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Executive Summary & Methodology

From Fall 2019-Spring 2020, the University of Montana’s Big Sky Poll conducted a grant funded project for the Headwaters Foundation. This research places a particular focus on the perspectives of Montana and Native American youth (18-26 year-olds) to understand why they participate (or do not) in public policymaking processes. The data here represent the viewpoints of 973 participants across two research phases.

Phase I of the research project consisted of 18 telephone interviews to capture baseline perspectives of business leaders, elected officials, elections administrators, tribal members, advocates, and other Montana community members. Interviews were transcribed and inductively analyzed to detect four major themes surrounding participation in policymaking, which include:

- Civic engagement
- Time and resource commitment
- Access to information
- Desire for civic education

Phase I Interviews

| Type of Organization | Gender | Background |
|----------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Civil Servant (6) | Male (6) | Non-Native (14) |
| Advocate (5) | Female (12) | Native American (4) |
| Elected Official (4) | | |
| Business Leaders (2) | | |
| Educator (1) | | |

These themes were presented to and discussed with the Headwaters Foundation’s Research Advisory Group on October 23, 2019. The themes served as a foundation to design the questions used for a telephone survey, online survey, and focus groups for Phase II of this project. Phase II included 955 participants. From January 28-February 22, 2020, the UM Research team partnered with West Research Group to conduct calls for the telephone survey. A random selection process was used to reach 800 respondents. From February 6-25, 2020, the UM team collaborated with Western Native Voice to send an online survey to their email distribution list (approximately 5,000 individuals). March 1-14, 2020, three focus groups were convened with Native and non-native students at the University of Montana and Montana State University-Billings.

Phase II Respondents

| Telephone Survey | Online Survey | Focus Groups |
|------------------|---------------|--------------|
| N = 800 | N = 142 | N = 13 |

This report presents the key findings from the data and identifies opportunities for increased participation (e.g. voter guide, mailed reminders, community leaders, Facebook live). For full results, Appendices I-IV provide aggregate results. These results are also posted to the [UM Big Sky Poll website](#). Additionally, a Tableau dashboard was created to interactively visualize results.

This report is organized into three sections. Section I illustrates the overall demographic data for Project phases I and II. Section II offers key findings across methodologies – interviews, telephone survey, online survey, and focus groups. Section III addresses project limitations and suggestions for future investment.

Section I: Overview of Demographic Data

This research represents the perspectives of 973 participants, including:

- 18 interview participants
- 800 respondents, telephone survey
- 142 respondents, online survey
- 13 participants, focus groups

Figure 1 illuminates the demographic breakdown by gender and background by methodology. For example, more women participated in interviews, the telephone survey, and focus groups. Specifically, more non-Native women participated in interviews, the telephone survey, and the online survey.

