

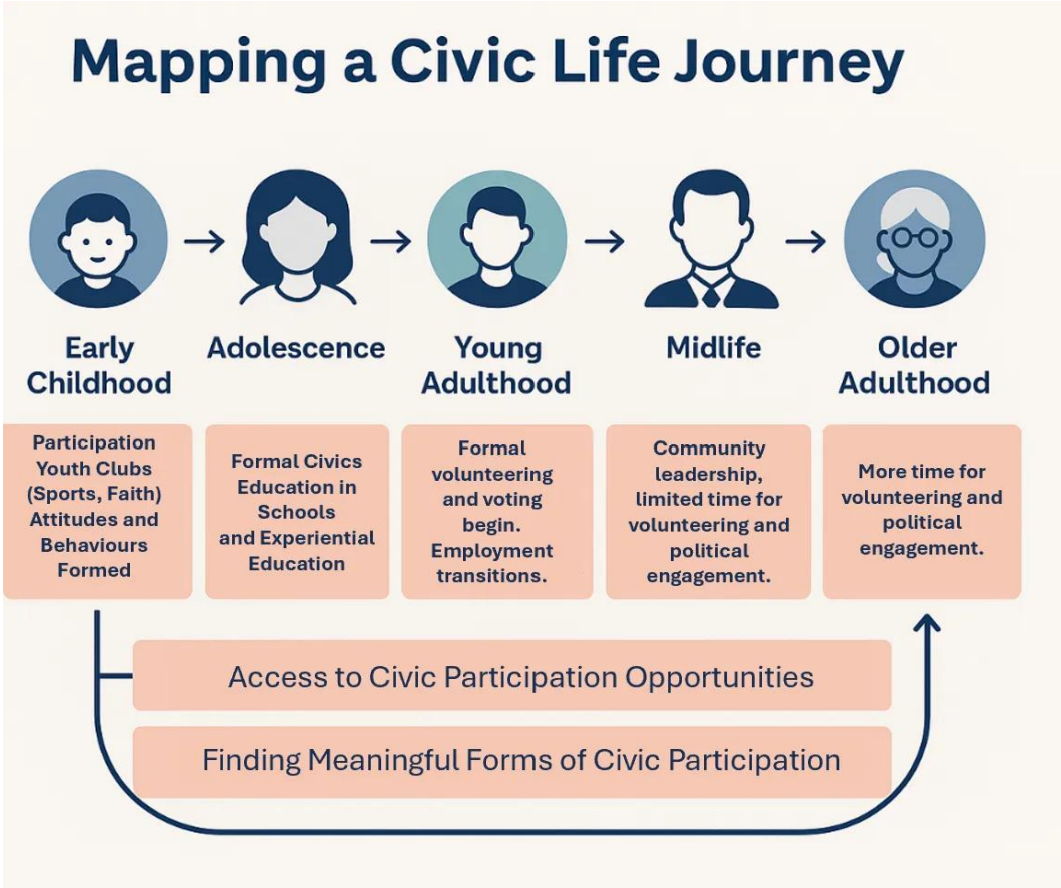


Australian Resilient Democracy Network (ARDN) Report

Mapping the civic life journey

Summary of 2025 cross-sector data and policy hackathon

4-8 December 2025



May 2026

Acknowledgement

This report provides a summary of a December 2025 hackathon focused on the ‘civic life journey’ concept, hosted by the Australian Resilient Democracy Network at the Australian National University. The hackathon built on Andrew Mycock and Brenton Prosser’s ARDN Discussion Paper, ‘[Mapping the Civic Life Journey](#)’.

We thank the Australian National University for hosting the December 2025 hackathon.

We also thank the 24 participants at the hackathon, representing 15 institutions:

- Australian Electoral Commission
- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Australian National University
- Australian Public Service Commission
- Australian Temperament Project, Deakin University
- Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety, Queensland Government
- Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government
- Department of Social Services, Australian Government
- Human Technology Institute, University of Technology Sydney
- McKinnon Foundation
- Office for Youth, Department of Education, Australian Government
- Premier’s Department, NSW Government
- Services Australia
- The Cabinet Office, NSW Government

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About the Australian Resilient Democracy Network (ARDN)

In early 2024, the Australian Resilient Democracy Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. The Network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and applied research seeking policy-relevant insights that measure, diagnose and assess pathways strengthening Australia’s democratic resilience. The Network is dedicated to sharing the analysis publicly and to encourage the use of these ideas to prompt future research collaborations and actionable policy.

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Executive summary

Australia's civic participation is declining, according to our current measurement tools. Volunteering rates are down, engagement in public forums and consultations is inconsistent, and membership rates in organisations are lower than a decade ago. While young people report sharply lower senses of belonging and Australia's national standardised NAPLAN Civics and Citizenship exams show declining understanding of how our government works, more than half of Australians report feeling their voices are not heard in key public decisions. Yet across our lives, from our first time voting or joining a political party to our first time participating in a school parent association or a local sports club, to when we first voice our opinion on a local development plan or join community organisations, we are active in different ways and at different points. Together, these make up our civic life journey.

Programs and democratic processes exist to enable civic participation, but they are often siloed or narrowly focused on specific activities at specific points of time in a person's life. In a recent paper from the Australian Resilient Democracy Network (ARDN), Andrew Mycock and Brenton Prosser [proposed](#) a shift in how we design and build engagement across our life course: moving from a patchwork of disconnected points of engagement, to a coordinated tapestry that provides access to participation opportunities at all ages – and in ways that are most meaningful at different moments in our lives.

This paper summarises a recent hackathon, convened by ARDN and OSC, to test the practical value of the framework in looking at how policies, specifically those seeking to strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience, could approach civic life from a life course perspective. The hackathon starts by assessing what we *currently* know and what we *need* to know about Australian's civic life journeys, from civic education in schools to major life transitions points, to how we engage once we stop working. The hackathon brought together 24 researchers, data specialists, and policy practitioners from 15 institutions to map available data, identify gaps, and generate priority directions for what comes next.

Three summary recommendations for civic engagement programs

- 1. Design civic engagement around key transition points – especially ages 16–24.** Prioritise programs that meet young people where major first-time civic interactions occur (leaving school; entering work/TAFE/university; first independent dealings with services; first vote), including pathways from school-based councils and youth parliaments into ongoing local, state and national participation options.
- 2. Move beyond a youth-only focus by creating purpose-built opportunities for mid-life and later-life stages.** Address the post-mid-20s 'flatness' of engagement offerings by developing age- and life-stage relevant pathways (e.g., for people balancing work and caring responsibilities, people relocating, people experiencing unemployment, and people transitioning into retirement), rather than relying on generic, opt-in models.
- 3. Broaden reach by combining 'explicit' civic programs with 'incidental' everyday settings, and by offering both voluntary and low-friction pathways.** Embed civic learning and participation into places people already are (workplaces, schools/P&Cs, community groups, service touchpoints), and offer multiple modes of participation (digital and in-person; short and sustained; advisory and deliberative) to reduce barriers for time- and resource-constrained communities.

