



2023 RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

How geography and community affiliation drive engagement, and what public organizations can do to increase participation.



INTRODUCTION

[In 2022, PublicInput conducted a survey](#) of US residents to understand their preferences for engaging with their local government following the pandemic. Results from the 2022 survey showed a mix of preferences and perceptions about residents' expectations for community engagement.

A year later, we've conducted a new survey to continue to learn more about how to best inform and engage with residents — and the results confirm:

- Local proximity motivates residents to engage — the closer to home, the more likely they are to engage.
- Engaging residents through groups with which they affiliate increases public trust and willingness to participate in community engagement opportunities.
- Residents are motivated to engage on a variety of issues, but report not being made aware of opportunities to engage.

This year's survey tells us that residents are more likely to engage with state and local governments on issues that directly impact the communities with whom they closely identify — be that their “backyard” or groups they are affiliated with. These insights suggest that agencies can increase engagement by reaching out to residents in a more focused way, such as location-based outreach or through community-based organizations that have preexisting relationships with residents.

This research was conducted through the use of a national market research survey in May and June 2023. Surveys were voluntarily completed by 1,000 residents across the United States. According to the most recent Census, the most commonly reported non-English language reported in the U.S. is Spanish (62%). In order to address this diversity characteristic, PublicInput released both a Spanish and English translated survey covering all 50 states.



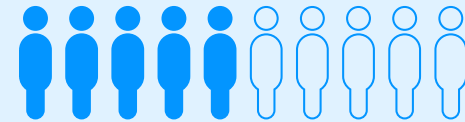
SURVEY RESPONDENT **DEMOGRAPHICS**

The following is a distribution of the sample size, demographic characteristics, and socioeconomic status of the survey respondents.

OF THE 1,000 PARTICIPANTS...



56% are employed
or self employed



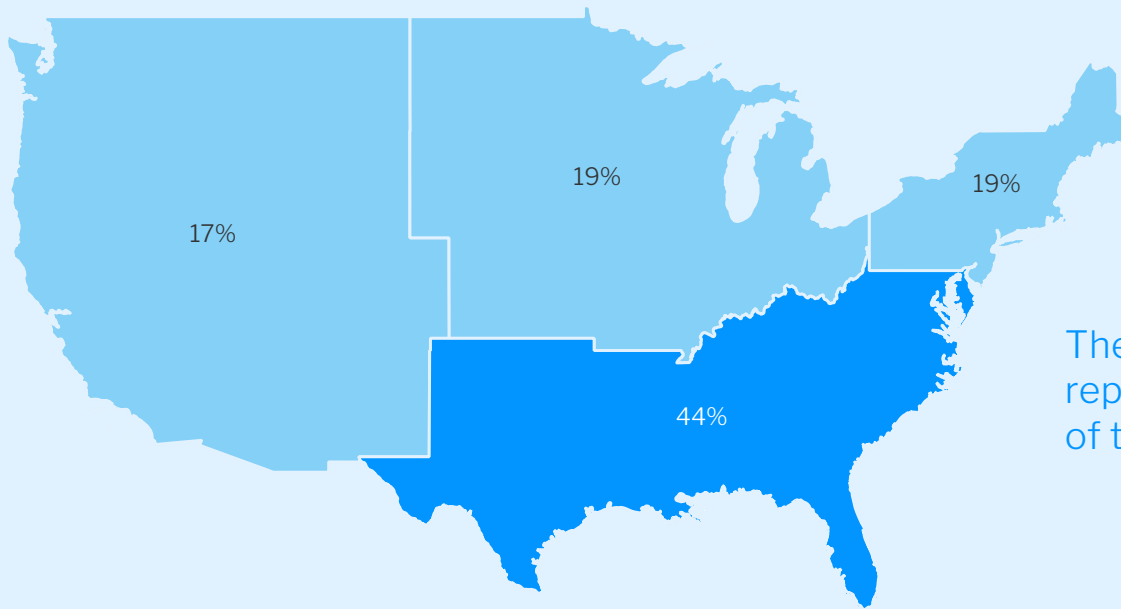
50% identify
as “female”