Figure 1: Gender and Background

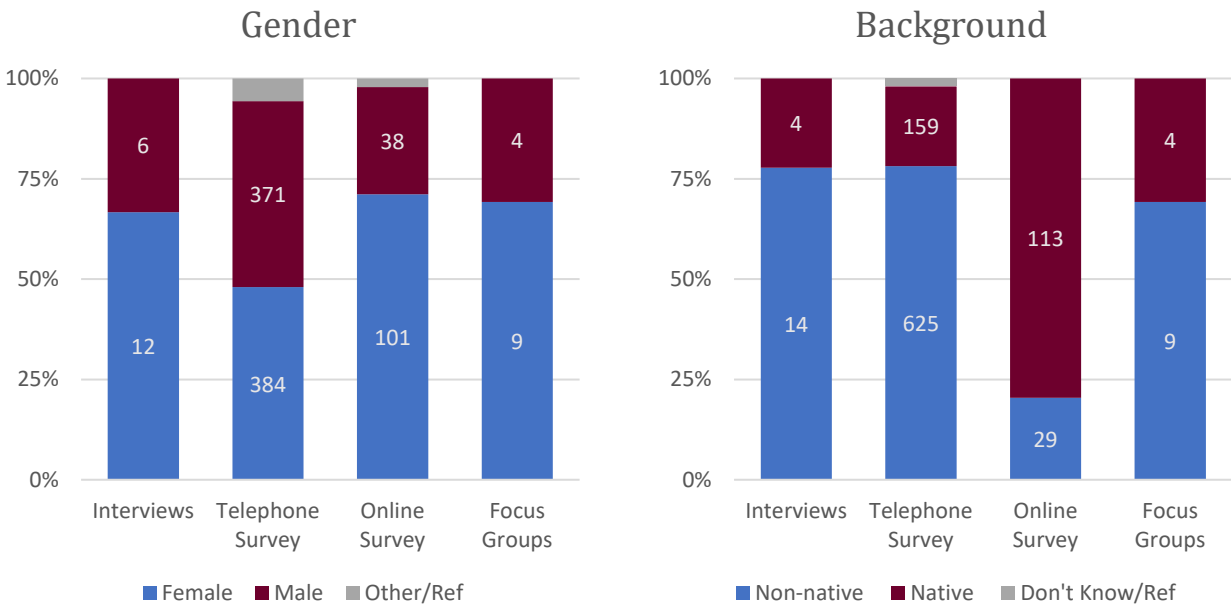


Table 1 illustrates a demographic breakdown of telephone and online survey participants. As Table 1 suggests, more than 480 women participated, with some college education. The vast majority of participants stated they are non-Native, 18-26 years old, and do not have children under the age of 18.

Table 1: Survey Demographics¹

N = 942 (800 Telephone, 142 Online)

Survey Respondents

| | Survey Respondents |
|--|--------------------|
| Native American | |
| Yes | 272 |
| No | 654 |
| Gender | |
| Female | 485 |
| Male | 409 |
| Non-binary/third gender/Other | 18 |
| Prefer not to answer | 30 |
| Age | |
| 18-26 | 402 |
| 27-46 | 289 |
| 47-66 | 160 |
| 67 or older | 59 |
| Prefer not to answer | 32 |
| Level of Education | |
| Some high school | 8 |
| High school/GED | 213 |
| Some college | 251 |
| Associate's degree | 99 |
| Bachelor's degree | 225 |
| Post baccalaureate (Master's, PhD, JD, MD, etc.) | 101 |
| Other | 25 |
| Political Party | |
| Republican | 142 |
| Independent | 140 |
| Democrat | 427 |
| Libertarian | 26 |
| Green | 10 |
| Other | 83 |
| Prefer not to answer | 114 |
| Total Household Income | |
| \$0 - \$20,000 | 299 |
| \$20,001 - \$37,000 | 190 |
| \$37,001 - \$46,000 | 68 |
| \$46,001 - \$57,000 | 66 |
| \$57,001 - \$88,000 | 82 |
| \$88,001 - \$150,000 | 91 |
| \$150,001 and above | 32 |
| Prefer not to answer | 114 |
| Parent or Guardian of Child under 18 | |
| Yes | 222 |
| No | 702 |
| Prefer not to answer | 18 |

¹ Note: A demographic breakdown of telephone and online respondents separately can be found in the data dashboard.

Section II: Findings

Section II offers key findings for each type of data collection. The full results are in Appendices I, II, III, and IV. We begin with an analysis of the interview data before turning to an examination of survey results and focus groups.

Interview Data Analysis

During Phase I of the investigation, eighteen individuals were interviewed during Fall 2019 to obtain perspectives about access to public policymaking in Montana. These interviews were transcribed and inductively examined yielding 4 broad themes.

Theme 1: Civic Education: Interview participants overwhelmingly noted that when it comes to civic engagement, many Montanans don't know where to start. The lack of education about public processes is a barrier to understanding what influence an individual's voice has in decision-making. As one respondent stated, "I think that the people who are most engaged are people who have been given the tools and training necessary and realize the importance and what it can do for communities." Repeatedly, respondents stressed the importance of a high school education to advance civic literacy as the initial entry point to understand how to participate. As another interviewee suggested, "Not everyone is informed, I was fortunate to get involved young. Not many people understand they can just drive to Helena and go to a committee hearing and tell people how things impact them."