Summary of key findings

<p>The data landscape is fragmented and skewed toward youth. The hackathon identified 15 different Australian datasets, which together suggested:</p>	
<p>No single dataset tracks civic engagement consistently or comprehensively across the full life course. Monitoring activity is greatest for ages 18–25 with a lack of specific datasets for elderly cohorts.</p> <p>Many data sets do not capture the spaces and ways that communities engage, including specific gaps understanding multicultural and diverse communities, limiting understanding of different civic trajectories.</p>	<p>Longitudinal data offers the most robust source to map the flows and impact across a life course for civic engagement. The Australian Temperament Project (ATP) has a significant age coverage and range of variables, while the Longitudinal Study on Australia Children provides significant insights for the younger cohorts.</p> <p>Volunteering is the most consistently measured indicator. Digital civic engagement and civic education are largely undermeasured.</p> <p>Administrative data on service provision and impact on engagement is limited.</p>
<p>Preliminary analysis of ATP & LSAC produced three findings, each requiring further investigation:</p>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> School belonging and friendship strength are strong predictors of later civic engagement identified in the analysis using Bayesian network and decision tree methods (exploratory only). The school-to-adulthood transition is both the highest-risk and highest-opportunity civic moment. Early-life loneliness at key transition points – such as leaving school, unemployment, relocation, and retirement – create pathways that risk civic disengagement and declining trust. 	
<p>Gaps in current community programs and public services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No coordinated life-course design Limited reach to diverse or resource-constrained populations No systematic evidence of cumulative impact. <p>Geographic analysis (see Rouven Link on ‘Mapping Access to Civic Participation Opportunities’) shows civic infrastructure is heavily concentrated in metropolitan areas, with pronounced gaps – “civic deserts” – in many rural and remote communities.</p>	
<p>What we need to know: significant gaps</p>	
<p>Connections: Linking longitudinal data analysis with administrative data.</p> <p>Evaluation: Evidence of program impact and digital civic engagement is almost entirely unmeasured across existing studies.</p> <p>Structural: Administrative data on program participation, membership and service engagement is not consolidated or accessible</p>	<p>Coverage: Elderly cohorts lack a dedicated data source despite containing key transition points.</p> <p>Priority: ATP and PLIDA (Person Level Integrated Data Asset) have not yet been thoroughly applied to civic engagement questions. This represents a strong opportunity for civic life journey analysis.</p>
<p>Policy and program opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target loneliness hotspots at life transition points such as school exit, workforce entry and exit, relocation, and retirement before disengagement takes hold. Extend program focus beyond youth. There is limited focus on civic engagement programs for adults aged 25–55 or 65+, despite lower democratic satisfaction in older cohorts. Redesign incidental civic activity such as workplaces, school P&Cs, and community groups to embed deliberate civic learning, rather than relying on explicit opt-in programs that reach a narrow slice of the population. Use geographic intelligence to target investment in civic deserts and inform place-based programs such as <i>Stronger Places, Stronger People</i>. Run evaluations across a variety of community programs to assess impacts. 	

About the hackathon

Background and purpose

The hackathon was an initiative of the Australian Resilient Democracy Network (ARDN) and the Office for Social Cohesion (OSC) in the Department of Home Affairs. The 3-day event tested the ‘civic life journey’ concept outlined by Andrew Mycock and Brenton Prosser in [Discussion Paper Six: Mapping the Civic Life Journey](#).

The purposes of the hackathon included:

- Testing the civic life journey framework as a means to identify ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ spots in civic education and engagement. This was with the aim of strengthening policy, program and monitoring approaches to enhance civic knowledge and engagement outcomes throughout the life course.
- Mapping the relevant datasets available to measure civic participation at different stages of Australians’ life courses.
- Mapping the suite of existing policies and programs in Australia regarding civic participation.
- Generating policy recommendations and ideas regarding data collection and policy or program interventions.
- Encouraging cross-sector partnerships to expand on the findings from the hackathon.

This summary synthesis document seeks to capture these objectives.

How it worked

The hackathon was held on 4, 5 and 8 December 2025. The facilitators and a small number of participants worked together in-person at the Australian National University on 4 and 5 December; most participants were online across Australia.

After some initial briefings and introductions, participants worked in four smaller teams of 3 to 7 people. The teams comprised a mixture of data and policy or programs expertise and were organised around 4 broad themes: state-level data and programs, elections and public services, causal pathways, and life course data.

Participants worked intensively in their teams over the first two whole days, with regular opportunities to check in with the whole group and share their progress and insights. On 8 December, participants shared their final research outcomes with the group as well as leaders from many of the participating organisations.

Participants

The hackathon had 24 participants and subject-matter advisors, plus a facilitation team of 5 people comprising OSC staff and ARDN members. Participants brought a range of data, policy and program skills and knowledge.

About the ‘civic life journey’ concept

Civic life is about how people take an active interest in public society. This includes:

- **Civic literacy:** The knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to participate in democratic life, which in turn helps people safely navigate, and be resilient to, threats to democracy.
- **Civic participation:** The actions and behaviours that represent contributions to public life, whether through community service and volunteerism, or by expressing democratic preferences and holding governments to account. This includes the public exchange of ideas, voting, peaceful protests, collective action and problem-solving, and corresponding with elected representatives. Civic participation helps people become familiar with, shape and thereby be more willing to trust democratic processes and institutions.
- **Civic connection:** The sense of belonging, agency, cohesion and responsibility within larger democratic society, which encourages mindsets that help people and communities prevent and overcome division, fragmentation, polarisation and harmful discriminatory and exclusionary behaviours.

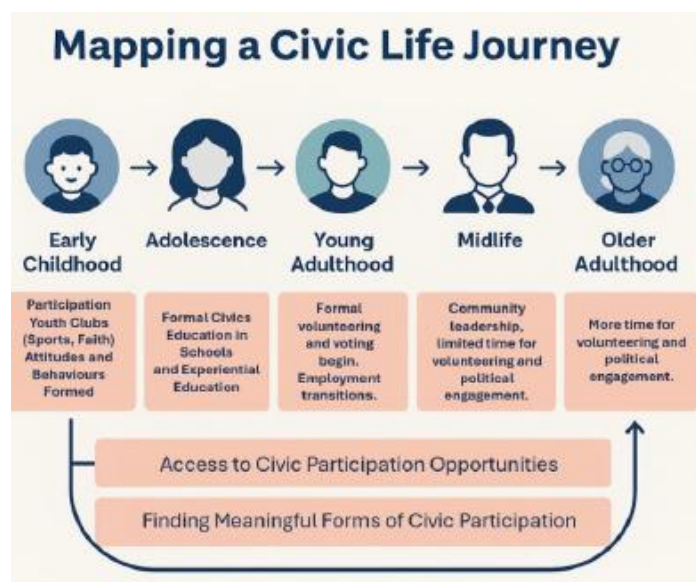


Figure 1: A simplified model of a civic life course taken from Mycock and Prosser’s 2025 [discussion paper](#).

The civic life journey concept views the progression of an individual’s relationship with society through these different stages of civic life. Whilst key stages of the journey are defined by age, they can also be differentiated across other factors and life experiences – such as where people live, experiences of disability or different cultural backgrounds. There are multiple forms of engagement and volunteering, some more formal than others. Some forms of civic participation are also unlikely to be identified in surveys or measurement systems.

The civic life course approach includes analysis of transition points in individual’s life course, such as from school into workforce or out of workforce. It also seeks to disaggregate preferences for when, how and where to engage. Previous attempts to explore the framework heavily focus on youth and have not had continuous life-course data to test the stages and connectivity of life experiences.

Examining the data landscape of civic engagement

Overall, there is no comprehensive linked data analysis of the civic life journey in Australia. The current data ecosystem has strong clusters of thematic data coverage, often collected by longitudinal studies, each of which covers different stages of the life course or dimensions of civic engagement.

