic opportunity as deeply interconnected.

While Marion County displayed the lowest number of civic interest references overall, participants expressed a desire to contribute to their communities and to play visible leadership roles despite having fewer formal opportunities for engagement.

One participant shared:

"I want to be the voice for our community one day or do something with public speaking."

Participants often described balancing civic participation with immediate responsibilities related to work, caregiving, and financial stability. While they often expressed strong concern for community issues, motivation for participation was limited when civic engagement was perceived as secondary to meeting immediate personal needs.

The findings also illuminate several constraints that shape civic interest across low media ecosystem communities. Participants referenced feelings of political invisibility, skepticism about whether their voices mattered, and historical patterns of exclusion from decision-making processes. Youth described situations in which community leaders sought their input but failed to act on their recommendations, reinforcing perceptions that participation would not lead to meaningful change and dampening motivation.

Consistent with previous CIRCLE research, these findings highlight how the values and attitudes of Gen Z directly influence their engagement with democracy. It highlights that youth with a "dismissive detachment" from democracy have very little confidence that the political system today can address the issues facing the country or have any influence on the current lived experiences of young people. Fortunately, in all three communities,

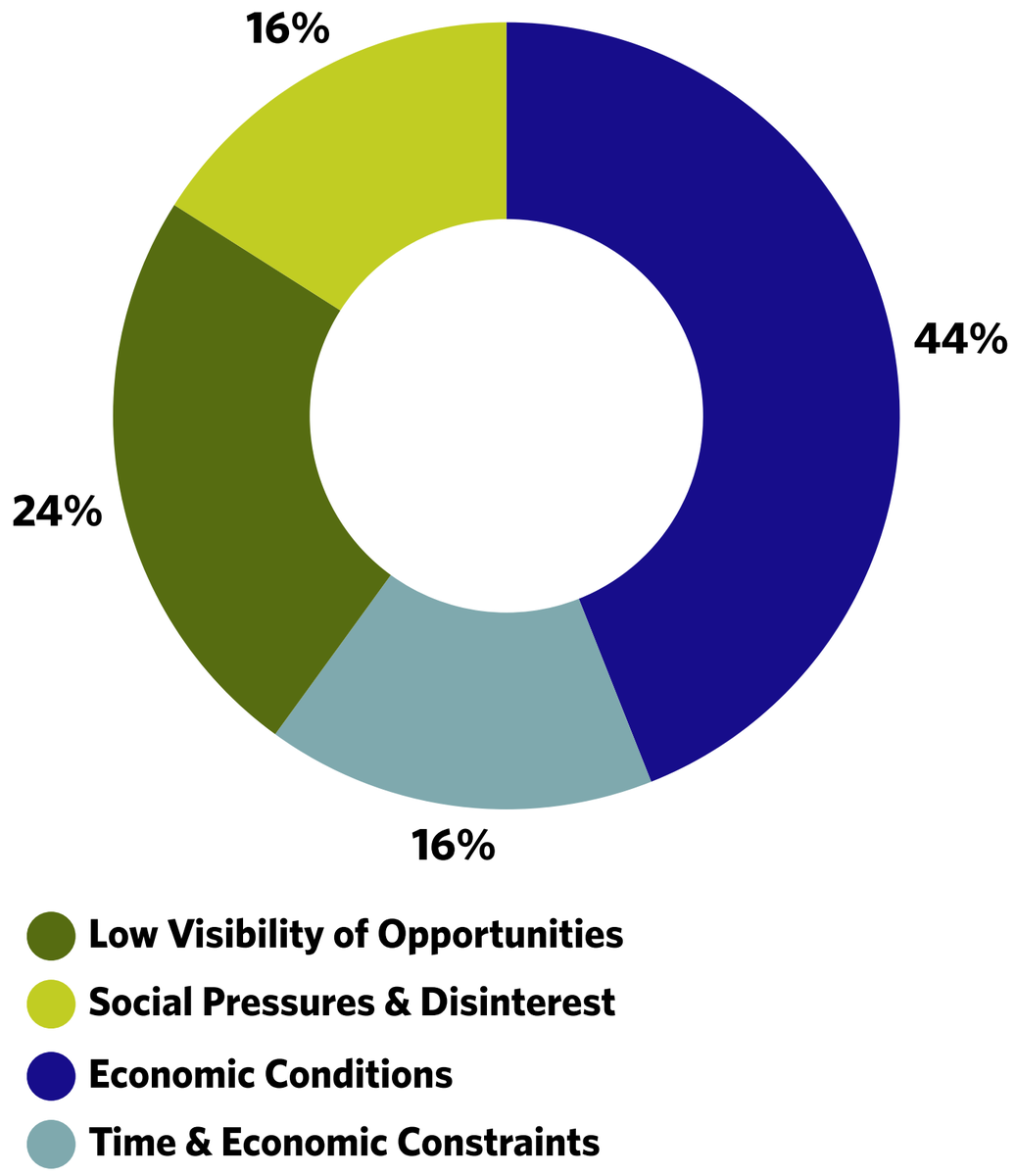
the majority of youth participants described civic engagement as an extension of their deeply held values and a desire to improve current conditions. The findings suggest that motivation is strengthened when young people see tangible evidence that their voices influence outcomes.

Frame 2: Civic Capacity (Personal Ability)

The second frame examines Civic Capacity, or the personal abilities and resources that enable young people to translate civic interest into civic action. While the Civic Interest frame focuses on why youth want to engage, Civic Capacity explores whether they possess the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to participate effectively. This frame considers how civic literacy, prior experiences, and awareness of opportunities support participation, while also examining the personal barriers that prevent engagement despite interest or motivation.