Theme 2: Time & Resource Commitment: Respondents noted that active engagement requires time and resources. Several respondents representing low-income or minority stakeholders emphasized this prohibits many Montanans from public participation. One interviewee noted, "If you have support and functionality in parts of your life, you can engage more deeply. If you're not stressed about paying rent, you can be more involved. It is humbling to realize that when people have a lot going on with kids or aren't financially secure, they don't have time to think about civic engagement." This statement was consistent with respondents noting people with multiple jobs may not be able to make a City Council meeting or parents with young children do not have access to childcare to participate.

Theme 3: Access: Lack of access is a barrier to participation (e.g. socioeconomics, rural areas). Montana's expansive geography creates barriers for underserved and rural communities who find it difficult to engage with organizers in urban areas (if they are even aware of the activities). One interviewee noted, "Rural communities are often cut off from attending events in person or they get reached out to less and therefore engage less." Another aspect of this theme is simply the lack of information about civic activities. Interview participants expressed many people do not get involved because they do not know where to go, when to attend, or how to make a difference.

Theme 4: Pathways Forward: Although respondents noted barriers and systemic challenges which prohibit civic engagement there are potential pathways forward. Participants noted Montanans know their local government officials. These relationships could be leveraged to invest resources to create paid civic engagement fellowships at the local level. Another

consideration is partnering with high schools across the state to illuminate and amplify students' ideas. This form of engagement could evolve into a statewide civic education competition. As one interviewee noted, "Teaching kids in high school more about local government and giving them concrete examples of how to make a difference. Imagine Red Lodge asking them what they want to see in the community they grew up in – they came up with big ideas." Other considerations include increasing the use of technology, partnerships with Montana libraries to ensure individuals can easily access information and alternative voting methodologies (e.g. mail-in-ballots (paid postage); childcare at polling places).

These themes served as the baseline information to construct and design questions for our Phase II surveys (online and telephone) and focus groups.

Online and Telephone Survey Analysis

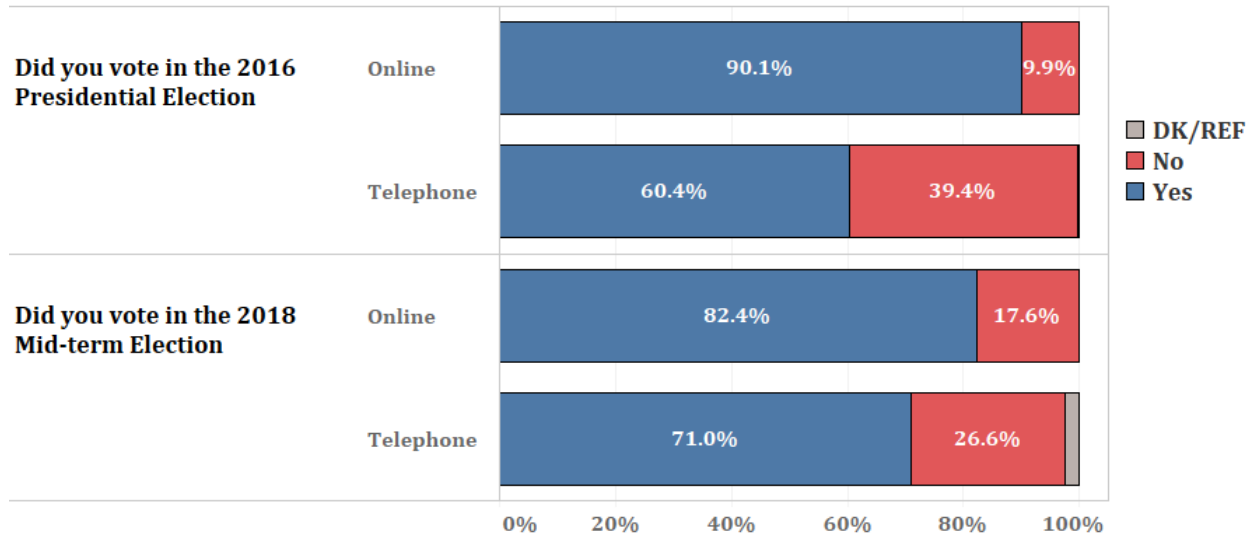
Appendix II and IV provide the complete aggregate results of the surveys. Nine hundred and forty-two individuals participated in the online and telephone surveys. Specifically, 800 participated in the telephone survey and 142 in the online survey. The telephone survey and online survey posed identical questions, including level of participation in voting, level of community engagement, and approaches to participation. The telephone survey drew a random sample from the combined, 7,000-person Forward Montana and Western Native Voice membership lists. The UM research team partnered with West Research Group to conduct calling. By way of comparison, the online survey was sent via email by Western Native Voice to their 5,000 members. To increase participation, three email reminders were sent and participants could be placed into a drawing to win an iPad for their participation.