15% Spanish
speaking

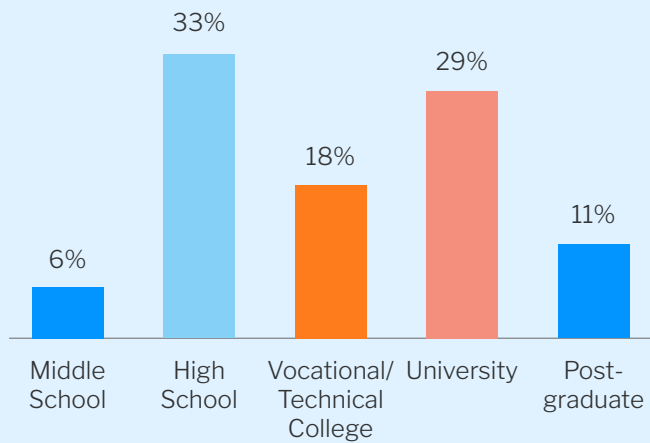


43% had an income
under \$43K

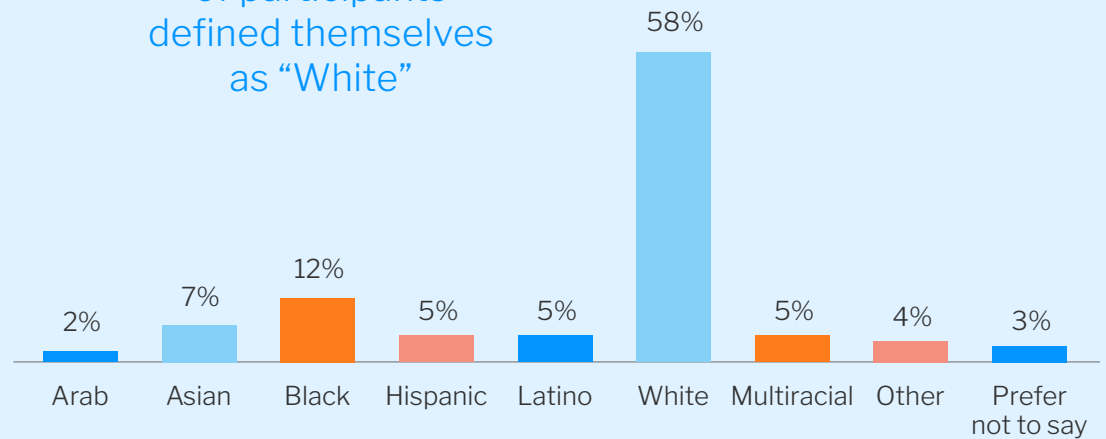


The largest share of participants (44%) reported living in the southern region of the U.S.

Over 20% of participants had attained a degree from a university



The majority (58%) of participants defined themselves as "White"





REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION **IN YOUR COMMUNITY**

Diverse community characteristics, whether they be demographic (like age and race) or geographic (rural and urban), have the potential to greatly impact resident participation.

REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION

Engagement best practices dictate that decision-making quality is eroded when leaders only hear from a narrow set of resident perspectives. State and local governments often seek to solve this problem with the “more is better” approach to engagement.

However, “more is better” does not ensure broad, representative perspectives. It can even exacerbate inequitable outcomes when engagement is dominated by outside influences or voices who already have a seat at the table.

Truly equitable community engagement takes a focused and accessible approach. By focusing outreach efforts on impacted communities and engaging residents through trusted groups and formats, practitioners can increase engagement from the people most affected by a given policy or project.



REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Equitable decision making requires planners, public communicators, consultants, and other community engagement practitioners to tailor how they plan for and engage with residents.

Practitioners should meet residents where they are, in a format that works best for them.

Using the findings from within this national survey, PublicInput is offering practitioners practical and relevant insights and recommendations designed to increase the effectiveness of local community engagement efforts.


Planning for equity is intended to challenge those planning practices that result in policies, programs, and regulations that disproportionately impact and stymie the progress of certain segments of the population more than others. Done with intention, equity is a thread that is woven through the fabric of all plans, regulations, developments, and policy options.

– [APA Planning for Equity Policy Guide](#)



KEY FINDINGS

The survey results highlight a handful of insights, challenges, and opportunities for state and local governments to increase representation in their engagement.



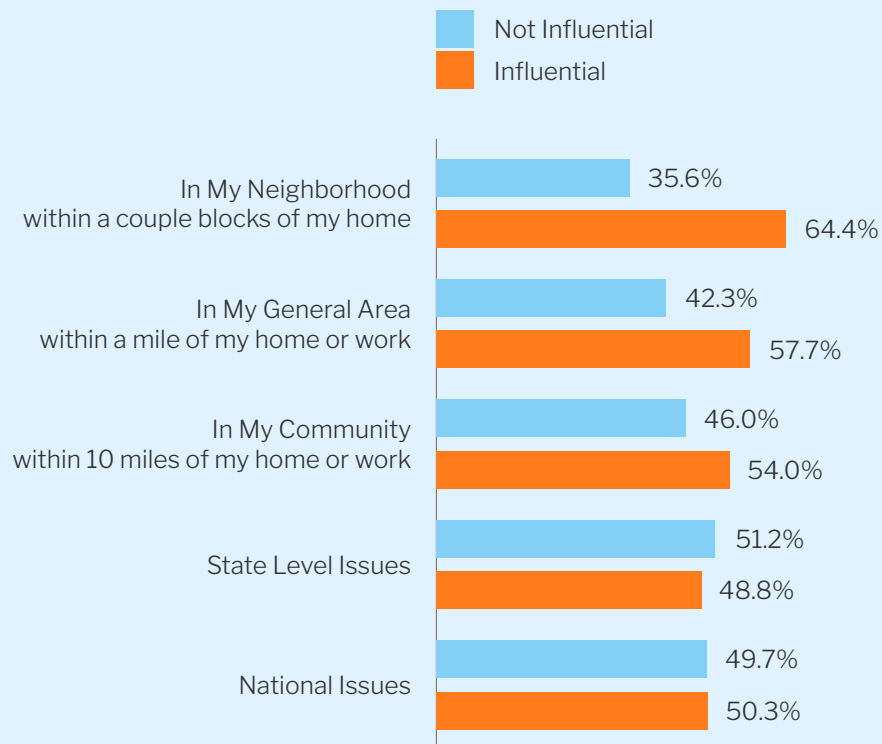
INSIGHT #1 **PROXIMITY MATTERS**

Local proximity motivates residents to engage. The closer to home, the more likely they are to participate. This represents a tremendous opportunity for state and local governments seeking to understand community perceptions at the hyperlocal level.



FINDINGS: INSIGHT #1 PROXIMITY MATTERS

When respondents were asked the following questions about willingness to engage on issues close to home, here is what we found:



TELL ME ABOUT THE THINGS HAPPENING NEAR ME

When we asked residents about their willingness to engage on issues close to home, a clear pattern emerged. The closer the impact is to my home or work, the more I care about it – even over state and national politics.

In terms of influence, the closer the impact to home the more likely residents were to engage. For example, 64% of residents were likely to be influenced by issues that were “within a couple of blocks” from their home.

The data articulates what many local leaders have already felt for years: people are more interested and more passionate about issues in their backyard than the state and national political issues that dominate airwaves and social media.



FINDINGS: INSIGHT #1 PROXIMITY MATTERS

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

From a data-driven perspective, the message to engagement practitioners is simple: If you want to drive engagement, make people aware of how an issue or project will impact their geographic area and their daily life.

