

# Mapping Civic Participation Opportunities across Australia

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## Acknowledgements and series note

In early 2024, the Resilient Democracy Data and Research Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. The network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and actionable 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 encouraging the use of these ideas to prompt future research collaborations and actionable policy.

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This report was written on the land of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nations. We pay respect to their elders past and present.



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## Abstract

Civic participation is crucial for maintaining a healthy democracy, and consequently, enhancing civic participation has become a critical concern for policymakers. Existing research predominantly examines how and why individuals participate in civil society, such as through volunteering activities. However, less attention has been given to where and when people have the opportunity to participate, including the geographic distribution of opportunities.

Some data on civic participation opportunities in Australia, specifically opportunities to volunteer, is available through registrations with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC), some is published on non-government organisation (NGO) websites, and some is held in reporting to government and funders. This paper addresses this gap by reconciling publicly available data to map civic participation opportunities across Australia, employing an adapted version of the civic opportunity index originally developed by de Vries et al. (2024). Using a newly constructed data set of approximately 30,000 charities registered with the ACNC, combined with additional data from charity websites, we identify significant regional disparities. We acknowledge significant limitations of this analysis based on available public data, and we seek ongoing collaborations to improve the reliability of the findings.

Based on what we can currently map, with the exception of Queensland, civic volunteering opportunities appear to be predominantly concentrated in Australia's capital cities, highlighting substantial spatial inequalities. At the charity level, we find that charities dedicated to human rights and legal advocacy offer the most extensive opportunities for volunteering, while religious charities tend to offer fewer such opportunities. Comparing the spatial distributions of civic opportunities and charity-run programs, we highlight the methodological shortcomings of mapping civic opportunities based on organisational location rather than where these opportunities are created. Together, these findings enable policymakers to pinpoint 'civic deserts'—areas lacking civic infrastructure—and inform targeted investments and strategies to strengthen democratic resilience and civic participation across Australia.

# 1. Introduction

There is broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that civic participation is both a sign of and essential for fostering a resilient democracy<sup>1</sup>. Civil society is an important source of democratic resilience (Bernhard et al., 2020; Holloway & Manwaring, 2023) because the stronger its commitment to democratic norms and the more active its involvement in democratic processes, ‘the more immune is democracy to external shocks and external challenges’ (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021: 872). Thus, concerns that dissatisfaction and distrust in democratic institutions may lead to disengagement from political processes and broader civil society have intensified policymakers' focus on strategies to enhance civic participation (OECD, 2025; Strengthening Democracy Taskforce, 2024). Researchers have responded by identifying and evaluating programs aimed at fostering civic participation (Link, 2024) and analysing population-wide trends in participation (Cameron, 2025). While these efforts have significantly informed the design of effective civic participation programs and identified target populations, less attention has been given to understanding the geographical distribution and availability of opportunities for civic participation (de Vries et al., 2024). Identifying where civic opportunities exist—and where they do not—is crucial for policymakers at all levels of government to allocate resources and overcome local barriers to participation.

Akin to the now mature literature on food-deserts (Cummins & Macintyre, 2002), areas of low levels of civic opportunities could be described as ‘civic deserts’ (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017). Civic deserts are defined here as ‘places characterized by a dearth of opportunities for civic and political learning and engagement, and without institutions that typically provide opportunities like youth programming, culture and arts organisations and religious congregations’ (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017). The concept of civic deserts was originally derived from survey research with young people aged between 18 and 34 years in the USA. It is based on a subjective measure of self-reported access to a range of resources. In other words, the original measure reflects those young people’s perceptions of what opportunities they have access to rather than an objective measure of the opportunities that are available to them. Such subjective measures can help to identify groups that experience (potentially multiple) barriers to civic participation, and contribute to our understanding of what these barriers are and how to address them. Yet, without knowing what opportunities are available to people, it is not possible to determine whether people cannot participate because there is an actual lack of opportunities to participate, or whether people cannot access the opportunities that are available. In this paper, we contribute to this discussion by presenting a more objective measure of the opportunities that are available to people in their area.

In this discussion paper, we present findings from the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute’s Civic Opportunity project. We have constructed an Australian-specific version of the civic opportunity index (de Vries et al., 2024), using publicly available data from the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) and additional information from charity websites obtained through web-scraping. Our analysis reveals pronounced disparities in civic opportunity distribution, notably concentrated in metropolitan Local Government Areas (LGAs). At the charity level, our research highlights that charities emphasising human rights and legal advocacy were most actively engaged in creating civic participation opportunities, whereas religious charities were generally less active in this regard. These

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, civic participation loosely refers to ways in which people participate in civil society, for example through volunteering, protesting or their involvement in membership-based organisations. We distinguish civic participation from participation in political processes, including governmental citizen engagement or public consultation processes. These are beyond the scope of this paper.

findings underscore the practical value of mapping civic opportunities, enabling government stakeholders to strategically target resources to areas most in need, thus directly addressing barriers to civic participation.