To identify what is currently measurable across the civic life journey, the hackathon teams searched for indicators across eight thematic areas:

- **Volunteering** (including formal and informal contributions);
- **Community engagement** (membership, participation and community action).
- **Social cohesion** (belonging, connectedness and inclusion);
- **Electoral participation** (enrolment, voting and related behaviours).
- **Political engagement** (party membership, contacting representatives, activism and protest).
- **Digital civic engagement** (online political expression, information seeking and mobilisation).
- **Trust in institutions** (confidence in government, media and democratic processes).
- **Civic education** (knowledge, skills and learning experiences that support democratic participation).

Together, these themes capture key dimensions of civic literacy, participation and connection, and provided a practical lens for comparing dataset coverage and gaps across age groups.

While mapping the data landscape for civic engagement – the collection of all datasets put forward by hackathon participants – datasets were mapped and compared along three axes:

- The age range covered by the dataset.
- The variety of questions on civic engagement.
- The nature of the data collection methodology.

There are also specialised surveys, such as, the Australian Election Study (covering electoral participation and political engagement) or Scanlon’s ‘Mapping Social Cohesion’. Across the hackathon, participants found that there is no single dataset which comprehensively links multiple dimensions of civic engagement across all age groups. As explored below, there are also limits on the type of questions and categories observed.

Data in this space is generally collected by research foundations, government departments, and tertiary institutions. It is mostly available for research purposes through the Australian Data Archive.

The most useful datasets for mapping civic life journeys will be longitudinal ones that cover a wide age range and contain multiple datapoints on each of civic literacy, participation and connection.

The charts below represent the survey dataset coverage across the three axes mentioned above. Importantly, only relative conclusions should be drawn from these charts.

The hackathon identified 15 datasets currently suitable for an initial meta-analysis of civic engagement data. These are listed below and used for analysis in the subsequent charts:

- Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Aus (OECD), OECD Data Explorer
- Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)
- Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY)
- Mission Australia Youth Survey
- ABS Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (ACLD)
- ABS General Social Survey (GSS)
- Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)
- Trust in Democracy Survey (APSC)
- Australian Youth Barometer
- Australian Temperament Project (ATP)
- Australian Election Study (AES)
- Scanlon: Mapping Social Cohesion
- NAPLAN Civics and Citizenship
- Mckinnon Index
- Volunteering Australia

These datasets are represented here as they contain at least one indicator of civic engagement and they allowed comparison of these civic engagement indicators between age groups, hence allowing a possible analysis and mapping of a civic life journey. Other datasets were also identified during the hackathon that did not fit neatly into this category but have future or adjacent potential. These alternative datasets are mentioned in a following section.

There is a fundamental challenge to using the civic life journey concept. How can different types of civic engagement, in different contexts, be combined and aggregated in a rigorous and repeatable way such that legitimate comparisons of civic engagement are possible over a life course? To use the civic life journey concept to its fullest potential this should be addressed in some way.

Assessment of data sources

The hackathon participants largely identified surveys as the primary data sources. These include longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys.

There was limited forms of administrative data. For example, none of the groups identified data sets that tracked cross-organisation membership and attendance records, or outcome measures of programs. There were also few data sets focused on tracking digital engagement.

There were no consolidated data or identified analysis from program and service delivery, such as records of who participated in experiential learning like parliamentary visits or youth engagement programs. Nor was there information on forms of parent-teacher involvement in schools or work-place volunteering programs and uptake.

Age coverage of datasets

Figure 2 provides an indication of the density of age range covered by the aforementioned datasets. From this, an idea of the age brackets of relatively high coverage can be discerned from those with low coverage.

Hot and Cold Spots

Age Range Coverage of Civic Engagement Datasets

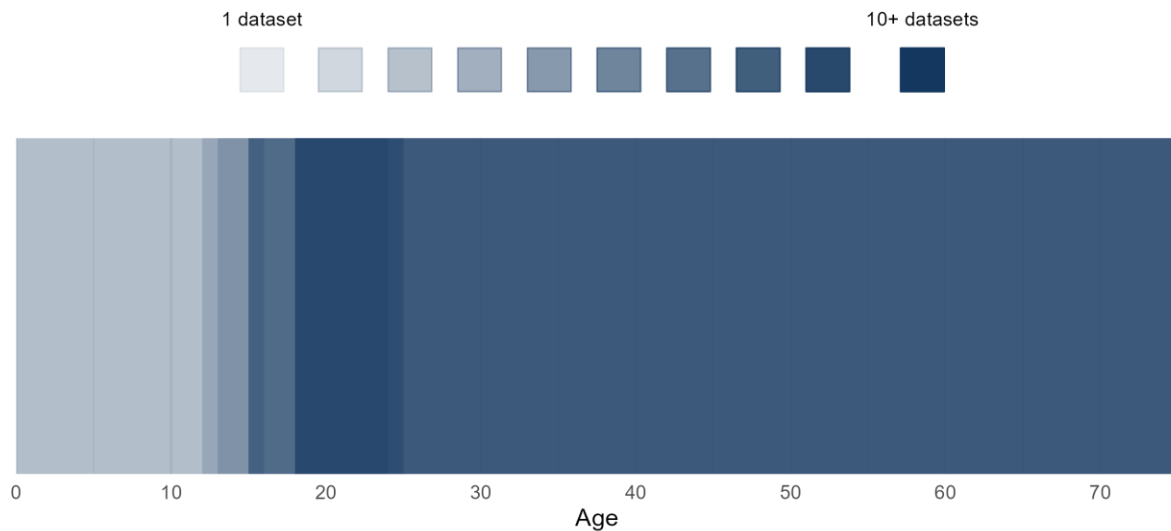


Figure 2: Hot and cold spots across age for coverage by civic engagement databases

The hackathon suggests that the most significant data collection occurs for those aged 18-25, a period of the civic life journey transitioning out of secondary school years. This demographic cohort has a relatively higher density of coverage than others as there are several datasets in this space that focus solely on these age brackets.

Datasets often have a clear minimum age of participants – however, it is much less common for a dataset to have a hard cutoff maximum age, for example, older age groups can be categorised as 75+. Consequently, for ages over 18, these charts depict age groups that are *potentially*, rather than *necessarily*, represented within the dataset. Further analysis into the age composition of these datasets would be required for a more thorough mapping of age range coverage.

While all age groups above 18 are ostensibly well covered, there is the smallest coverage of datasets specifically focused on older age groups. Retirement, bereavement, and the declining health that comes with old age are all key transition points and the lack of a specific dataset could be a gap or cold spot in services or access to civic engagement opportunities

Thematic coverage of datasets by age

Note: nuance may be lost by the broad categorisation of civic indicators used here. A systematic analysis of the datasets to a greater granularity is possible but was not feasible in this iteration of this report. Additionally, some information about the contents of the datasets may have been missed.