For planners conducting very tactical projects like transportation improvements, small area plans, parks, or even rezoning applications, this primarily comes down to targeting your communications to the specific area they're affecting most.

For communicators and engagement practitioners working on larger scale or community-wide initiatives, it could mean an intermediary step of translating an initiative into tangible impacts at the community level.

For example, a comprehensive plan update affects a very broad set of places, but framing the call to action around “how might we make [neighborhood name] more connected, healthier, and livable” could put a comprehensive plan into a more relevant context.

[See the recommendations section for practical solutions and tactics designed specifically for state and local governments seeking to address this opportunity.](#)





INSIGHT #2 **COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

Residents are more likely to engage when the call to action comes from a group with which they affiliate. Reaching out to residents through community groups can drive increased engagement and trust.



FINDINGS: INSIGHT #2 COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

THE POWER OF AFFILIATION: ACCELERATING TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

In addition to proximity, residents cited another key factor in their willingness to engage with public organizations — being asked to engage by a group with whom they affiliate.

Whether it be faith-based organizations, nonprofits, neighborhood associations or civic groups like the Rotary Club, affiliated networks and community groups play a key role in the fabric of communities. They can also help bridge the trust gap between governments and residents.

Given the rhetoric around the decline of civic engagement, the numbers are quite surprising.

Overall, over 63% of residents reported being affiliated with one or more community organizations.

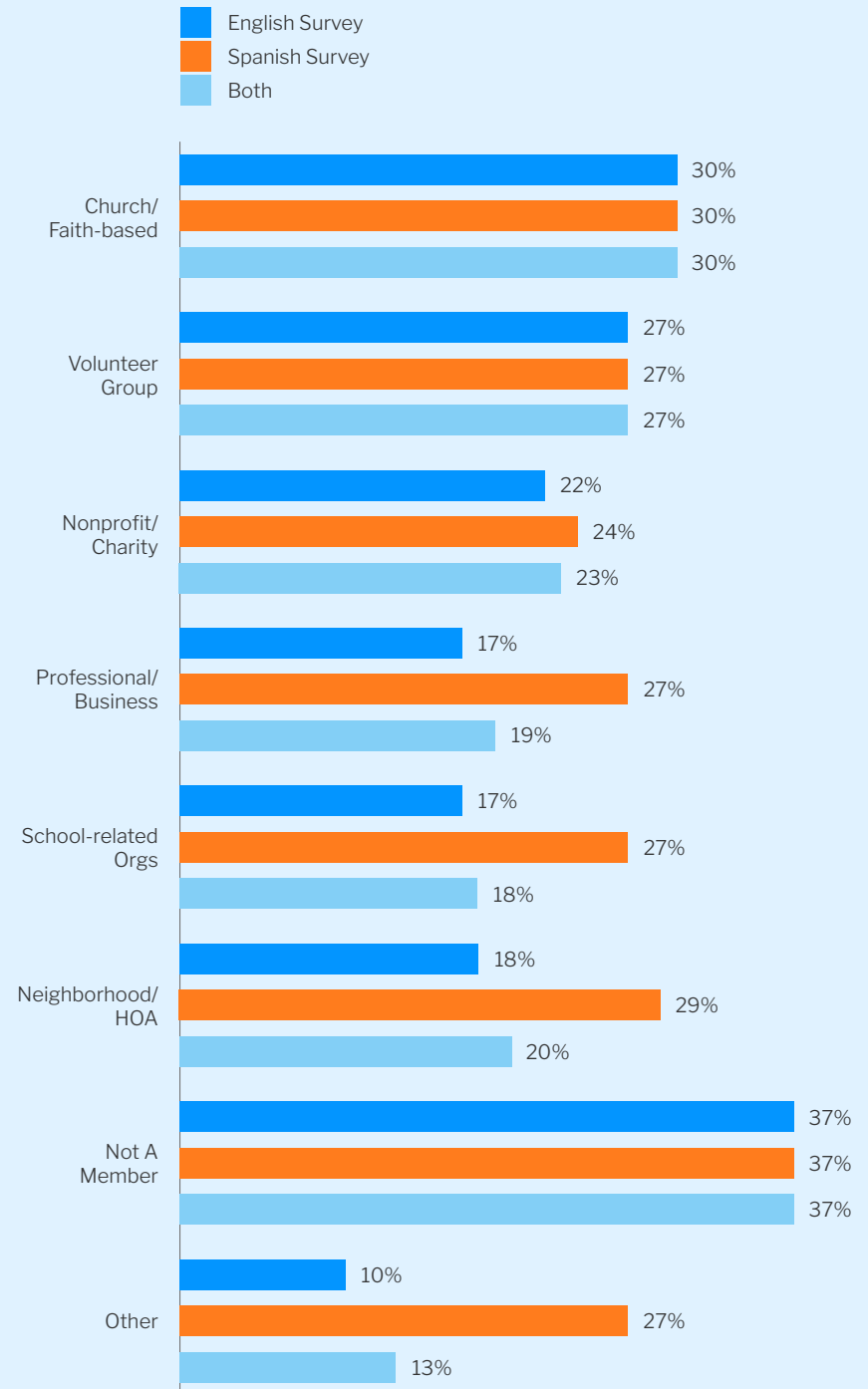
When considering why that number is so surprisingly high, we find a wide array of affiliations.





FINDINGS: INSIGHT #2 COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Around a third of both English and Spanish survey participants reported being affiliated with a church or faith-based organization (30%). Volunteer groups were the next most common, with 27% of respondents reporting being involved. From there, nonprofits, professional groups, school-related organizations, and neighborhood groups like HOA's rounded out the data:





FINDINGS: INSIGHT #2 COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Partnerships with community groups is a must for organizations who want to increase engagement, especially among under-represented communities. The data tells us that group affiliation may even drive more engagement than “in my backyard” factors.