The following sections detail the rationale and theoretical framework underpinning this research, describe our methodological approach, and present findings at both the charity and LGA levels. The paper concludes with a focused discussion on policy implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research and policy action.

## 2. Mapping civic opportunities

The conceptual rationale for measuring civic opportunities is derived from research on the role of organisations in generating social capital (de Vries et al., 2024), specifically in the tradition of Robert D. Putnam. Putnam (2000: 19) defined social capital as ‘[...] social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’<sup>2</sup>. His primary concern was a decline in social capital and its implications for civil society in the USA, rooted in declining civic participation. From this perspective, civic participation is an important contributor to social capital because it is in part through the organisations that people are involved with that social capital is realised as a ‘public good’ (Putnam, 2000: 20). Participation in organisations expands individuals’ social networks, while also benefiting local communities through organisational activities and their contribution to local causes. In other words, organisations can generate social capital by providing opportunities for civic participation.

Traditionally, research on the role of organisations in creating social capital has relied on measures of organisational density (e.g., Chetty et al., 2022; Putnam, 2000; Rupasingha et al., 2006). However, these measures face several limitations. From a conceptual point of view, they measure a particular form of social capital – horizontal associations (Rupasingha et al., 2006) –, which facilitate cooperation by bringing people together as equals (Putnam et al., 1993). While all measures have their own conceptual limitations, organisational density has been shown to be a poor predictor of economic mobility in comparison to other measures of social capital (Chetty et al., 2022). Another limitation is that measures of organisational density can lead to incomplete understandings of civic infrastructure. For example, official databases and registers of organisations may undercount immigrant organisations (Gleeson & Bloemraad, 2013) and small organisations that do not meet registration requirements (Borkowska et al., 2024). Furthermore, organisational density is a static measure that overlooks founding and dissolution dynamics (Clifford, 2018). Finally, organisational density assumes all organisations contribute equally to social capital and civic participation, disregarding differences in their activities or capacities (de Vries et al., 2024).

The concept of civic opportunities represents a shift from measuring the structural presence of organisations towards assessing the opportunities for civic participation that they create for the public. Unlike traditional organisational density measures, which treat every organisation as an equal contributor to social capital regardless of its activities, the civic opportunities approach focuses on how organisations actively invite civic participation. de Vries et al. (2024) define civic opportunities as ‘the opportunities people have to encounter the experiences necessary to cultivate the capacities for collective life in pluralistic societies’. They identify four core activities—events, membership, volunteering, and taking action—that organisations engage in to generate social capital, and which

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of differences in social capital theories, see Portes (1998) and Siisiäinen (2003).

make up the civic opportunity index. Each activity directly engages community members, reflecting an organisation's proactive contribution to civic life:

1. Events facilitate community interaction, knowledge sharing, and mobilisation of support for causes.
2. Membership fosters a sense of community, commitment, and personal investment in the organisation's objectives.
3. Volunteering represents direct civic participation, as it involves individuals dedicating their time and skills to actively further organisational goals.
4. Taking action encompasses advocacy and campaigns, highlighting an organisation's active role in driving societal change by mobilising community participation.

In other words, this approach targets outward-facing practices that directly foster civic capacity. By focusing on organisational activities, the civic opportunity index addresses a key limitation of organisational density metrics: it provides a measure that differentiates organisations based on their potential to generate social capital. Thereby, it improves conceptual validity. The following section details the data sources and methodological steps underpinning the Australian adaptation of this approach. It foregrounds the availability of data sources in the Australian context to measure civic opportunities and highlights our efforts to address key methodological shortcomings.

### 3. Data and methods

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's Civic Opportunity project adapted the methodology developed by de Vries et al. (2024) in their research on civic opportunities in the United States (Wilcox et al., 2024). We used publicly available datasets containing information about charities registered with the ACNC. The ACNC was established in December 2012 under section 105-5 of the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) (ACNC Act) and is the national regulatory body overseeing charities. The Commission decides whether an organisation can be registered as a charity under the ACNC Act and the *Charities Act 2013* (Cth) (ACNC, n.d.). To be registered as a charity, organisations must show that they are not-for-profit, have charitable purposes that are for the public benefit, do not have a disqualifying purpose, and are not an individual, a political party or government agency (ACNC, n.d.).