Across the three counties, 146 coded references were identified within this frame, making Civic Capacity one of the most prominent influences on youth engagement. The most frequently occurring category was economic conditions (44%), followed by low visibility of opportunities (24%), social pressures and disinterest (16%), and time and economic constraints (16%).

CHART 2: Civic Capacity



These findings suggest that civic participation in low media ecosystem communities is shaped not only by motivation, but also by whether young people have the practical capacity and resources needed to engage.

Consistently, participants from all three counties demonstrated a foundational understanding of civic issues and institutions. Youth were generally aware of local concerns affecting their communities and possessed varying levels of civic knowledge acquired through schools, community organizations, family networks, and lived experiences.

Economic conditions emerged as the most significant factor influencing civic capacity across all three counties, accounting for nearly half of all coded references (44%). While participants expressed interest in civic issues, many described how economic realities affected their ability to participate consistently. These findings align with previous CIRCLE research demonstrating that economic disparity often constrains civic engagement. Youth in all three communities described balancing civic interests alongside responsibilities related to employment, caregiving, education, and family obligations. As a result, participation was often shaped by what was realistically accessible within the constraints of daily life rather than solely by interest or commitment.

Additionally, in Appling County, low visibility of opportunities emerged as the most prominent barrier. Participants frequently described a lack of awareness regarding civic programs and leadership opportunities. In this context, civic disengagement often reflected information scarcity rather than a lack of interest. Youth expressed wanting to contribute to their communities but struggling to identify where opportunities existed or how to become involved. These findings reflect a key challenge within low media ecosystem communities: when civic opportunities are not consistently promoted through local media, schools, or organizations, youth may have limited exposure to participation pathways despite expressing strong community attachment and concern.

Marion County presented perhaps the clearest example of how economic conditions and opportunity access intersect to shape civic capacity. Participants repeatedly described the limitations created by a highly constrained local economy. One youth participant explained:

> ***"Sometimes, to get a job, you got to go out of town. You got to go out of town for everything."***

Similarly, a community leader from Marion County stated:

> ***"We know that, in our community, that age group [youth] don't have employment."***

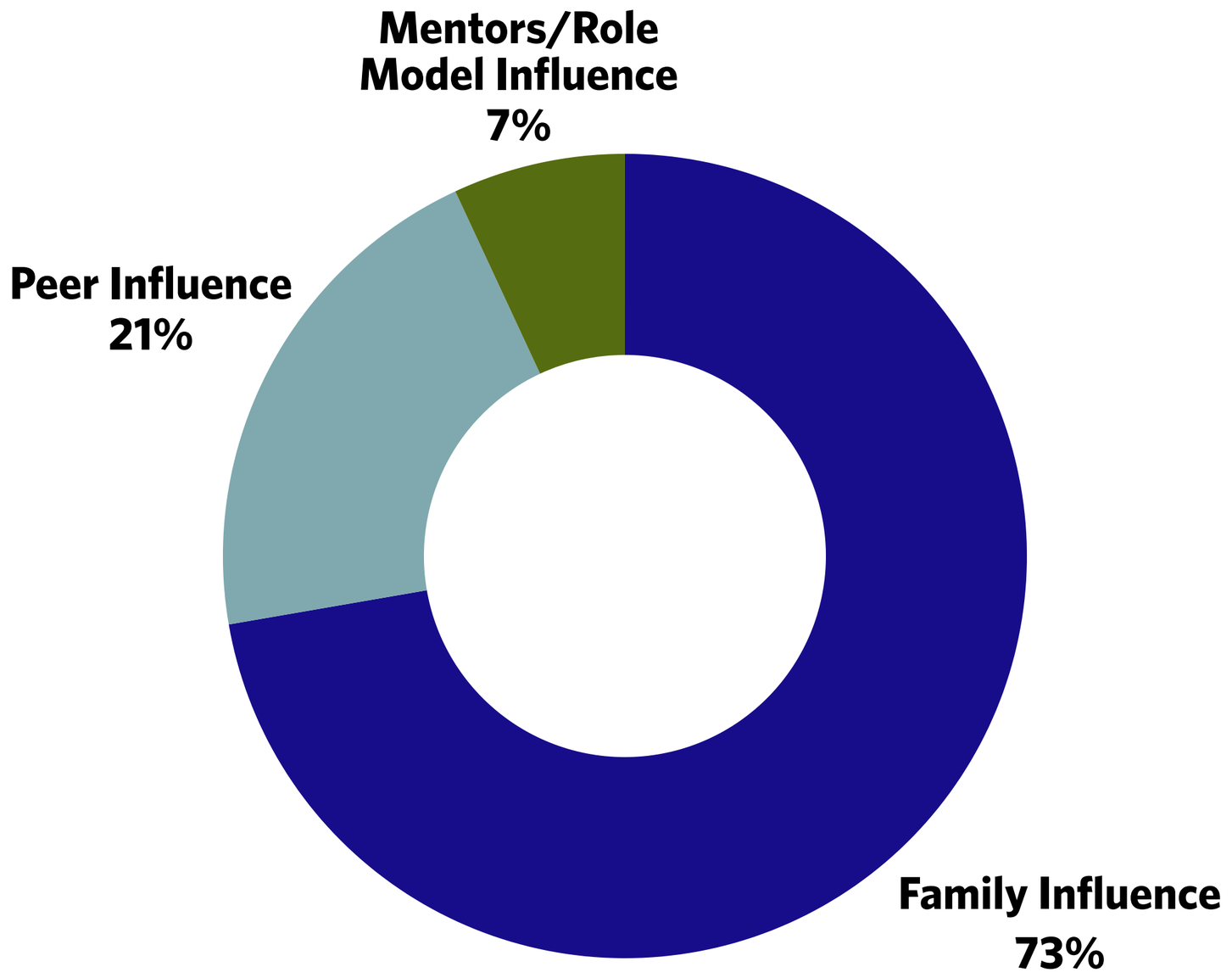
When young people must leave their communities for work or education, fewer opportunities exist to build local civic networks and sustained community engagement. Marion County also recorded relatively high frequencies for both "low visibility of opportunities" and "social pressures and disinterest," suggesting that youth may experience a compounded effect in which civic opportunities are both scarce and difficult to access. These findings support existing scholarship demonstrating that participation should not be interpreted solely as a measure of civic commitment; rather, engagement is often contingent upon whether young people possess the time, resources, and logistical support necessary to participate.