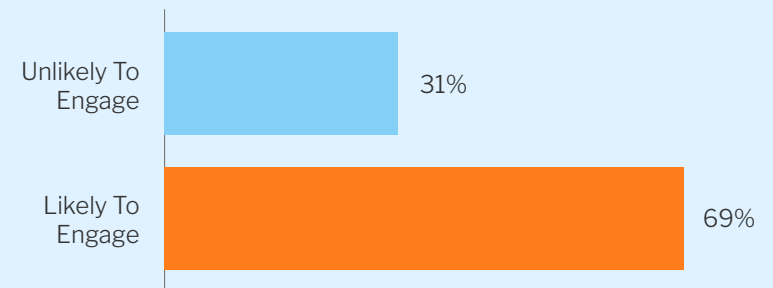
Interestingly, community groups are usually taken into account when reporting on engagement results, rather than as a primary driver of engagement. For instance, while planners may note that a comment was submitted by an individual representing a local trade association, teams often overlook reaching out to these associations when seeking assistance for other projects.

Recognizing this gap, we believe that proactive engagement with community organizations offers a substantial opportunity to enhance public participation and achieve greater equity.


[See the following recommendation section for practical solutions and tactics designed specifically for state and local governments seeking to address this opportunity.](#)

How Groups Can Impact Engagement

Survey data showed that nearly 70% of residents reported they would be more likely to engage if government reached out to them through a group with whom they affiliate:



Note: responses were collected from those that reported being a participating member of a local community group, church or nonprofit organization.

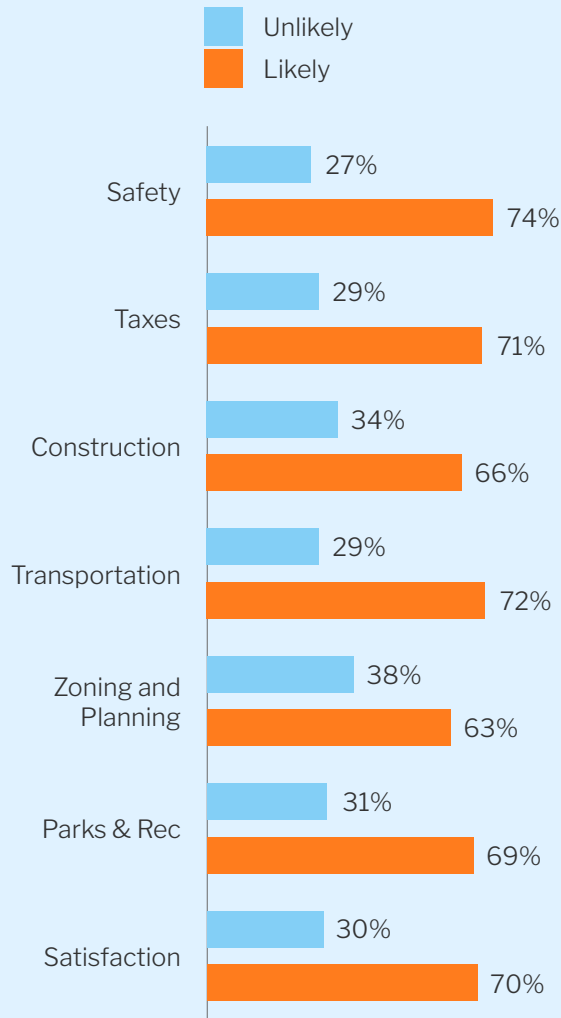


INSIGHT #3 **LACK OF AWARENESS**

Residents are motivated to engage and willing to self educate on a variety of issues, but report that they're simply not being made aware of issues that affect them.



FINDINGS: INSIGHT #3 LACK OF AWARENESS



Do Some Topics Drive More Engagement Than Others? The Answer May Surprise You.

When we asked residents about their willingness to engage or offer their views on particular issues, we found widespread interest across many community concerns, such as safety and satisfaction with government. Interestingly, the propensity for involvement remained relatively consistent across different topics.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

It's Not About The Issue — It's The Context

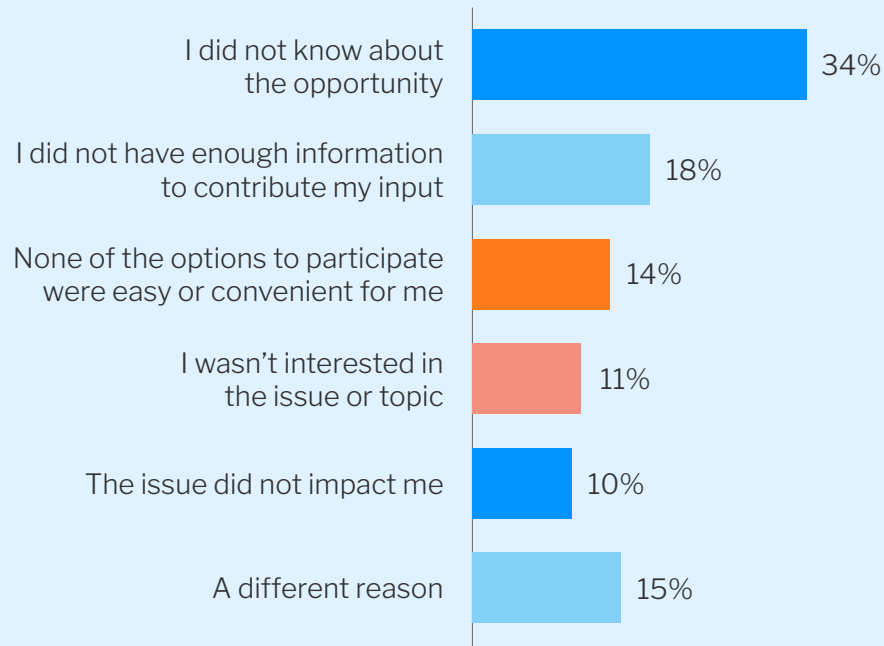
While the findings did not show a strong preference between issue categories, they present an interesting question: if a majority of residents express interest in engaging in a broad set of topics, why are most organizations only hearing from a small subset of their residents, and how can agencies be more consistent in affording opportunities to participate, regardless of which department 'owns' each initiative?