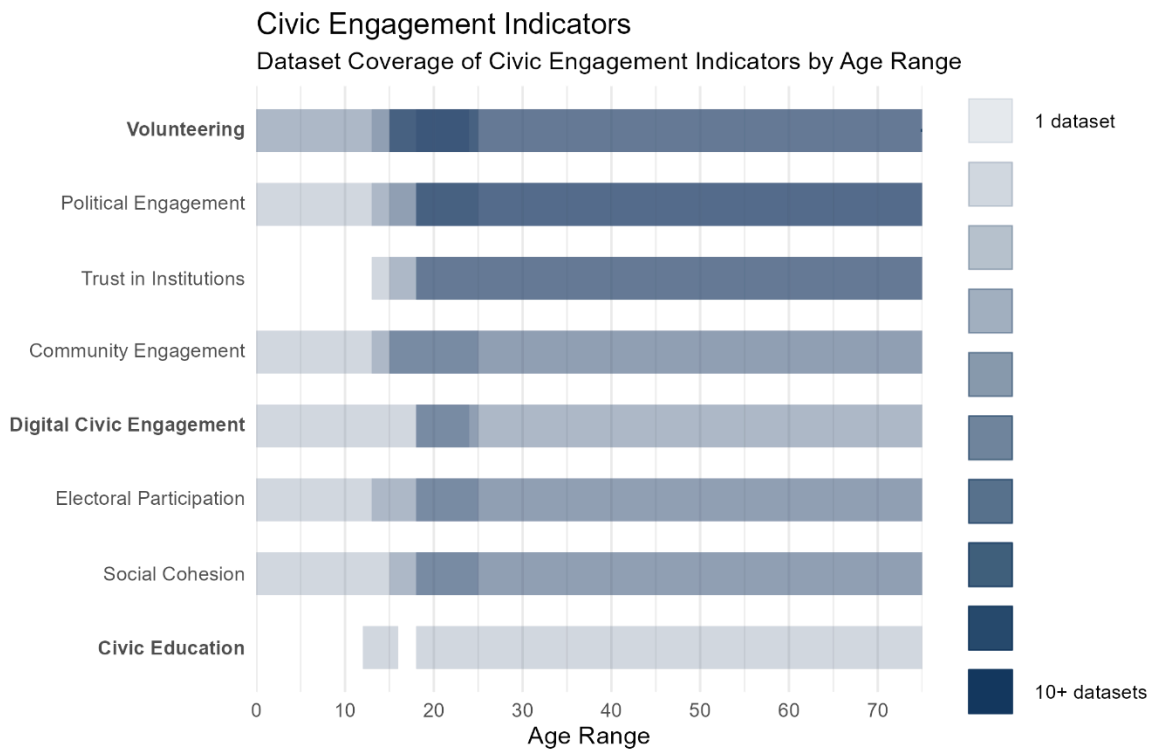


Figure 3: Thematic coverage of datasets by age

After examining the datasets and the areas covered, Figure 3 segments the datasets by the indicator of civic engagement they captured. Datasets were deemed to contain data on a civic engagement indicator if there were at least one variable, question, or subject area present that fit into these broad categories. No analysis was done to ascertain the quality of the coverage of an indicator for the purposes of Figure 3. There was also no consideration given to how many variables a dataset may contain on a civic engagement indicator.

Of all the indicators of civic engagement covered, volunteering is the most common aspect across surveys. This does not include formal and official data collection methods for other volunteering data by organisations or communities, data which might enable more additional analysis or cross-checking in the future.

Dataset coverage by age range: longitudinal and repeated cross sectional

Figure 4 compares civic engagement data coverage across life stages while differentiating for data collection methodology. There is a greater density of repeated cross-sectional datasets.

Hot and Cold Spots: Longitudinal vs Repeated Cross Sectional
Age Range Coverage of Civic Engagement Datasets

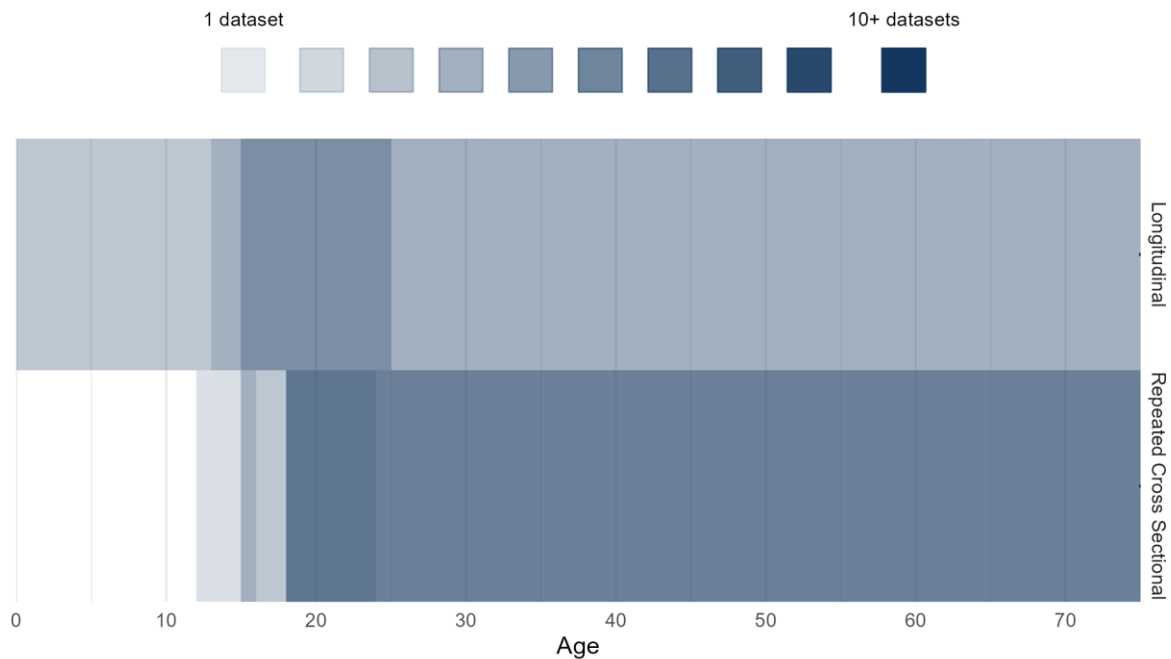


Figure 4: Hot and cold spots for longitudinal versus repeated cross-sectional datasets

This shows that longitudinal data collects more information about childhood, while cross-sectional collections generally only survey people above 18 years of age. The hackathon teams explored the potential for using longitudinal data and generally found it more suitable than other types of data. The findings from the initial analysis of longitudinal datasets are summarised below.

An important feature here is that repeated cross-sectional data cannot be used to map individualised civic life journeys in the manner that longitudinal data can.

Thematic coverage of datasets by age: longitudinal and repeated cross sectional

When accounting for different data collection methodologies, a clearer indication of hot and cold spots emerges. There are large gaps in the data ecosystem for longitudinal data on a range of civic engagement components. There is a large gap in longitudinal data for digital civic engagement.

Given that digital platforms are becoming a primary vehicle for civic engagement, for data in this space to stay relevant (and for the civic life journey concept to be used effectively), then this needs to be captured.