Frame 3: Civic Influence (Social Motivation)

The third frame examines Civic Influence, or the social forces and people that motivate youth to engage in civic life. While the previous frames focused on individual interest and capacity, this frame explores how civic participation is shaped by relationships and social environments. Civic influence considers the ways family members, peers, mentors, and community leaders model civic behaviors, communicate civic values, and encourage youth participation.

A total of 91 coded references were identified within this frame. Family influence emerged as the dominant source of civic motivation (73%). These findings suggest that youth civic engagement in low media ecosystem communities is largely a socially learned behavior, rooted in interpersonal relationships and highly influenced by family members.

CHART 3: Civic Influence



Participants frequently described parents, grandparents, and extended family members as the individuals who first introduced them to community service, voting, and advocacy related activities. Family influence often extended beyond explicit conversations about politics or government and instead manifested through everyday acts of community care and volunteerism. The importance of family influence was particularly evident in Chatham County, which accounted for nearly half of all Civic Influence references (50%). Participants frequently connected their civic motivations to family histories and experiences.

One Chatham County youth participant explained:

"I have parents that are migrants, and so a lot of it was just motivation for them."

In Chatham County, where demographic growth and increasing diversity have transformed the local community, many youth described feeling motivated to engage because of their families' experiences navigating social and economic systems.

Although Marion County generated the fewest Civic Influence references overall (13%), the findings reveal the importance of visible community leadership and service-oriented role modeling. One participant described how their mother worked alongside local leadership to support community members in need, stating:

"My mom... her and the mayor... they give out food every first of the month to families that need it."

This example illustrates how youth often learn civic engagement by witnessing community care and collective action rather than through formal political participation. In Marion County, civic influence frequently emerged through direct observation of individuals addressing community needs, which reinforced the idea that civic engagement is not limited to electoral politics but also includes acts of service and mutual aid.

While family influence dominated across all three counties, peer influence also emerged as a meaningful source of civic motivation. Peers often shaped perceptions of what forms of participation were socially valued or acceptable. Youth shared that they were more likely to engage civically when they observed trusted adults and peers participating in civic life and discussing community issues within the home. This aligns with a 2025 CIRCLE report that highlighted the institutions trusted most by young people are their peers and neighbors, with 74% reporting having "some" or "a great deal" of trust.

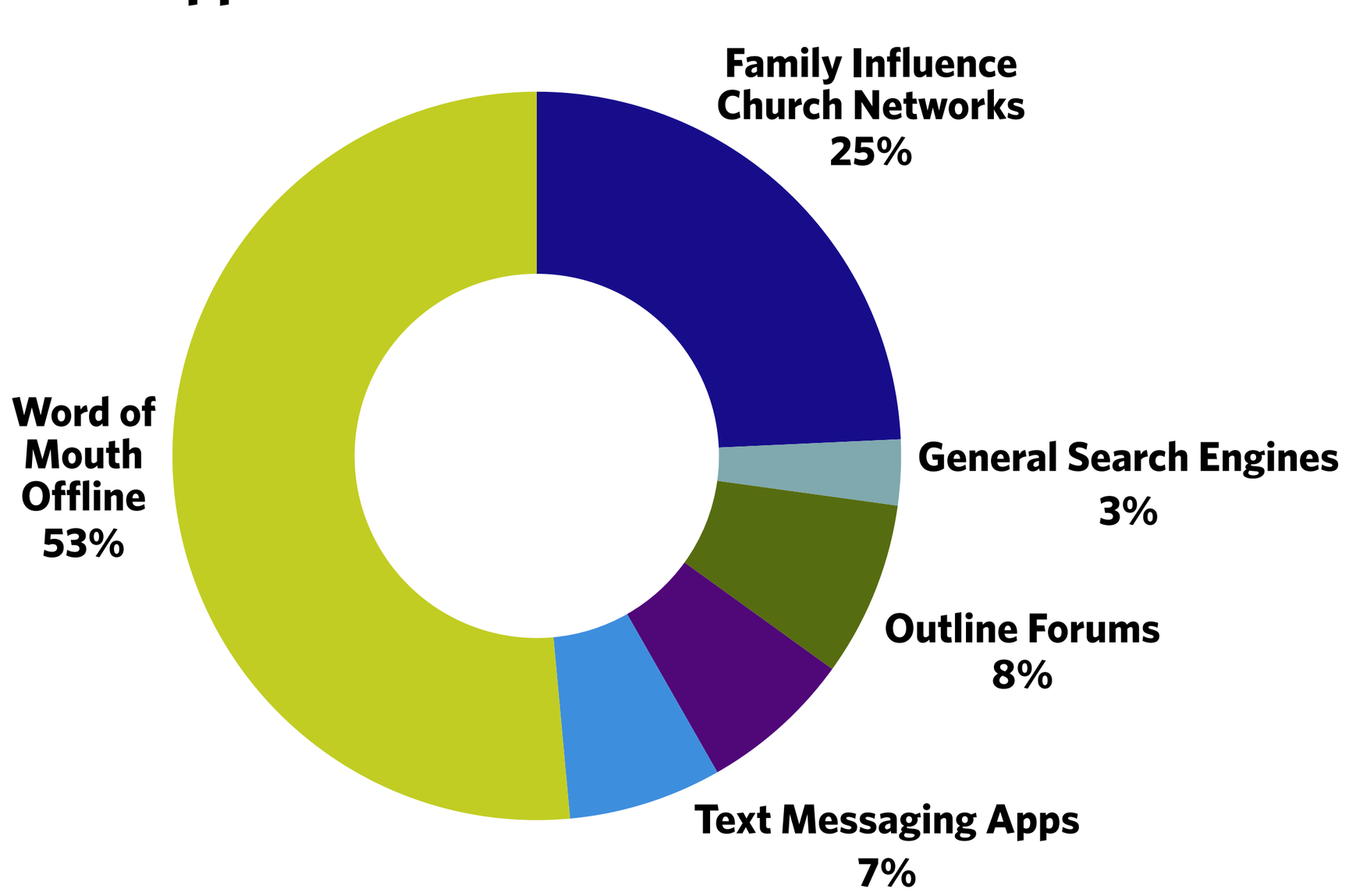
However, peer influence functioned differently across communities. In Marion County, peer influence represented half of all Civic Influence references, suggesting that in communities with fewer formal civic opportunities, friendship networks may serve as important channels for information sharing and participation. At the same time, participants described social pressures that could discourage engagement when civic participation was perceived as unpopular or disconnected from the interests of their peer groups.