The simple answer seems to come down to awareness. When asked why they haven't engaged in the past, the top-cited reason for not engaging was "I did not know about the opportunity."



FINDINGS: INSIGHT #3 LACK OF AWARENESS

Reasons why residents didn't respond to engagement outreach



A COMMON SENTIMENT WE HEAR IN SOME COMMUNITIES IS “PEOPLE DON’T FEEL THAT THEY’RE INFORMED ENOUGH TO ENGAGE.”

But according to the survey data, that’s not the blocker.

In fact, residents cited not being aware of an issue at nearly twice the rate of those concerned about not having enough information to engage among reasons for not engaging with their local government.

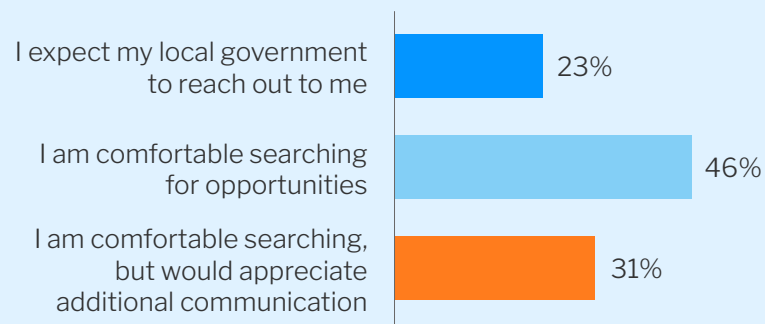
Additionally, residents reported that when they are made aware of an issue, they are willing to actively seek out information and opportunities to engage.



FINDINGS: INSIGHT #3 LACK OF AWARENESS

If residents are comfortable seeking out ways to engage when aware of an issue, it begs a question:

Why then do we routinely hear from only a small and familiar cohort of residents?



The short answer is noise. It is increasingly challenging to get the right information to the right people in an age when communication channels and content have increased exponentially.

Cutting through the noise does not require adopting every new social platform and channel, but focusing engagement communications to be:

- Targeted and highly localized
- Framed with the context residents care about

See the recommendations section for practical solutions and tactics designed specifically for state and local governments seeking to address these opportunities and challenges.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Practical solutions and tactics designed to address the opportunities and challenges highlighted in the survey results.



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS

PROXIMITY AND FAMILIARITY: ENSURING THAT OUTREACH IS TARGETED AND CONTEXTUAL

The data tells us residents are more likely to engage when a topic or project directly affects their neighborhood or community. The closer to home, the more likely they are to engage.

This represents a tremendous opportunity for state and local governments to drive more engagement from the people who will be most affected by a project or topic. It also can support increased equity if the project impacts historically under-represented communities.

Equitable community engagement starts with understanding who is most impacted by the decisions and outcomes of a project or initiative. To achieve this kind of equity, state and local governments need reliable ways to identify and reach impacted communities.

Tools like PublicInput's [Equity Mapping](#) were built with this use case in mind. Overlaying a map of your community with data on key demographic indicators like income, race, and English language proficiency allows teams to thoughtfully conduct outreach to the communities most affected.

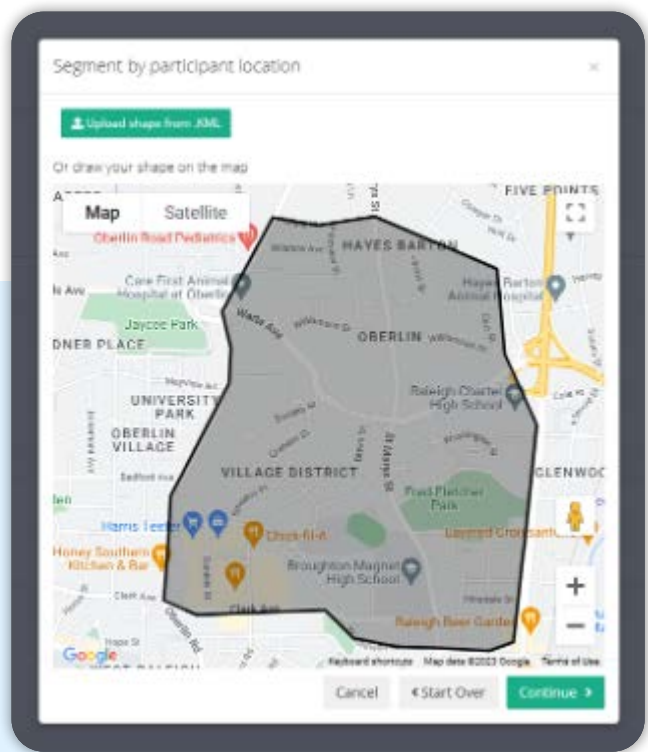
Once your project area and affected communities are identified, practitioners can develop an outreach plan that incorporates both traditional approaches like direct mail and in-person events with digital approaches that target email, text, and social communications.

PublicInput's integrated geo-targeted communications suite can help simplify the process of reaching out to specific zip codes, neighborhoods, census blocks, and customized local boundaries like council districts.

This targeted approach prioritizes outreach to residents who are most likely to be affected, and — as the survey data reminds us — most likely to engage.