Civic Engagement Dataspace: Longitudinal vs Repeated Cross Section: Presence of Civic Engagement Indicators in Datasets and their Age Range

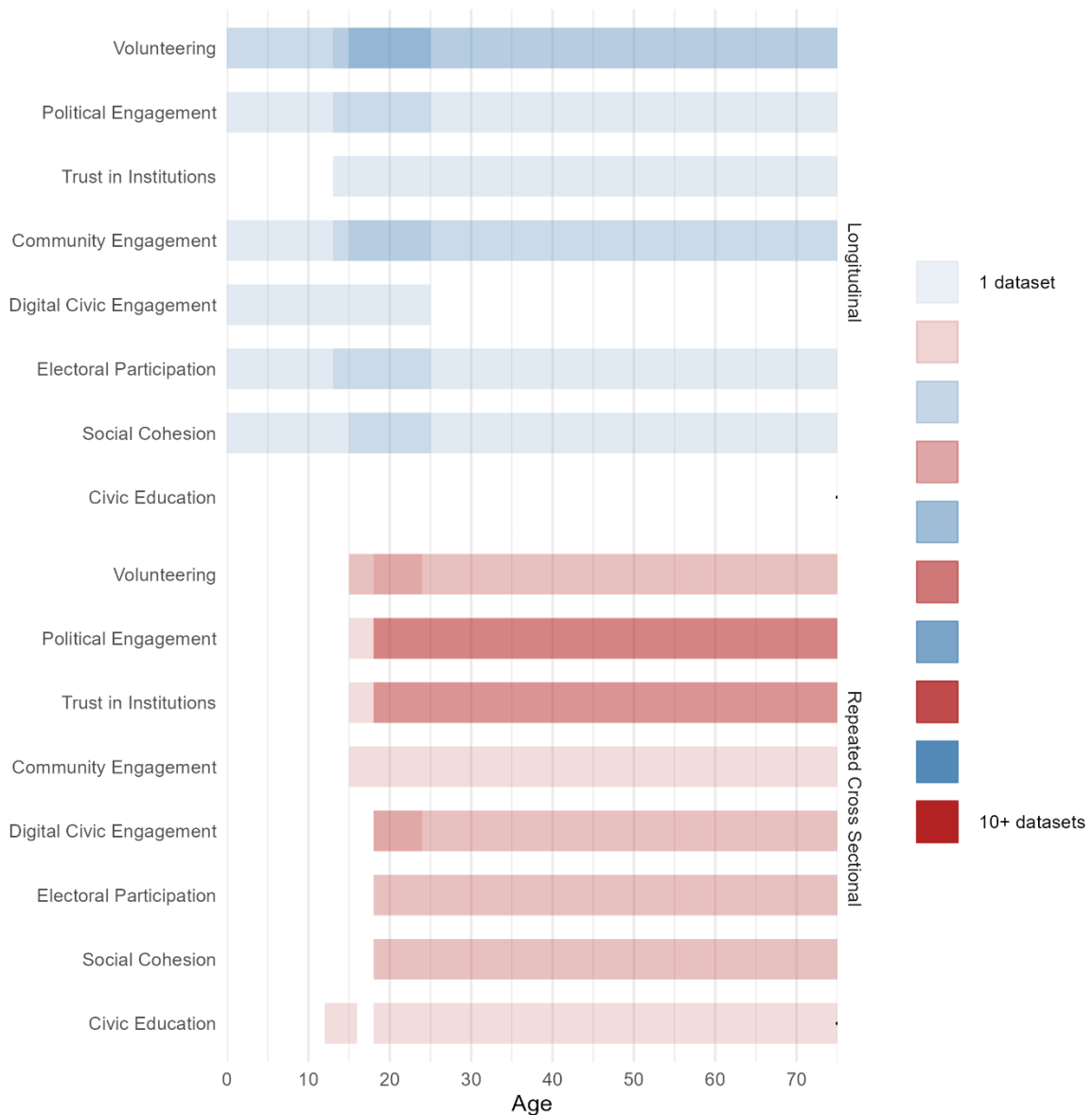


Figure 5: Longitudinal versus repeated cross sectional by civic engagement indicators

There is also a cold spot for longitudinal data on civic education. Evidence suggests that civic education is a key driver in civic engagement in later life. NAPLAN Civics and Citizenship data is linked to LSAC and LSAY, which could be used to fill this gap.

Again, it should be noted that a wide array of variables, survey questions, and thematic areas on civic engagement have been forced into broad categories for the sake of visualisation. It is therefore inevitable that some nuance and accuracy have been lost as a result, with the possible introduction of ambiguity. This should be kept in mind when examining charts in this section.

Other cold spots

Multicultural and diverse communities

Some hackathon participants noted that multicultural and diverse communities are not necessarily being reflected in the data. It is not clear if civic life journeys can be aggregated up from the individual, especially across different demographics. These two factors mean that careful consideration needs to be taken when trying to understand the civic life journeys of different cultural groups. It was also noted that the Australian context presents a unique but transferable opportunity to explore the civic life journeys of different communities in the multicultural nation.

Invisible civic engagement

Invisible forms of civic engagement are often informal, mundane, and small-scale actions that take place outside of formal political structures. Actions such as ethical consuming, creative resistance, unpaid care work and online activism are examples of civic engagement that are hard to capture with traditional data collection methods. This is a persistent gap within the civic engagement data ecosystem, potentially risking further exclusion while privileging certain forms of engagement. Approaches such as youth workshops to collect data might be one option to capture these more 'invisible' forms of engagement.

Negative engagement

The types of civic engagement examined thus far could be considered generally positive. Volunteering, engaging in community, and political advocacy are assumed to have a benefit to the community. Harassment and intimidation of public officials, spreading mis- and dis-information are activities that could be considered as civic engagement despite generally negatively affecting individuals and communities.

A focus on negative forms of engagement, rather than just the absence of positive forms of engagement, is potentially missed in the current makeup of surveys and studies. There is also a question as to whether surveys are an effective mechanism for capturing such behaviours.

Key datasets for civic life journeys

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

The LSAC contains data on several thematic areas of civic engagement, with participants now aged between 22-27 years old. Volunteering, community engagement, social cohesion, electoral participation, and political engagement are all included within the study. Importantly, digital forms of engagement are also covered. It appears to be the only longitudinal study that covers digital civic engagement.

The Australian Temperament Project (ATP)

ATP covers civic engagement most broadly amongst the longitudinal studies. It contains variables or lines of questioning that cover electoral participation, community engagement, volunteering and charitable activities, and political engagement. Within each of these indicators there are several questions or variables. Additionally, it covers a wide age range. This positions ATP as a valuable resource for understanding changing behaviours and related factors that might influence civic engagement.

There are currently three generations of participants in the study, with civic engagement specific items from ages 13 to 42 for Gen 2s and years 43 to 70 for Gen1s. For Gen 3s, there are age-appropriate civic engagement items included which attempt to capture environmental and social conscience.

Other datasets

These datasets have not yet been mentioned in this report, and they are not featured in the plots as they do not obviously contain an explicit indicator of civic engagement. They are included here as they may still be useful for the analysis of civic life journeys.

Beginning a New Life in Australia: Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants (BNLA)

The BNLA study follows migrants that arrived in Australia in 2013 and covers topics such as community support, social capital, and level of trust in community groups and organisations. Arriving in Australia is a key transition point, meaning this could be a very valuable dataset for understanding the civic life journey for this cohort.

NSW Government Administrative Data

The NSW Government has a rich set of linked datasets that could be used for mapping civic engagement over life stages. Participants mapped out several datasets that contain data on a range of different civic engagement elements. The NSW Customer Insights dataset covers experiences with government services which in turn can inform trust in institutions. The NSW Government engages youth in a targeted manner through initiatives across multiple portfolios. The reports from these activities can offer insights into opportunities and gaps around civic engagement for youth. These datasets are not as readily available as other sources given requirements for ethics approval and a solid governance structure.

Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)

POCLS is a study to link child protection, health, education and offending administrative data for children in care with first-hand accounts. This dataset could reveal inflection points where communities lose trust and disengage from broader supportive social systems and structures.

Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA)

[PLIDA](#) is a secure data asset combining information on health, education, government payments, income and taxation, employment, and population demographics (including the Census) over time. It provides whole-of-life insights about various population groups in Australia, such as the interactions between their characteristics, use of services like healthcare and education, and outcomes including improved health and employment. This is a possible resource for further research.