The findings also reveal several social constraints that limit civic influence. Across all three counties, youth described experiences of feeling excluded from decision-making processes, ignored by community leaders, or disconnected from institutions that claimed to serve them. Participants frequently referenced generational differences in communication styles and priorities, which sometimes created barriers to meaningful youth involvement.

Frame 4: Civic Support (Social Ability)

Civic Support considers the people and informal networks that help youth access, interpret, and share civic information. While the Civic Influence frame focused on who motivates youth to participate, Civic Support explores the social resources that make participation possible by helping youth navigate information environments and connect to civic opportunities. This frame is particularly important within low media ecosystem communities where formal civic information channels may be limited or inconsistent. In these contexts, informal social networks often serve as critical mechanisms through which information is circulated and unpacked.

CHART 4: Civic Support



Word-of-mouth communication emerged as the dominant source of civic support across all three counties, accounting for more than half of all coded references.

Participants frequently described learning about local events, community concerns, and civic opportunities through everyday conversations. One youth participant from Chatham County explained:

"I mostly just talk with friends and other people within the community, not so much getting it (civic information) from a source."

This statement reflects a broader pattern across the data in which civic information was primarily highlighted as being accessed through social interactions rather than through formal news channels, unless prompted to share specific sources. Similarly, an Appling County participant described how information often reached them through interpersonal sharing, stating:

"If they just hear it (local news), then they'll tell me, or... just text it to me."

While all three counties relied heavily on interpersonal networks, the structure of those networks differed according to local context. Appling County accounted for the largest proportion of Civic Support references (42.6%) and demonstrated the strongest reliance on both word-of-mouth communication and church-based networks. In this rural community, churches appeared to function as central civic information hubs that connected residents to local events and community concerns.

The prominence of church networks in the data reflects longstanding research on rural civic life, and a 2026 report by CIRCLE which identifies faith-based organizations as important sites for political homes among youth. In the absence of extensive local media infrastructure, churches often served as trusted institutions that connected individuals across social and generational lines.

There was a similar pattern in Marion County, where church networks represented one-third of all Civic Support references. Like Appling, Marion participants frequently described receiving information through interpersonal relationships embedded within tightly connected community networks. However, Marion also demonstrated relatively high reliance on text messaging and informal communication channels. These findings may suggest that in highly rural communities where civic information sources may be scarce, communication often occurs through a combination of longstanding social relationships and direct digital communication between trusted individuals. While these networks can effectively disseminate information, they may also limit exposure to diverse perspectives and broader civic opportunities when information remains concentrated within existing social circles.

Chatham County presented a somewhat different civic support landscape. Although word-of-mouth communication remained the dominant source of support, participants also reported higher use of online forums and digital spaces than those in the more rural counties. As a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse community, Chatham offers a broader civic information environment than Appling or Marion. Youth described accessing information through community groups, online discussions, and social networks in addition to interpersonal conversations. However, even within a county with greater digital access and civic infrastructure, trusted interpersonal relationships remained the primary mechanism through which civic information gained credibility and relevance.

The findings also reveal important constraints affecting civic support systems. Across counties, participants described social divisions, economic inequalities, and varying levels of distrust that influenced access to information networks. In some cases, information circulated unevenly across communities, resulting in gaps in awareness and participation opportunities.

Participants also referenced racial, geographic, and socioeconomic divides that shaped who had access to influential networks and community resources. These findings reflect broader concerns identified in CIRCLE's work on civic opportunity gaps, which suggests that access to civic information is often mediated by social capital and community connections.