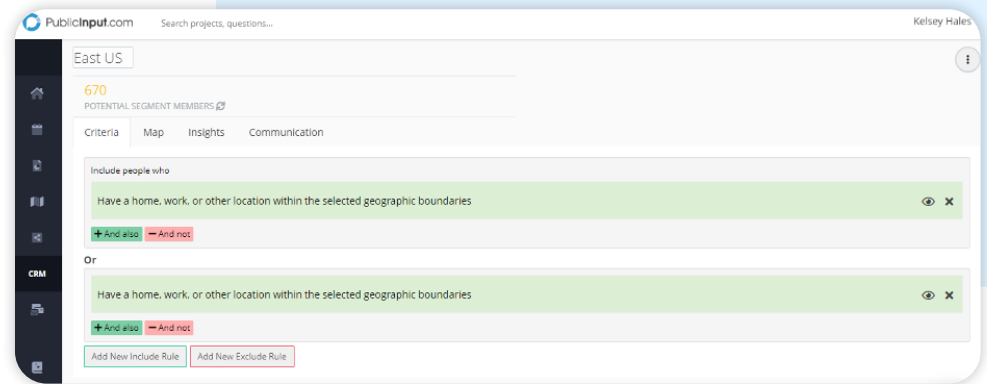


FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS



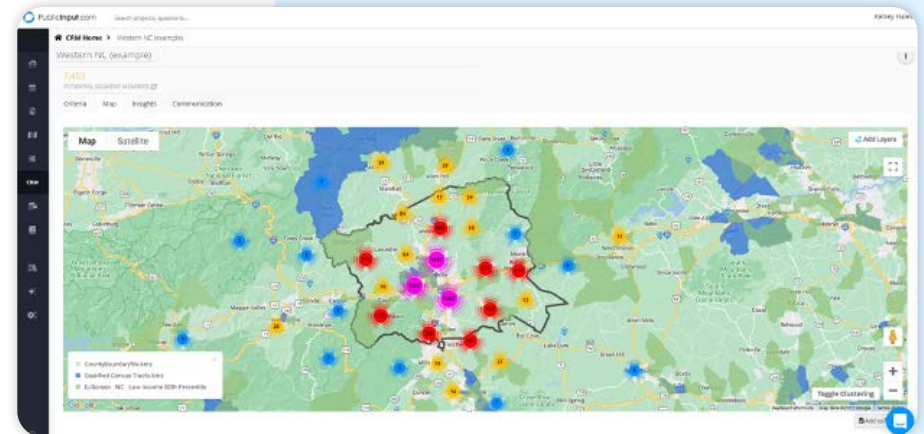
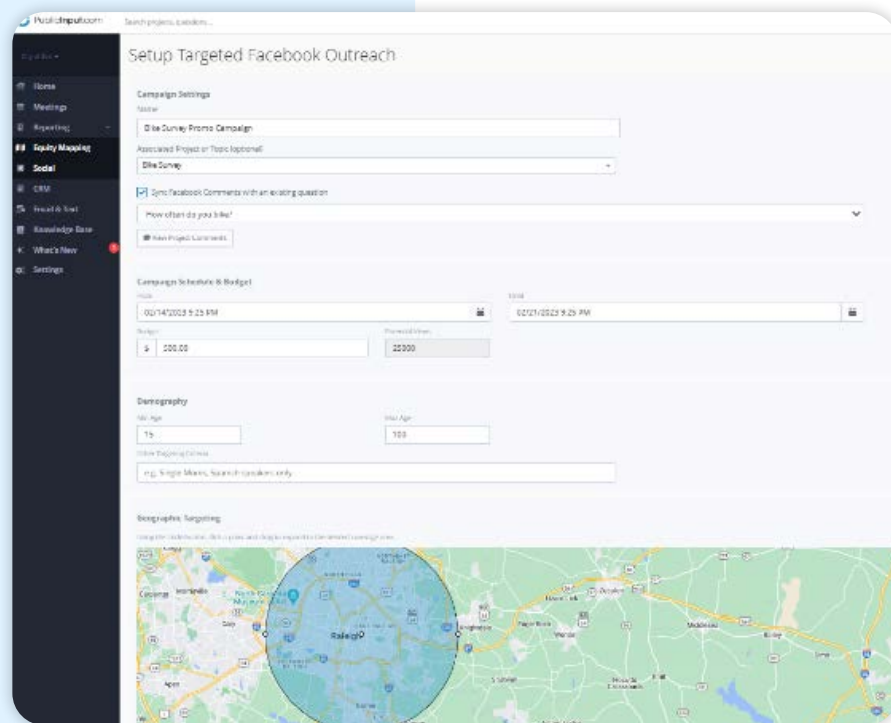
GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION, OR PROXIMITY TO A PROJECT, IS DIRECTLY LINKED TO HIGHER RATES OF PARTICIPATION.

Geo-targeted outreach via email and text can drive higher rates of engagement and increase the relevance for residents.





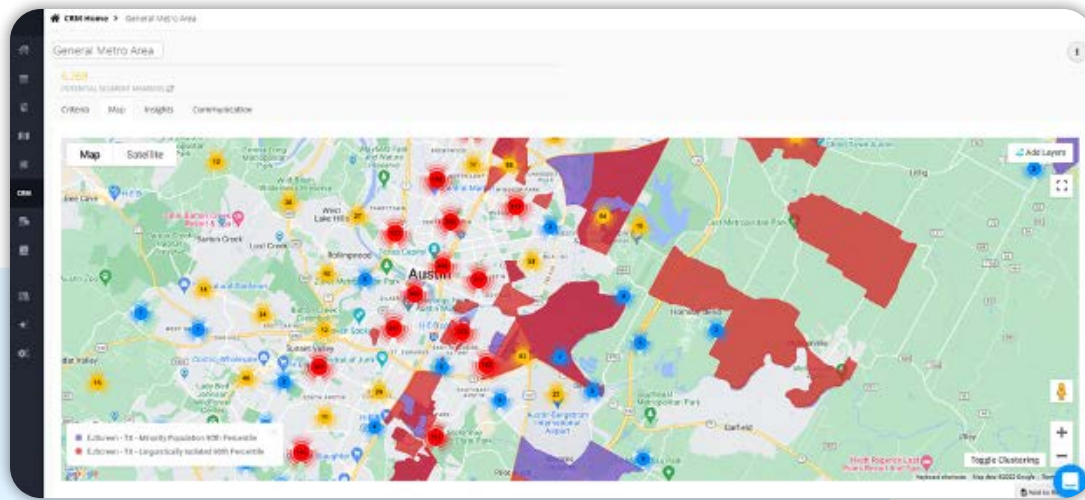
FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS



**GEO-TARGETED
FACEBOOK, EMAIL,
AND TEXT CAMPAIGNS
CAN REACH SPECIFIC
RESIDENTS AND INCREASE
THE RELEVANCE OF
A TOPIC.**



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS



EQUITY MAPPING HELPS PROVIDE CONTEXT TO EXISTING ENGAGEMENT DATA.

Use ArcGIS and information from Justice40, the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, EJScreen, or Qualified Census Tracts to create strategies to engage target demographics based on their location.

GETTING STARTED WITH EQUITY MAPPING AND GEO-TARGETED OUTREACH

If you're like most organizations, you may not have robust location data about your residents, and they may be reluctant to share much about themselves. If this is the case for your team, the best approach is to get started collecting location both passively, using information like Geo-IP, and actively by asking for zip code or address when gathering input.

PublicInput's engagement and communication suite make this a default part of your engagement work by:

- Inferring general location with Geo-IP for website visitors, email opens, and virtual meeting attendees
- Geocoding all location responses in survey engagements — including zip code, cross street, and address
- Gathering location responses from meeting and event registration



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS

By making location a key aspect of all engagement touchpoints, most organizations can quickly build out a geo-database of informed residents. This geo-database creates the foundation for a positive cycle of engagement: teams leveraging geo-targeted outreach see greater engagement, which in turn grows their database for future engagement.

THE COMMUNITY GROUP OPPORTUNITY

Local community groups, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations represent a unique opportunity for state and local governments as partners in empowering resident participation.

The preexisting rapport established between community groups and members provides a trusted environment that has the potential to enhance willingness to participate in community engagement opportunities.

What we know anecdotally is that most state and local governments do not have a centralized method of managing community group information. Whether it be an inventory of contact information or a database that tracks outreach efforts and participant data, the challenge of managing community group information in a single location is a common barrier.

Given the challenges, these groups could represent the biggest untapped potential for expanding participation at the community level. Maintaining a database of community organizations and fostering relationships with these organizations can empower residents to be more engaged in the decision making process.



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS

For example, working within the areas of influence of these community groups provides an avenue for staff and project teams to leverage the vested interests of community members. Say a state or local government is interested in getting input from community members about air quality impacts associated with a new highway project. The government project team may find partnering with the local Sierra Club chapter will be beneficial in engaging stakeholders with vested interest in environmental impacts and make sure they get ahead of any potential roadblocks or misunderstandings.

To manage the process of collaboration and engagement, PublicInput offers a database module that allows state and local governments a single informational warehouse that can be configured to include:

- Community groups and their members
- Mapping of topical areas of interest or influence that support outreach and engagement efforts
- Coding and tagging of survey results and comments with the affiliation to community groups
- Outreach tools that simplify the process of linking engagement to opportunities to specific community groups.
- Analytic tools help identify which groups are driving engagement
- Reporting filters to support viewing response data for specific groups



OFFLINE METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT LIKE FLYERS CAN BE MADE MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN PARTNERING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY GROUPS.

These groups already have strong connections within the community and can build on that relationship to help spread the word about engagement initiatives.



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS

PUBLICINPUT MAKES IT EASY TO CREATE MULTIPLE LINKS AND LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC VERSIONS OF YOUR PROJECT PAGE, WITH QR CODES FOR EACH VERSION.

This can be used to offer surveys in multiple languages or to learn which communication methods are the most effective (example: one version distributed by a local community organization, one version for an email campaign, and one version for an in-person meeting).

Tracking how participants came across the project gives valuable insight.

Monitor your successes and learn how residents prefer to engage.

Web Traffic by URL

URL	Visitors	Views
https://publicinput.com/...	4,650	5,579
https://publicinput.com/...	2,834	3,494
https://publicinput.com/...	357	408
https://www.publicinput.com/...	324	352
https://publicinput.com/...	272	348
https://publicinput.com/...	115	138
https://publicinput.com/...	20	28
https://publicinput.com/...	18	23
https://publicinput.com/...	10	12
https://www.publicinput.com/...	3	3
https://publicinput.com/...	1	6

All participants Filtered by Participant Segment

Show advanced options for custom domains

Create New Link

URL	Segment	Event	Language
publicinput.com/kcbeach-es	Beaches-Spanish		Spanish
publicinput.com/kcbeach-ch	Beaches-Chinese		Chinese (Simplified)
publicinput.com/kcbeach-vi	Beaches-Vietnamese		Vietnamese
publicinput.com/kcbeach-ko	Beaches-Korean		Korean
publicinput.com/kcbeach-so	Beaches-Somali		Somali
publicinput.com/kcbeach-pu	Beaches-Punjabi		Punjabi
publicinput.com/kcbeach-ru	Beaches-Russian		Russian
publicinput.com/kcbeach-uk	Beaches-Ukrainian		Ukrainian
publicinput.com/kcbeach	Beaches-English		Default
publicinput.com/kcbeach-am	Beaches-Amharic		Amharic



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS

GREATER AWARENESS THROUGH TARGETED OUTREACH

The effectiveness of an equitable and comprehensive community outreach approach is critical to the success of any project or initiative. Without the awareness and visibility of issues and opportunities, residents are unable to be informed and engaged in the process.