Collectively, this data surfaced important findings, which we examine next.

Online vs. Telephone Responses

Although we focus our analyses on the collective obstacles and plausible solutions for the combined online and survey data, we begin with a few clear distinctions. First, there were demographic differences between the two sets of respondents. Most notably, 80 percent of the online respondents identified themselves as Native American compared to twenty percent of telephone respondents. Additionally, a higher percentage of self-identified women participated in the online survey (71 percent), while 48 percent of telephone respondents identified as female. There were also differences in the way respondents from the two different survey modes responded to some questions. For example, as Figure 2 suggests, a larger proportion of online respondents reported that they had voted in both the 2016 presidential and the 2018 mid-term elections (90 percent voted in 2016 and 82 percent voted in 2018). Comparatively, 60 percent of telephone respondents voted in the 2016 presidential election. Additionally, larger proportions of online respondents said they would be more likely to engage with their community when offered courses on government, live streaming local meetings, or access to a community liaison to assist them with clarity in processes. An additional interesting contrast is that 88 percent of telephone respondents said they were more likely to attend a public meeting if a friend personally invited them, compared to 76 percent of online respondents.

Figure 2: Online vs. Telephone Responses (2016 and 2018 Elections)



Next, we combined the two surveys into a single dataset for analysis. Figure 3 highlights the consistent obstacles to community engagement we found. Specifically, respondents were asked, “In just a few words, please explain the most significant barrier for you to make a difference in your community.” We used NVivo, a software package that enables structured analyses of qualitative data. We created a word cloud, in which larger words were more frequently mentioned by respondents. As evidenced, “time,” and “work” appeared most frequently. This supports the notion that individuals spend most of their time working and it prevents them from engaging. This helps explain why less than 20 percent of respondents would travel anywhere in the state to participate in policymaking. Participants noted it was onerous to find opportunities to be involved when they already had work, family and educational commitments. Participants also highlighted the socioeconomic disparities between communities. Several participants voiced concern that the lack of resources in their community, such access to highspeed internet, prevented many of their friends and family from engaging and lowered their interest.

Focus Group Data Analysis

The final component of our research design was to extend our understanding of the survey findings by convening a series of focus groups. Focus groups are an opportunity for participants within similar backgrounds to describe their shared experiences. Focus group recruitment was facilitated through student government organizations and leadership contacts within university-specific Native American organizations. Participants were provided an Amazon gift card for their participation. Three total focus groups were convened – two at the University of Montana and one with Montana State University-Billings – with a total of 13 participants². Appendix III presents the aggregate data, and below we highlight some key overarching sentiments from participants.

Civic Barriers: When asked what prevents community members from becoming civically engaged. Participants referenced barriers to education and a lack of civic literacy, emphasizing the need to ensure all information is easily accessible and can be understood by people with varying levels of education. Somewhat ironically, participants mentioned mail-in-ballots, an intervention specifically designed to ease access, as an example of an overly complicated process. In fact, one participant said she had to read the instructions multiple times and did not know that postage was not required.