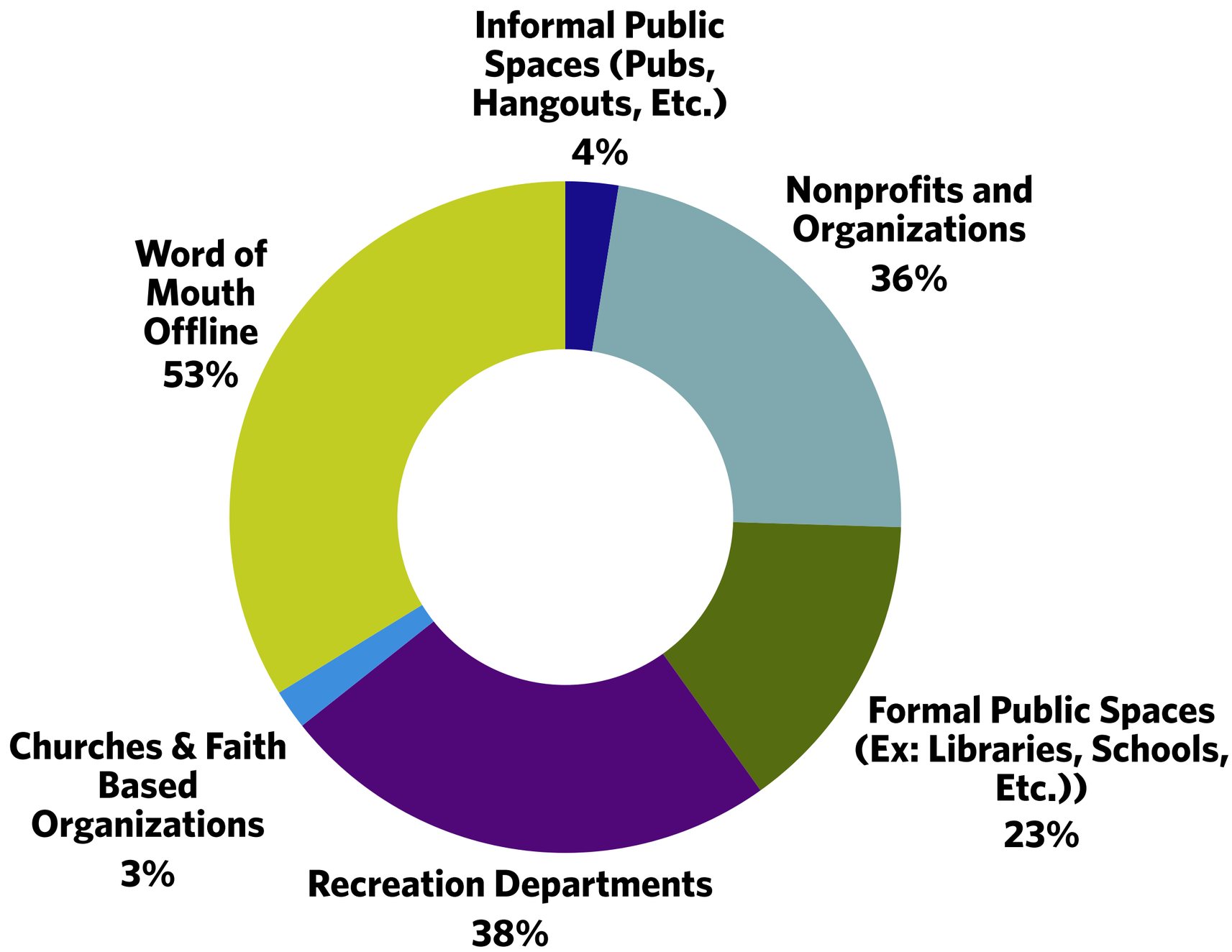
Frame 5: Civic Culture (Structural Motivation)

The final two frames of the model, Frames 5 and 6, look at civic engagement on an infrastructural level, focusing on the broader community institutions that shape youth participation. Frame 5 examines Civic Culture and specifically explores the institutional structures at the community and county level that motivate or deter young people from participating in civic life. Unlike Frames 3 and 4, which focus on the influence of people and close social networks, this frame focuses just on the institutions and platforms within a community

Separating social influence from structural influence is important because, particularly in rural communities, young people may be influenced more by specific people and relationships than by an institution or organization itself. This distinction captures the role of trusted individuals and social networks in shaping youth civic engagement, an influence that can easily be overlooked when relying on big data that primarily identifies organizations, institutions, and formal structures.

With 349 coded references identified within this frame, Civic Culture was the most prominent source of influence on civic participation identified in the study. The most frequently referenced community assets were recreation departments (38%) and nonprofits and community organizations (36%), followed by formal public spaces such as schools and libraries (23%).

CHART 5: Civic Culture



Across all three counties, recreation departments, schools, libraries, and nonprofit organizations served as the primary civic infrastructure supporting youth engagement. Participants consistently described these institutions as places where they encountered leadership opportunities, volunteer activities, mentorship, community events, and civic learning experiences. Rather than civic engagement occurring through formal political channels alone, youth often experienced civic participation through sports leagues, youth programs, community service projects, educational initiatives, and cultural events.

One of the most notable findings in the data is the consistency across counties despite their differing demographic and economic contexts. Appling County (34%), Chatham County (34%), and Marion County (32%) all generated relatively similar levels of Civic Culture references, which suggests that community institutions play a consistent and central

role in supporting youth engagement regardless of local conditions. This pattern indicates that even within low media ecosystem communities, young people are able to identify places and organizations that foster civic participation. However, the specific ways these institutions function varied according to each community's unique context and available resources.

One of the most notable findings in the data is the consistency across counties despite their differing demographic and economic contexts. Appling County (34%), Chatham County (34%), and Marion County (32%) all generated relatively similar levels of Civic Culture references, which suggests that community institutions play a consistent and central role in supporting youth engagement regardless of local conditions. This pattern indicates that even within low media ecosystem communities, young people are able to identify places and organizations that foster civic participation. However, the specific ways these institutions function varied according to each community's unique context and available resources.

In Appling County, recreation departments emerged as the most frequently referenced civic spaces. Youth described community centers and recreational programs as important venues for connection and engagement. In a rural community with limited civic media infrastructure, recreation-based programs often served as informal civic hubs where young people built relationships, learned about local issues, and participated in community activities. While these spaces were beneficial to youth, participants also described limitations in the availability of informal public spaces specifically designed for civic dialogue and youth organizing. One youth participant explained:

> ***"I don't think there's a place for it (civic organizing) ... there's not like one we can actually go... to have that conversation."***

This observation highlights an important distinction between general community participation and intentional civic engagement. While community spaces existed, participants suggested that opportunities for youth-led civic discussion and organizing remained limited. In Chatham, NC, young people used local pubs and bars to host events, gather, and engage in discourse to fill this void. Participants in Marion and Appling counties also described barriers that limited their ability to gather in public spaces. One youth participant from Marion stated:

"Anything that we try to organize... they shut it down."