It is clear that typical methods of outreach, like posting on a website or a social media page, are not very effective at driving resident awareness especially at the hyperlocal level.

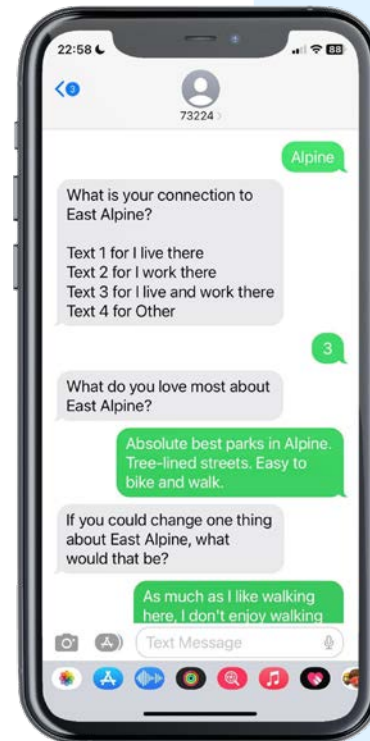
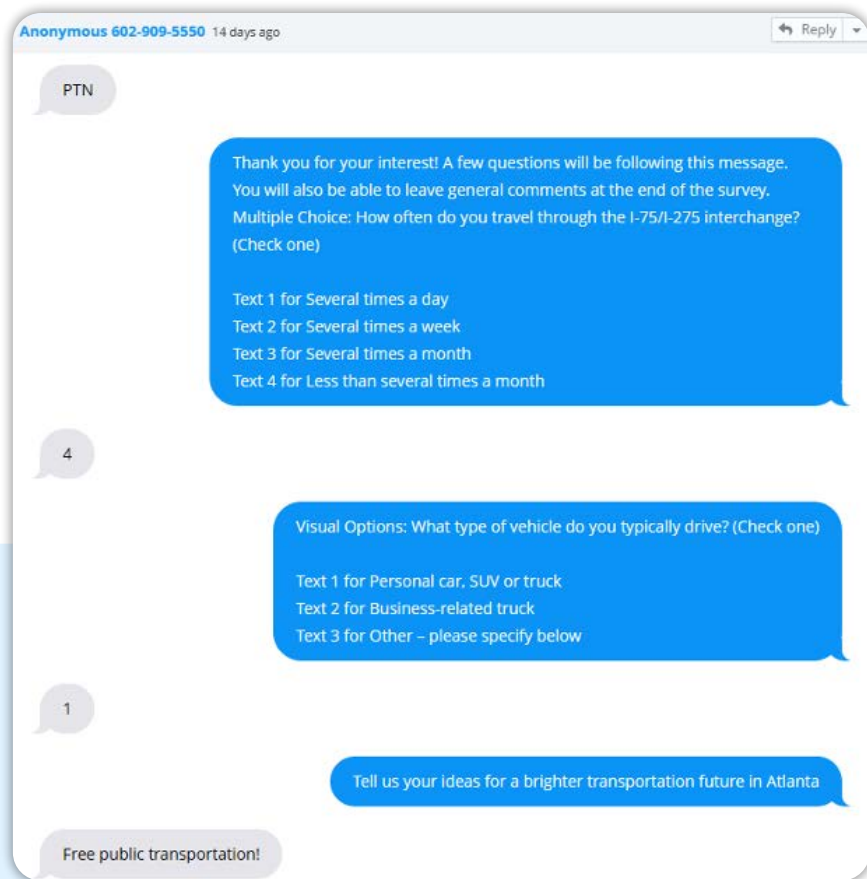
A better approach is getting specific about who should be informed, and what communication mediums are most likely to reach them. Direct mail, geo-targeted text and email campaigns, and even targeted social media advertising are all proven ways of reaching and engaging specific residents.

These online communication methods can be supported and supplemented by offline methods such as print advertising, signage, flyers, and partnerships with local organizations to distribute information regarding upcoming engagement opportunities.





FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS



PARTICIPANTS WHO VOLUNTARILY PROVIDE EMAIL ADDRESSES, PHYSICAL ADDRESSES, OR PHONE NUMBERS CAN BE REACHED USING AUTOMATED EMAIL OR TEXT CAMPAIGNS.

Regular communication, via newsletters, subscriptions, or project emails that are integrated with a central database, can help residents stay informed and encourage future engagement.



FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS

TRACKING RESIDENT INTERESTS VIA THEIR PARTICIPATION CAN HELP STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CATER FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS TO A RESIDENT'S INTERESTS.

The screenshot shows the PublicInput web application interface. At the top, there is a search bar for projects and questions. Below that is a navigation menu with options: CRM Home, Activity Log, Parcel Data, Lists, and Organizations. The main content area is titled 'Search Organizations' and includes a search input field and a dropdown menu set to '10 entries'. A table lists various organizations with their names and types.

Organization Name	Type
La Voz	Nonprofit
Forestville Junior League	Civic Organization
Forestville Chamber of Commerce	Professional Organization
Eastside Rotary Club	Civic Organization
First Baptist Church of Campbellton	Faith Group
Puente	Professional Organization
Forestville Community College	Educational Institution
St. Joseph Vietnamese Catholic Church	Faith Group
Campbellton MAAD	Nonprofit
Forestville Spokes	Nonprofit

DRIVING MORE EQUITABLE AND REPRESENTATIVE ENGAGEMENT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE HARD.

As the data shows us, the greatest impact can likely come from focusing outreach efforts on the communities most affected by a topic or project, and reaching out through the groups already operating in your community.

If you want to get started on that journey, but are not quite sure how to take the first step, we'd love to show you what's possible.

GET A DEMO

EXPLORE OUR PLATFORM



PublicInput