Key findings from hackathon team analysis

Limitations of findings from hackathon

Participants of the hackathon thoroughly stressed the many caveats to their analyses. There was not enough time for the necessary checks and balances required to make concrete conclusions. As such, the findings and methods are better regarded as proofs-of-concept or possible directions of further research, rather than rigorous findings.

The purpose of this hackathon was to test what is possible, and determine where efforts would be most valuable in the future, not reach immediate conclusions.

Causal pathways analysis preliminary findings

There is a question about how civic education and experiences of engagement at one stage of life impacts your likelihood to be engaged later, or your satisfaction and knowledge of how Australian democracy works. There is an opportunity to use longitudinal data to map civic life journeys and analyse the causal pathways to satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

LSAC and ATP were analysed using different methods of predictive analysis, including decision trees and Bayesian networks. Variables that cover school belonging, strength of friendships, and engagement in school emerged from these analyses with the strongest predictive power of different civic engagement indicators. While not robust enough to treat as conclusive, this analysis is complemented by other work put forth during the hackathon. One participant argued that, for young people, transitions such as leaving school, entering university or the workforce, and moving out of home are strongly associated with increased loneliness and distress.

Research from the Scanlon Institute further contextualises these preliminary findings at a cross-sectional population scale:

The Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion 2025 survey shows a sharp drop in Australians' sense of belonging, from 63% feeling a great sense of belonging in 2020 to 47% in 2025, with the lowest belonging and highest loneliness among young people (18-24).

These analyses support the idea that school years and the years thereafter are a key transition point in a civic life journey and, as one participant put it, "Young people face the highest civic risk and the greatest civic opportunity". The experiences in youth also become predictors of civic engagement and satisfaction later in life journeys, however this finding needs greater analysis with longitudinal data.

Volunteering emerged as the most prevalent or available descriptor of civic engagement within the data ecosystem. It was covered by the datasets most widely. The status of volunteering as the most official and widely measured of the indicators of civic engagement is reinforced by the fact that it has been used as a response variable for predictive analysis of civic engagement.

Participants noted that LSAC's utility is declining and that there is a continuous need for new cohort studies with a focus on civic engagement.

Recommended analysis directions using existing data

Conduct more thorough analysis into early life social capital and school experiences as predictors for civic engagement

The hackathon considered both a range of datasets relevant for civic life journeys and methods of analysis that showed promise for predicting civic engagement. One such method was a Bayesian Network, a probabilistic graphical model that represents a set of variables and their conditional dependencies through a Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG). Several reasons were suggested for ongoing usefulness for this type of analysis:

- Explainability and transparency
- Efficiency with small samples

- Quantifying uncertainty
- Enabling causal inferences
- Building stakeholder trust

Decision trees were also used throughout the hackathon to analyse the data from the Australian Temperament Project. A suggested analysis technique was to use machine learning to narrow the range of variables and find those with the highest feature importance.

These analysis techniques could be used more deeply and rigorously on data from the ATP to build on the work done in the hackathon. There is also an opportunity to use them on a wider range of datasets with a focus on the relationship between civic engagement and a sense of belonging in early life and school engagement.

Use Directed Cyclic Graph models to capture the contemporaneous feedback

As an extension to the Bayesian networks and DAG's, Directed Cyclic Graphs could be used to capture potential relationships between variables that feedback to one another continuously. For example, how volunteering affects belonging at the same time and vice versa.

Use PLIDA to understand civic life journeys

Participants of the hackathon recommended several potential directions of analysis using the existing data. There were multiple recommendations to use the Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) for the purposes of better understanding civic life journeys. While there is not an explicit indicator of civic engagement within PLIDA currently, the ABS is planning to link GSS data with PLIDA. Due to the collection of volunteering and trust in institutions data in GSS and the wide range of data in PLIDA, this coupling will have high potential for analysing civic life journeys.

Use the GSS to analyse the relationship between volunteering and trust in institutions

The [ABS General Social Survey](#) (GSS) measures both volunteering and trust in institutions. While publicly released tables do not yet cross-tabulate those directly, the design of GSS and other volunteering data (e.g., State of Volunteering in Queensland) could help determine whether there is an association between declining volunteering and declining institutional trust, which could be explicitly tested using microdata. Although, the inclusion of GSS in PLIDA could supersede this approach.

Recommendations for structural change in data collection

Bolstering the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is considering including the parents of the children in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth.

Identifying youth and family civic engagement (including with education) allows integrated responses to support youth initiatives with interventions to provide reinforcing family environments, as well as enhance or renew adult civic education and awareness.

Create measurement devices for civic engagement

In the hackathon responses, there were several suggestions for different measurement techniques that could be helpful:

- Develop an “AU Civic Engagement Scale”.
- A “Participation Index” could be developed to quantify how engaged a community is and level of engagement opportunities available.

Include civic education and digital civic engagement in studies

An important insight from this hackathon is that digital civic engagement is not captured well in the current make up of surveys and studies. If the data is to stay current in this space this is an area that should be addressed.

Additionally, civic education is another component that appears undermeasured, with only two datasets considered in the hackathon touching on it. There is evidence to suggest that civic education in early years is correlated with greater civic engagement in later life. By increasing the measurement of civic education, this relationship could be further analysed.

Create dataset containing determinants of civic engagement

There was a suggestion of creating a ‘Determinants of Civic Engagement Dataset’ by using a framework that combines Max-Neef’s Key Needs with data on interactions with social system infrastructure:

- **Step 1:** Create life journey pathways of Max-Neef’s ‘Key Needs’, by mapping Key Needs alongside Civic Engagement to help identify how and why people or groups engage.
- **Step 2:** Map pathways of interaction with system social infrastructure based on behaviours that seek need fulfilment or those that involve providing for others.
- **Step 3:** Build dataset of participation and utilisation rates.

Due to the wide range of data needs for this approach, PLIDA could be a good resource.

Policy & programs: civic engagement opportunities across the life journey

Mapping civic engagement opportunities by life stage

Figure 6 on the following page outlines the key types of civic engagement opportunities identified by participants during the hackathon. This mapping is not intended as exhaustive. It should be understood as a high-level summary of the broad categories of civic engagement available to people in Australia across the course of their lives. It does not represent the depth or range of opportunities available in each category. The age ranges depicted here represent estimations. Age eligibility and relevance will naturally vary by individuals, groups, and specific programs or engagement opportunities.

Research and discussion on current programs addressing civic participation formed a substantially smaller part of the hackathon, with only about a quarter of participants focusing on this issue during the event (whereas the majority focused on datasets). Consequently, the level of detail and coverage is substantially less than for the data section above.