This statement highlights a need to further explore youth agency and institutional responsiveness in communities. While organizations and programs existed, participants sometimes perceived local institutions as resistant to youth-led initiatives or hesitant to share decision-making power. Youth consistently emphasized the importance of having opportunities to lead, organize, and contribute to decision-making processes. Findings suggest that youth civic engagement in low media ecosystem communities is heavily shaped by the availability and accessibility of formal community institutions that create opportunities for leadership participation and social connection.

Interestingly, this frame, churches and faith-based organizations scored the lowest as an institution compared to church networks in frame 4 with Civic Support. This is a great example of the need to differentiate between social influence versus structural influence among youth. While relationships with trusted people within organizations may appear to represent institutional influence, conversations with youth revealed an important distinction: their connection was often to the individual, not the institution itself. If those trusted individuals were removed from those spaces, youth indicated that their engagement with an institution could change.

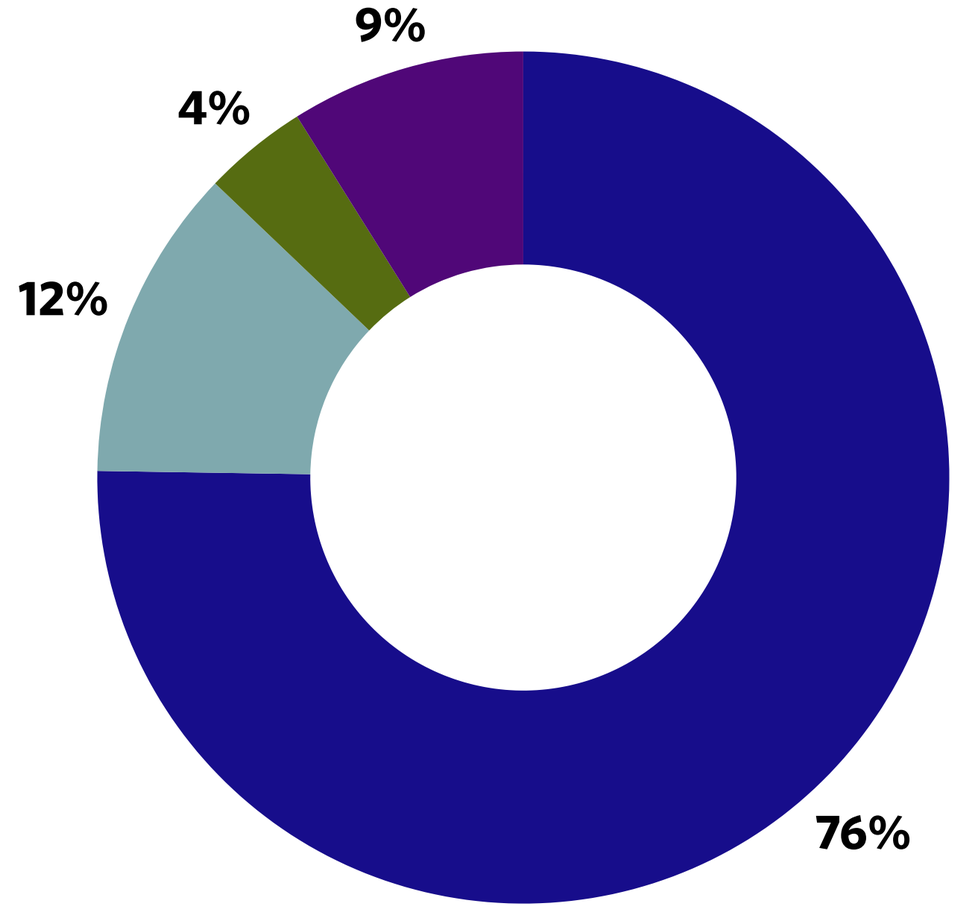
For youth in rural communities, an institution may become trusted because of the relationships they have with specific people within it. At the same time, institutional policies and practices can either support those trusted relationships or make them difficult to build. This means social and institutional influences work together, but separating them analytically helps identify whether youth engagement is being sustained by the institution itself or by the trusted people operating within it.

Frame 6: Civic Access (Structural Ability)

The sixth and final frame examines Civic Access, or the extent to which young people have access to the infrastructure for information, opportunities, and resources needed to participate in civic life. While previous frames explored motivation, capacity, and social support, Civic Access focuses on the "formal" information infrastructure and platforms that connect youth to civic opportunities. Across all three counties, youth relied on a combination of formal information pathways and social media platforms to learn about local issues, events, and opportunities.

Local news outlets emerged as the dominant formal source of civic information, accounting for 76% of all references within formal information pathways (Table 6A in the appendix). While this may appear contradictory within communities characterized as low media ecosystems, a low media ecosystem does not mean that local media outlets are entirely absent. Rather, these communities may have fewer formal sources of local information, making the outlets that do exist particularly important. With fewer sources available, local newspapers and news outlets can play an even greater role in how residents access information about their communities.