Clarity in Processes: Focus group participants expressed concerns about the ability to understand government processes and the clarity of distributed materials. One participant stated, “I feel like a lot of people think that it is so big that they wouldn’t know where to start.” Additionally, when discussing running for office, it was stressed that individuals do not understand the process. One participant stated, “I wouldn’t even know who to talk too to even start figuring it out.”

Cultural Awareness: Native American participants repeatedly stressed the need for civic leaders and organizers to engage people with the appropriate level of cultural awareness. Participants stressed the need to for others to listen to their voices and respect the cultural context on reservations. One participant noted, “You need to show up and talk to me. I don’t care what you send me on paper.” Several participants also noted the important role elders and immediate family members play when making decisions. One participant said, “We’re going to listen to our own people more likely than we’re going to listen to some outsider.” It was clear that participants valued the opinion of those closest to them and were wary of outsiders coming in and demanding attention. Finally, several participants mentioned the long-lasting effects of intergenerational trauma and how it has impacted native communities and their ability to trust others.

Inequities: Focus group participants stressed that not all communities are created equal. Rural and underserved communities face myriad barriers, including a lack of access to information and resources. Participants discussed socioeconomic disparities and how individuals face a number of tradeoffs every day. One participant said, “How are you going to engage when you can’t afford gas? We don’t care about volunteering when we can’t eat.”

² The COVID-19 crisis limited focus group participation.

Another participant said, “There is so much to worry about every day in just surviving that there's not enough time to be worrying about other things like volunteer stuff.”

Political Differences: An additional sentiment presented by participants was their inability to engage in productive political conversations with family. As one person stated, “My family is in Polson, very conservative, and there's a cultural backlash if I differ. So, I don't “like” things in the social media arena because of the backlash that comes from that.”

Conclusion, Recommendations & Future Research

Though the overall findings identify a number of barriers, they also suggest promising opportunities to increase participation in Montana for youth and Native populations. Before delving into opportunities, we address limitations of this research.

In the United States, young voters (18-26 years of age) and Native populations do not consistently engage in public policymaking. As a result, it can be difficult to access, engage, and solicit feedback from youth and Native populations across Montana, a theme echoed by the respondents from each phase. Further, the online survey, distributed through Western Native Voices, garnered a response rate of only 3 percent. Geography, internet and telephone access, and cultural sentiments all limit our ability to meaningfully engage Native populations. Phase II research was conducted shortly before or at the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic shelter-in-place policies. As a result, we posit a higher percentage of respondents may be more willing to cast their ballots through the mail. However, this seemingly positive move toward access could negatively affect Native communities where many have P.O. Box numbers to which ballots cannot be mailed. Additionally, the pandemic prevented the research team from conducting the desired number of focus groups (9-10).

Despite limitations, tangible opportunities exist. We highlight a few from the survey portion of this project.

- ✓ Sixty-nine percent of participants indicated that if **courses on community engagement** were offered by someone they knew in their community, it would make them much more or somewhat more likely to be engaged.
- ✓ Sixty-five percent of respondents would be more likely to engage if their county had a **community engagement liaison** who helped them to find when and where to participate. Those identifying as Native American reported that they would be more likely to engage at higher rates than non-Native respondents to questions about courses on community engagement and community engagement liaisons.
- ✓ More than 70 percent of respondents are more likely to vote if the **State of Montana sent out a voter information guide** for general and primary elections.
- ✓ Eighty percent of respondents noted they would be more likely to vote if a **reminder** was sent prior to an election of the date and location.
- ✓ Sixty-one percent of respondents would be more likely to engage if they had **access to courses** about the roles of elected officials and how government works and offered by someone they know.
- ✓ Eighty-seven percent of respondents indicated they would be more likely to attend a public meeting or legislative hearing if a **friend invited them**.