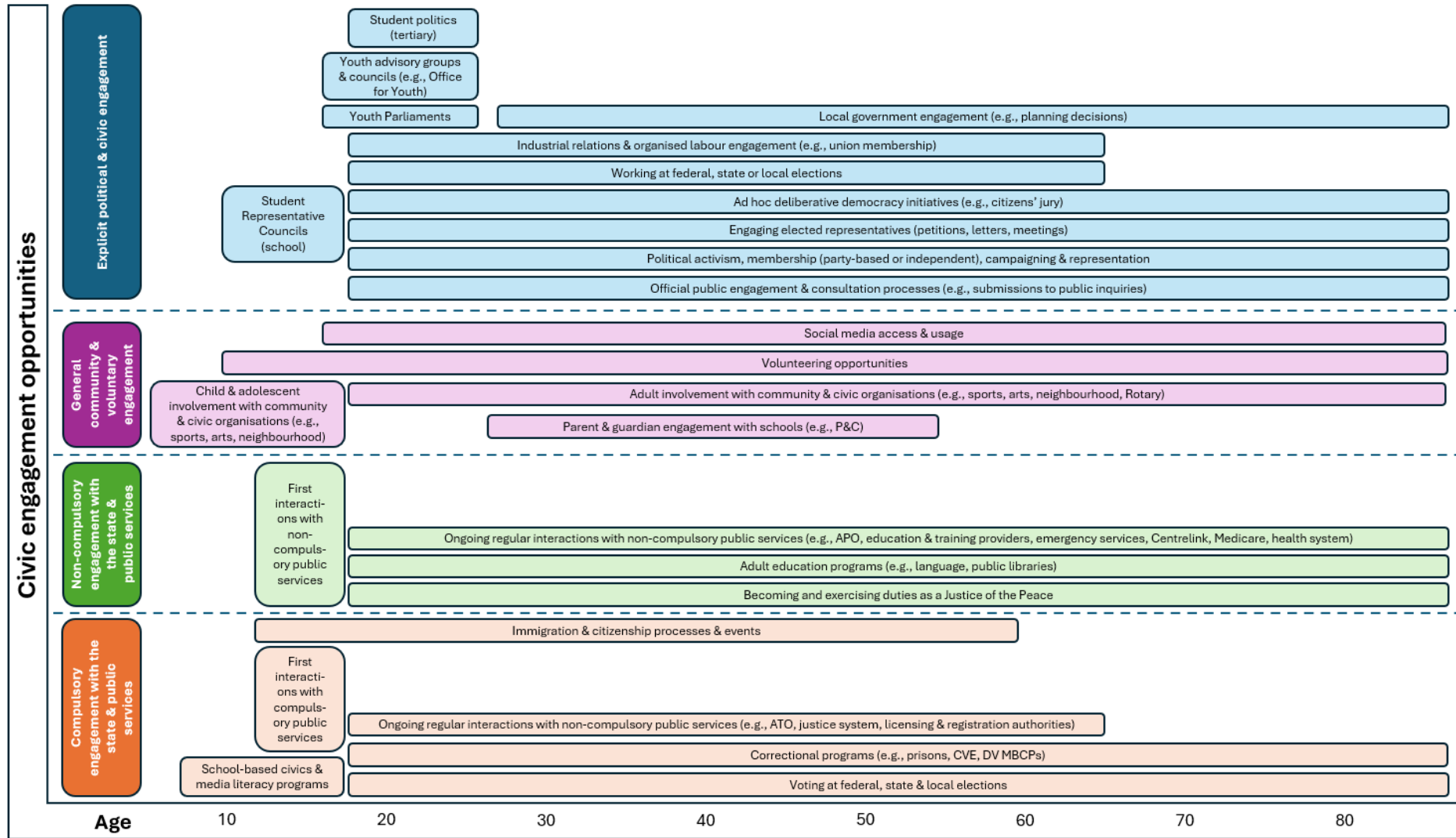


Figure 6: Civic engagement opportunities by type mapped across age

Understanding the landscape of civic engagement opportunities

Adolescence and young adulthood constitute a key transition point

Clustered around the age bracket 16 to 24 are a series of key life transition points, with corresponding dedicated civic engagement opportunities. In this period, individuals leave school and start work or tertiary education, they interact with the state and public services in their own right for the first time (e.g., using healthcare, paying tax), and become full members of the Australian political community (social media access (16), rights to vote and become an elected representative (18)). Reflecting this key transition point, dedicated civic engagement opportunities designed for adolescents and young adults are clustered around this point. For example, school-based representative councils, youth or student political institutions (e.g., youth parliaments), and young person advisory groups.

Civic engagement opportunities become generic after young adulthood

Beyond the mid-20s, civic engagement opportunities tend to become more generic or 'flat' in the sense that they are not specifically designed or intended for specific age groups. This likely reflects well-established assumptions around individuals becoming progressively more competent, knowledgeable and well-resourced with age to undertake civic engagement – and therefore not demanding or requiring dedicated forums or opportunities. There are specific exceptions to this, such as advocacy organisations or initiatives around seniors. The preponderance of youth-oriented opportunities represented here may also reflect the focus taken by working groups during the hackathon.

Though civic engagement opportunities may remain generic after young adulthood, individuals may engage with each opportunity in a variable way over time as a consequence of their life stage. For instance, an adolescent or young adult would be more likely to engage in political campaigning and activism through social media and grassroots organising, whereas a middle-aged or older adult might prefer to engage through donations and formal political party membership.

Civic engagement can be mandatory or voluntary, and explicit or incidental

The civic engagement opportunities identified can be distinguished qualitatively into four broad categories based on two criteria. First, whether they are mandatory or voluntary. Compulsory civic engagement (lowest, orange category in Figure 6) constitutes the 'bare minimum' for individuals to function in Australian society, as well as coercive measures such as paying tax or programs for offenders. All other forms of civic engagement are to some degree voluntary.

The second distinguishing criteria is whether the opportunity is explicitly civic or political in nature, or whether the civic element is incidental or secondary. The highest, blue category in Figure 6 represents opportunities that have a specific political or civic purpose. The other three categories entail some degree of civic engagement, but this is an incidental element of the activity.

Examples of existing programs

Several examples of civic engagement programs were mentioned throughout the hackathon including:

Queensland Youth Parliament

A six-month program run by YMCA Queensland for ages 16 to 25. Individuals nominate to represent an electorate as a youth member. Participants debate and work together in committees on 'Youth Bills', culminating in a 'sitting week' at Parliament House in Brisbane where the bills are considered and voted on, alongside social activities.

Australian Capital Territory YourSay Panel

A program for anyone aged 16 or over who lives in the ACT that allows people to directly articulate how government can better deliver services, policies and programs. The program is based online with individuals filling out surveys on a range of topics, decisions or programs. Information is used by government to inform its decisions. Participants have a few days to a week to respond to a survey. If they do so, they go into a lottery to receive a prize worth \$100.

Department of Social Services Volunteer Grants

DSS provides grants of \$1,000 to \$5,000 through annual rounds to supports not-for-profit organisations with increased participation in volunteering.

Recommendations and ideas

Better understanding youth programs to improve their impact

The hackathon raised several queries about the reach and appeal of youth focused civic engagement opportunities:

- Ongoing challenges (especially skills deficits) for institutions in effectively engaging young people in political and policy processes.
- Many youth programs, while well intentioned and well designed, may appeal to only a narrow section of young people based, for instance, on their interests and access to resources. This implies that engagement numbers might reflect a high volume of repeat participants across programs, rather than broad range of youth.
- Youth civic engagement programs are commonly focused on issues that are specific to young people (e.g., adolescent mental health; education). However, this does not necessarily correlate with the issues that are most consequential to, or considered important by, young people (e.g., housing, inequality, health care, environment).

These key queries indicate a need for deeper, qualitative data on the substantive focus of youth-focused civic engagement programs and the profile of participants. This data could be used to inform iterative program design, as well as system-level funding decisions.