CHART 6A: Civic Access - Formal Information Pathways



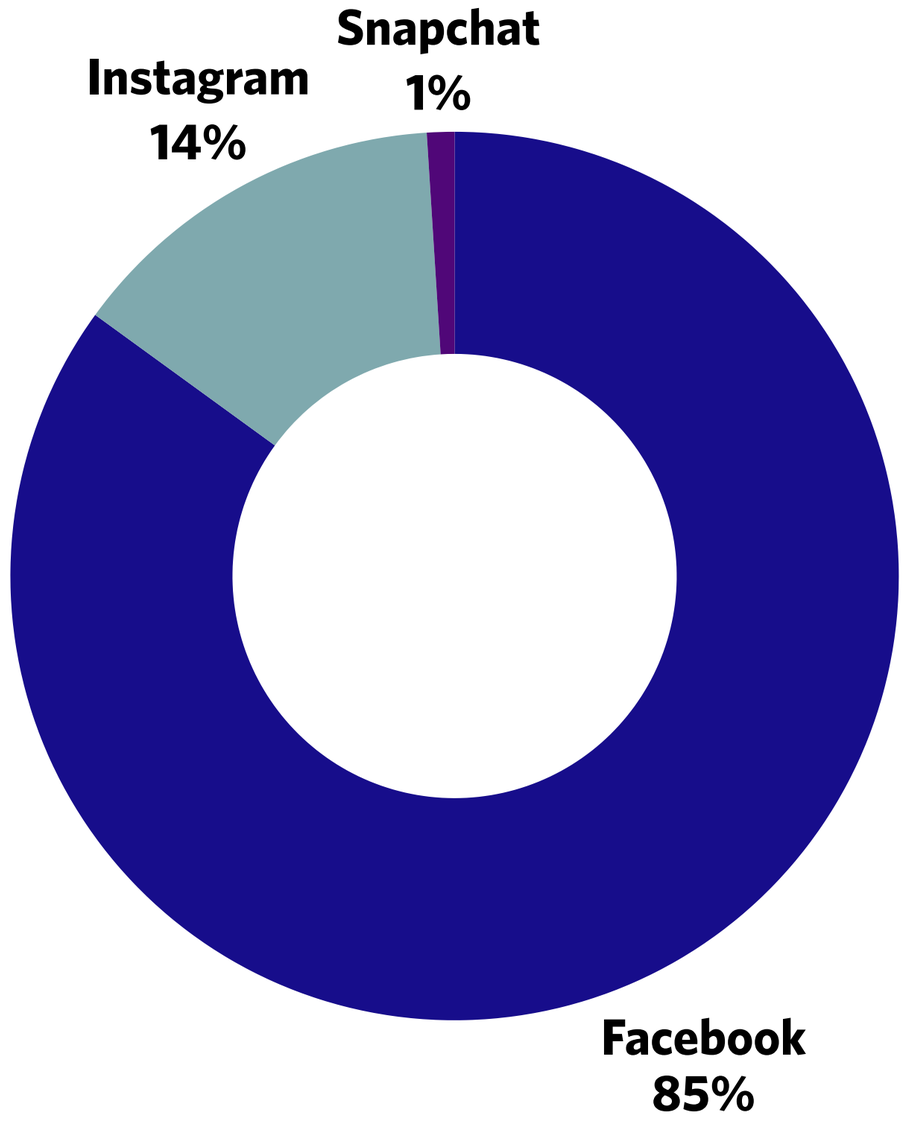
This finding is notable given national concerns about declining local journalism, but it aligns with CIRCLE research emphasizing importance of local information ecosystems for civic participation. Participants frequently described newspapers and local news sources as trusted outlets for learning about community events and public affairs. In Appling County, where local news dominated formal communication channels, one participant explained:

"Everybody put everything in the newspaper."

This quote highlights that local journalism continues to serve as critical civic infrastructure in rural communities, particularly where alternative information sources are limited.

Significant differences emerged across counties. Chatham County accounted for the majority of formal information pathway references (59%), which reflects its larger population, stronger institutional infrastructure, and broader range of communication channels. Participants described accessing information through local media, government communications, nonprofits, and community organizations. In contrast, Appling and Marion Counties relied on fewer formal channels and more heavily on community-based information networks, as shown in Table 4 in the appendix.

TABLE 6B: Civic Access - Social Media as Civic Platforms



Social media also played a central role in civic access, with Facebook accounting for 85% of all social media references (Table 6B in the appendix). Among all three counties, Facebook functioned as the go-to digital civic hub where residents learned about public / community events and local issues. While national studies, such as 2025 findings from the Pew Research Center, often suggest that younger people are moving away from Facebook, participants from the study described the platform as indispensable for community communication and connection to family.

A youth participant from Marion County noted:

"It's (civic events) streamed through Facebook only. If we didn't have Facebook, they wouldn't get it at all."

Reimaging Civic Engagement in Low Civic Media Ecosystem Communities

The findings from the Six Sources of Youth Civic Engagement Influence in Low Media Ecosystem Communities Model highlight that youth in these communities are not disengaged from civic life. Rather, their participation is shaped by the interaction of personal motivations, social networks, and information infrastructure. Across all three counties, young people demonstrated a strong desire to contribute to their communities, but often encountered barriers related to information access, economic constraints, and institutional responsiveness. Based on these findings, we offer five recommendations for strengthening and sustaining youth civic engagement in low civic media ecosystem communities.

1. Invest in Community-Based Civic Hubs Rather Than Traditional Political Spaces

With all six frames, youth consistently identified recreation departments, schools, libraries, nonprofits, churches, and community programs as the spaces where civic engagement naturally occurs. Rather than expecting young people to enter traditional political institutions, communities should invest in strengthening existing civic hubs where youth already gather and build relationships. Recreation programs, youth-serving organizations, and community events can serve as entry points for civic learning, leadership development, and community problem-solving. Consistent with CIRCLE's research on youth-centered civic engagement and political homes, civic participation is most effective when integrated into the everyday spaces where young people live, learn, and socialize.