- ✓ More than sixty percent of respondents indicated that if there were **alternative** ways to participate (such as Facebook live or similar streaming platforms) they would be more likely to participate.
- ✓ Outsiders are ineffective and not trusted in Native communities. Respect, cultural awareness, reciprocity, and humility are principles community organizers should keep in mind when reaching out to Native American communities and where possible, **paid Native organizers should be utilized.**

Figures 5 and 6 below illuminate the potential influence of various interventions on participants' likelihood of voting and engaging in other aspects of the political process.

Figure 5: Activities to Increase Voting

The following are a list of activities that some communities could offer before or during voting. For each, please answer whether it would make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely or much less likely to vote.

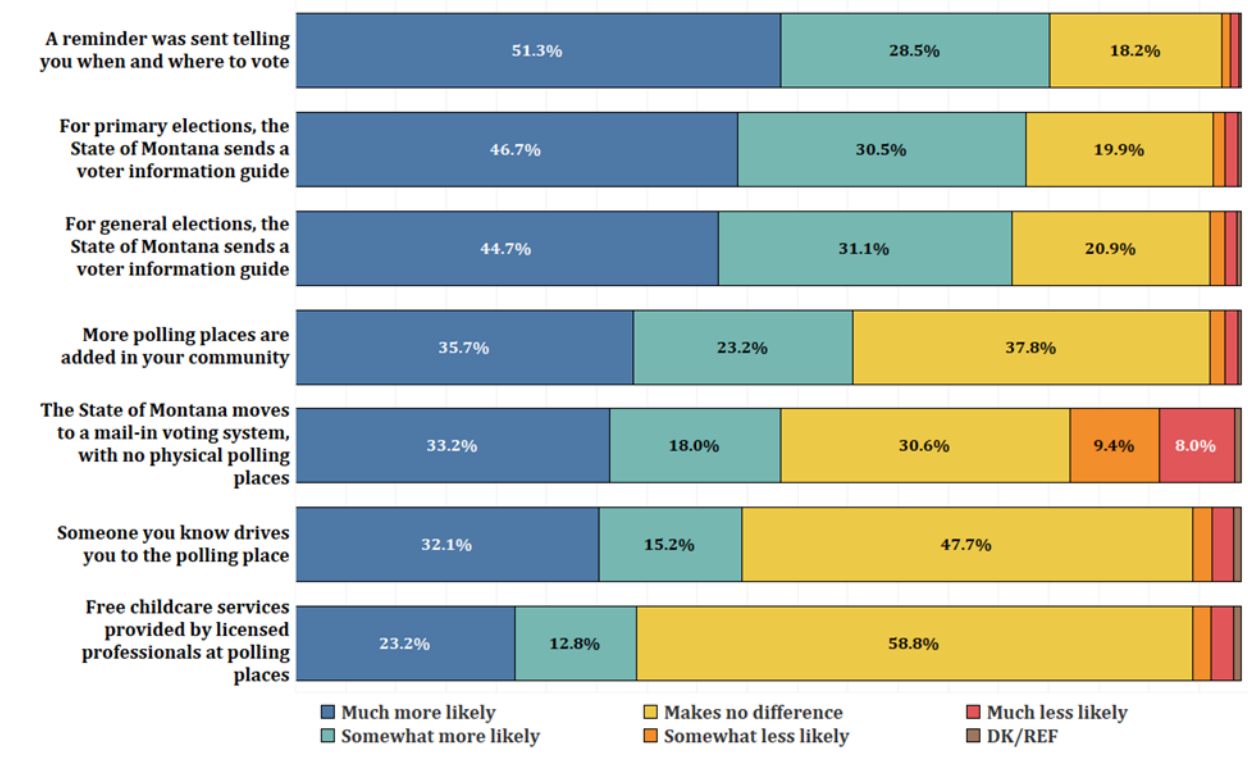
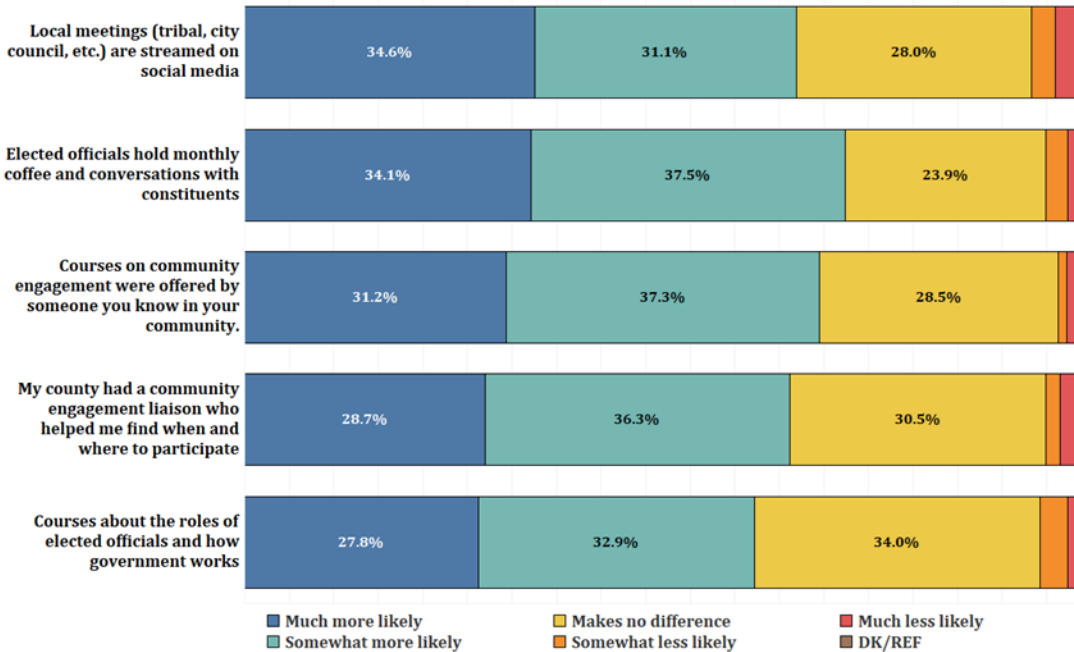