Civic engagement opportunities beyond voluntary and youth-focused programs

Analysis of Figure 6 above also reveals opportunities for other types of civic engagement programs that target different demographics or focal areas:

- **Programs specifically designed for older age brackets.** Some survey data suggests lower levels of satisfaction with democracy and lower trust in government amongst the 65+ age bracket. This may indicate a need for life-long civic education and engagement programs. This will ensure that older cohorts are included in programming.
- **Engaging people in forums beyond community volunteering.** Most of the civic engagement opportunities in the 'blue' and 'purple' categories in Figure 6 require

individuals to exercise initiative, leverage existing connections, and contribute unpaid labour. These factors may exclude a large body of people who are resource and time constrained. There may be opportunities for greater incidental civic engagement in forums such as the workplace or for parents of school children that require minimal additional effort or commitment by individuals.

- **Putting a more deliberate civic engagement lens over incidental opportunities.** Programs in the lower three categories in Figure 6 (purple, green, orange) could be re-designed or re-purposed to make the civic engagement or civic education elements more systematic or deliberate in order to broaden their reach and impact.

For organisations designing and administering programs, these suggestions could be used to broaden the appeal and focus of their initiatives. For funders and policymakers, these suggestions for expanding civic engagement programs could be used to encourage new areas of effort by civil society.

Evaluating civic engagement programs

The limitations of the hackathon meant that evaluations of civic engagement programs were not examined. However, participants did identify a need for more disaggregated analysis of who was accessing programs, and the impact they are having.

Additionally, there is ongoing challenge of capturing the impact of programs until they are required to collect meaningful data or be evaluated.

Risks and opportunities related to loneliness and transition points

One recommendation for civic engagement programming that was deeply examined during the hackathon was to focus on ‘loneliness hotspots’.

Assuming that social connection and belonging are foundational to democratic participation, then loneliness creates a civic risk pathway of disengagement, mistrust, and vulnerability. It was further contended that young people face the highest civic risk and the greatest civic opportunity in this respect.

Consequently, a civic life journey framework could target ‘loneliness hotspots’, or key transition points where civic risks increase, such as leaving school or tertiary transitions, unemployment or financial shocks, relocation, family transitions, and retirement. The core idea is that these are the moments where government and civil society should be deliberately building connection, belonging, and civic capability, not just responding in crisis. Place-based, early connection at these points can significantly increase belonging, capability, participation and democratic resilience.

Make formal government consultations more attractive and accessible

Participants noted the large number of formal consultation processes for public inquiries and other matters of policy change or law reform that happen at the local, state and federal levels. However, it was recognised that such processes are not always accessible (in terms of being known about or navigable) or attractive to some individuals or groups. Improvements to such consultation processes were recommended, including to use innovative means to raise awareness and to make the submission process more easily completed. Examples of existing

good practice include the Australian Electoral Commission's efforts to encourage engagement by people on redistributions of federal electorates through [video explainers](#).

Data about individuals making submissions to such consultation processes could also be collected and analysed to greater effect. For instance, collecting basic demographic data (e.g., age, location, income) about those making submissions could enable a better understanding of how consultation processes can better target and engage underrepresented groups. Such data could be analysed together with that collected by some longitudinal datasets mentioned in the previous section that collect information about whether respondents have engaged in public consultations.

Future research collaborations & potential next steps

The civic life journey concept gives policymakers, researchers, and data custodians a powerful tool to reframe thinking and process on civic engagement. The hackathon has demonstrated that using this concept to map out data, policies, and programs in the civic engagement space can provide greater insight into issues for democratic resilience, while also guiding the direction of future research and analysis.

The hackathon identified three interconnected areas of work needed to advance the civic life journey framework from concept to policy-relevant practice. These are sequential in that stronger data collection expands what analysis can achieve. However, they are not strictly dependent: existing longitudinal and administrative datasets already offer significant analytical opportunities that can be pursued now, in parallel with efforts to improve what is collected.

1. Sharpen data collection across the civic life journey: ages, engagement types

Current datasets leave critical gaps in what can be measured and for whom. Three priorities stand out.

- First, **digital civic engagement is undermeasured in existing longitudinal studies**, despite being an increasingly preferred vehicle for participation. Future augmentation of studies should include variables capturing different forms and intensities.
- Second, **non-youth cohorts are not well monitored**: specialised data for older cohorts is not plentiful despite this age period containing key transition points. Generation 1 of the Australian Temperament Project is a subset of data that remedies this slightly.
- Third, **administrative data on access to and participation in civic programs**, including workplace volunteering uptake, school-based civic programs, community organisation membership is not consolidated or accessible for analysis, whether academic or policy. Working with state and Commonwealth agencies, including ABS, to unlock this data and understand the potential for data linkage with PLIDA, represents the single largest underutilised opportunity in this space.

2. Fund new analytic methodological approaches to map causal pathways and differentiate community needs

Existing longitudinal and administrative data already contains more analytical potential than has been realised. The hackathon demonstrated that Bayesian networks, Directed Acyclic Graphs, and decision tree methods can illuminate causal pathways between early-life experiences and later civic engagement. This analysis should now be pursued more rigorously, with the full data sets and a wider range of variables.

Beyond causal pathways, there is a need for analysis that differentiates community needs: understanding how preferred forms of engagement vary by geography, age, cultural background, and life stage is essential for moving from generic programs to targeted investment. Link's civic opportunity index analysis which maps the supply-side civic infrastructure at the LGA level offers one model for this kind of spatial differentiation, but could be further analysed for impact on access to opportunities at different life stages.

Other priority analyses include:

- Formal testing of early-life social capital and school engagement as predictors of civic outcomes.
- Leveraging the imminent linkage of GSS and PLIDA to conduct civic engagement analyses.
- The practical projects that will be most valuable should emerge from this analytical work, rather than being determined in advance.

3. Advance a framework for civic engagement across life journey, and enhance understanding of what works, when, and for whom

Neither Commonwealth nor state policymakers currently have sufficient evidence to fully assess the long-term impacts of how civic education and engagement programs achieve meaningful, sustained impact, or how different forms of engagement compound across a life course. Two strands of work might help:

- First, a **more rigorous mapping of the existing program landscape**. Building on the typology developed in this hackathon, a systematic survey of current civic engagement opportunities across life stages, geographies, and population groups would identify gaps in reach, substantive focus, and program capacity, and help distinguish programs with broad organic reach from those serving a narrow, self-selecting audience.
- Second, **evaluation**. Efforts areas could include: A process to measure impacts of existing programs to improve design and longitudinal tracking of participants; frameworks that measure cumulative and immediate impact; and attention to how incidental community activities, P&C committees, local sports clubs, or workplace programs, can be redesigned to build civic capacity more deliberately.

A practical starting point for the program strand would be a series of cross-government workshops bringing together policy areas such as education, social services, employment, health, sports and local government. Together, they can examine how existing programs can be better connected to reinforce a coherent civic life journey, rather than operating in parallel with no shared framework. This kind of coordination work does not require new funding or new data: it requires a shared organising concept, which the civic life journey framework is positioned to provide.

Appendix A: Summary of Civic Engagement Indicators in Datasets

Presence of civic engagement indicators								
Dataset	Volunteering	Community Engagement	Social Cohesion	Electoral Participation	Political Engagement	Digital Civic Engagement	Trust in Institutions	Civic Education
National Assessment Program - CC (NAP-CC)								
Mission Australia Youth Survey								
Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY)								
ABS GSS								
Volunteering Australia Dataset / State of Volunteering Reports								
Mckinnon Index								
Australian Youth Barometer								
Trust in Democracy Survey (APSC)								
Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)								
Australian Temperament Project (ATP)								
Australian Election Study								
ABS Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset								
Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Aus (OECD)								
Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)								
Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)								
Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC)								
Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants								
Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion								
Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA)								
Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE)								
NSW Customer Insights								
BOCSAR								