2. Strengthen Local Information Ecosystems Through Hybrid Communication Strategies

The findings demonstrate that youth rely on a combination of local news outlets, Facebook, interpersonal networks, churches, schools, and community organizations to access civic information. Efforts to increase participation should embrace hybrid communication models that combine online and offline channels. Local governments, nonprofits, and community organizations should distribute information across multiple platforms, including social media, local newspapers, flyers, school communications, and trusted community networks. In low media ecosystem communities, visibility of opportunities is often as important as the opportunities themselves.

3. Create Authentic Youth Leadership and Decision-Making Opportunities

A recurring theme across the Civic Interest, Civic Influence, and Civic Culture frames was youth frustration with being asked for input but not given meaningful decision-making power. Young people expressed a desire to lead initiatives, shape community conversations, and contribute solutions to local challenges. Communities should move beyond youth participation models that position youth as just advisors and instead create structures that share power through youth councils and youth-led action projects. Consistent with CIRCLE's work on youth civic agency, meaningful engagement occurs when young people see tangible evidence that their voices influence outcomes.

4. Address Civic Opportunity Gaps by Reducing Economic and Logistical Barriers

The Civic Capacity findings revealed that economic conditions, transportation limitations, work responsibilities, and caregiving obligations significantly shape youth participation. Civic engagement initiatives must recognize these realities and design opportunities that reduce participation costs. This includes providing transportation assistance, flexible scheduling, stipends, paid internships, community service scholarships, and virtual participation options. Particularly in rural communities, civic engagement should be viewed not as an extracurricular activity but as an opportunity that must compete with other pressing demands on young people's time and resources.

5. Leverage Family and Trusted Community Networks as Civic Engagement Partners

Family members emerged as the strongest source of civic influence across all three counties, while trusted mentors, peers, and church networks served as primary pathways for civic information and support. Rather than focusing solely on youth-targeted interventions, civic engagement efforts should adopt a family and community-centered approach. Programs that engage parents, grandparents, faith leaders, coaches, educators, and community mentors can strengthen civic participation by leveraging the relationships that already shape youth attitudes and behaviors. In low media ecosystem communities, trust is often the most valuable civic resource, and trusted networks can serve as transformative catalysts for engagement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these recommendations challenge deficit-based narratives that portray rural and low media ecosystem communities as civically disengaged. Instead, the findings suggest that youth participation is already occurring through community relationships, local institutions, and informal information networks. Reimagining civic engagement in these contexts requires recognizing and investing in the civic assets that already exist while expanding access to opportunities, information, and leadership pathways. By building on existing community strengths, communities can create more inclusive and sustainable pathways for youth civic participation.

Appendix

Frame 1

TABLE 1: CIVIC INTEREST (Case Counts & Percentages)

	Representation	Values & Identity	Economic Mobility	Totals	Percentages
Appling County	2	10	10	22	31%
Chatham County	11	22	8	41	58%
Marion County	1	3	4	8	11%
Total	14	35	22	**71**	
Percentages	20%	49%	31%		

Frame 2

TABLE 2: CIVIC CAPACITY (Case Counts & Percentages)

	Economic Conditions	Time & Economic Constraints	Low Visibility of Opportunities	Social Pressures & Disinterest	Totals	Percentages
Appling County	14	4	16	12	46	32%
Chatham County	47	14	8	2	71	49%
Marion County	3	5	11	10	29	20%
Total	64	23	35	24	**146**	
Percentages	44%	16%	24%	16%		

Frame 3

TABLE 3: CIVIC INFLUENCE (Case Counts & Percentages)

	Family Influence	Peer Influence	Mentors/Role Model Influence	Totals	Percentages
Appling County	24	7	3	34	37%
Chatham County	37	6	2	45	50%
Marion County	5	6	1	12	13%
Total	66	19	6	**91**	
Percentages	73%	21%	7%		

Frame 4

TABLE 4: CIVIC SUPPORT (Case Counts & Percentages)								
	Church Networks	**General Search Engines**	**Online Forums**	**Text Messaging Apps**	**Trusted Individuals**	**Word of Mouth Offline**	**Totals**	**Percentages**
Appling County	18	1	1	4	4	21	49	43%
Chatham County	1	2	8	0	3	25	36	31%
Marion County	10	0	0	4	1	15	30	26%
Total	29	3	9	8	8	61	**115**	
Percentages	25%	3%	8%	7%	7%	53%		

Frame 5

TABLE 5: CIVIC CULTURE (Case Counts & Percentages)							
	Informal Public Spaces (Pubs, Hangouts, Etc.)	**Nonprofits and Organizations**	**Formal Public Spaces (Ex: Libraries, Schools, Etc.)**	**Recreation Departments**	**Churches & Faith Based Organizations**	**Totals**	**Percentages**
Appling County	0	41	23	54	2	120	34%
Chatham County	12	45	37	32	4	118	34%
Marion County	1	41	21	45	3	111	32%
Total	13	127	81	131	9	**349**	
Percentages	4%	36%	23%	38%	3%		

Frame 6

TABLE 6A: CIVIC ACCESS - Formal Information Pathways (Case Counts & Percentages)

	Local News Outlets	Official Government Channels	Organization Communications	Physical Promotional Materials	Totals	Percentages
Appling County	40	3	1	4	48	27%
Chatham County	81	14	4	5	104	59%
Marion County	13	4	2	6	25	14%
Total	134	21	7	15	**177**	
Percentages	76%	12%	4%	9%		

TABLE 6B: CIVIC ACCESS - Social Media as Civic Platforms (Case Counts & Percentages)

	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Snapchat	Totals	Percentages
Appling County	64	4	0	0	68	34%
Chatham County	71	16	0	2	89	45%
Marion County	35	7	0	0	42	21%
Total	170	27	0	2	**199**	
Percentages	85%	14%	0%	1%		