Figure 6: Activities to Increase Participation

The following are a list of activities that some communities could offer. For each, please answer whether it would make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely or much less likely to be engaged in your community.



Our research confirms and extends much of what we already know about the low rates of youth and Native civic engagement in Montana. It also illuminates several promising avenues for future research. In the immediate term, interventions could be developed and tested for their efficacy in increasing voter turnout in the November 2020 election. Our results suggest that reminder calls and a voter information guide would be particularly effective. These sorts of interventions could be stood up rather quickly. Various treatments could be empirically tested.

In the longer term, our findings uncovered several unanswered questions that a more ambitious and extensive research agenda could address. To understand barriers to engagement among Native Americans in Montana, we propose more intimate and humanistic engagement with this community. Expanding the research team to include tribal members is critical. Furthermore, engaging the community over a longer term with conversations aimed at assessing Native people’s view of the legitimacy of US and Montana state authority and power structures. In the current research we admittedly brought to the table a set of assumptions about the legitimacy of predominantly white power structures and systems. Some Native focus group participants indeed pointed out that they are strongly engaged in their tribal governance and choose not participate in state and federal processes. Classifying as unengaged misses the mark. Understanding this reasoning more

completely could uncover pathways for strengthening relationships with the Native community and encourage more enduring forms of engagement. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate on this sort of inquiry.

In conclusion, participants across the data collection consistently noted opportunities to increase engagement. We encourage investment in aforementioned areas, but priority should be placed on removing any physical barriers to voting and community engagement. Mail-in voting systems was a complicated topic, with several focus group participants commenting on the confusing instructions and lack of clarity on what was required to submit your ballot. Also, respondents to the online and telephone surveys indicated mail-in voting systems with no polling places would not increase their voting likelihood. As evidenced by the June 2020 primary, record turnout occurred in Montana. We suspect this result may change due to COVID-19. This is an area the UM Big Sky Poll research team will extend our investigation into Summer 2020 with the remaining grant funds.