#### 3.1 Constructing the civic opportunity index

For this research, we combined data from the ACNC's Charity Register (ACNC, 2024b) as well as the Annual Information Statement (AIS) 2021 (ACNC, 2024a) datasets, which we downloaded on 18 March 2024. As the regulatory body overseeing the charity and not-for-profit sector, the ACNC's datasets provide near-universal coverage of all charitable, not-for-profit organisations in Australia<sup>3</sup>. The total number of charities in the merged dataset was 60,061. For the purpose of constructing the civic opportunity index, 29,241 charities were excluded that:

1. were not active in Australia

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<sup>3</sup> Charities may apply to the ACNC to have some or all of the information they provide withheld from the ACNC Register (ACNC, 2023). All data from such charities are excluded from the public-access dataset (ACNC, 2024b). In the datasets used in this research, information about 1,854 charities was withheld.

2. were not registered with the ACNC
3. did not conduct activities
4. did not provide a website or for which a URL look-up using Bing failed
5. provided a social media URL that could not be parsed.

The analysis of civic opportunities in Australia presented in this paper is based on the remaining 30,820 charities.

The construction of the civic opportunity index follows two steps. The first step was to identify which of the four activities that can generate social capital – events, membership, volunteering, and taking action – a charity offers<sup>4</sup>. To do so, we collected information from charities' websites using a similar approach to de Vries et al. (2024). A web scraper was used to request the content of a charity's website. For each civic activity, string detection was then used to assess whether any of the charity's website links indicate that the charity offers that activity based on matching rules for a list of words and phrases. Our matching rules expanded de Vries et al.'s (2024) original list to adapt it to the Australian context (see Table A1). Our findings indicate that our expanded matching rules may better identify opportunities for advocacy and taking action (see Figure 1). For each charity, a civic activity was coded as 1 if it had been detected and as 0 otherwise. Because of access errors (e.g. connection time-outs, bad gateways, etc.), we were unable to collect information about the civic activities of 2,295 charities. We excluded these charities from the analyses presented in this paper; a total of 28,525 charities were included.

The second step is to map the charities to a geographical area and aggregate their civic activities. In circumstances where a charity's address did not map neatly to a single LGA, it was assigned to the LGA with the largest share of the population. We mapped charities to the 2022 boundaries of Local Government Areas (LGAs) using ABS Australian Standard Geographical Standard correspondence files to ensure that our analyses were relevant to a range of stakeholders, including from government. We could not map 4,767 charities due to incomplete address data. Following the mapping, we calculated the civic opportunity index score for each LGA. First, we calculated the mean number of civic activities for each charity. Then, we summed up the civic activities scores of all charities in an LGA and divided the sum by its Estimated Resident Population (ERP) at the 2021 Census. For scaling purposes, we multiplied the result by 1,000 to arrive at the final civic opportunity index score. More formally, following de Vries et al. (2024) approach of normalising by population, we calculated the civic opportunity (*civic\_opportunity\_avg*) within the  $k$ th LGA as follows:

$$civic\_opportunity\_avg_k = 1000 \times \frac{\sum_{j=1}^J (\sum_i opportunity_{ijk} / 4)}{N_k}$$

where  $opportunity_{ijk}$  are the  $i = 1,2,3,4$  civic opportunities measured (events, membership, volunteering, and taking action), coded as 0 if the activity detected, 1 if an activity was detected, in the  $j$ th charity (where  $j = 1,2, \dots, J$ ), and  $N_k$  is the population size of the  $k$ th LGA (i.e. the Estimated Resident Population at the Census 2021). Finally, we divided LGAs into five equal-sized quintiles based

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<sup>4</sup> These specific activities were selected for their ability to directly measure active civic participation. In contrast, activities such as donations, newsletters, and press releases, while valuable for organisational support and information dissemination, do not inherently reflect direct civic involvement and participation (Wilcox et al., 2024).

on their civic opportunity index score<sup>5</sup>. In total, we mapped the civic opportunity index scores of 473 LGAs out of a total of 547 in-scope LGAs<sup>6</sup>. We were unable to calculate civic opportunity index scores for 71 LGAs because we could not map any in-scope charities to these LGAs, and for a further three LGAs because all in-scope charities registered in these LGAs were excluded from analysis because of access and other technical errors (see above).

### 3.2 Mapping charity-run programs

One of the key methodological shortcomings of the approach to measuring civic opportunities by de Vries et al. (2024) is that it is based on the location of the organisational head office that offers civic opportunities rather than where the civic opportunities are being offered. As part of their Annual Information Statement reporting process, charities can submit information on up to ten of their programs and specify up to ten locations for each program (see ACNC (2025b) for more information about data availability). We obtained information about the programs run by charities registered with the ACNC and their locations from the 2023 Annual Information Statement program dataset (ACNC, 2025a), which we downloaded on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2025. Based on program location data, we mapped charity-run programs to the 2022 boundaries of Local Government Areas and created a per-capita measure that measures the number of programs per 1,000 people of the ERP at the 2021 Census. To ensure consistency, we only included programs run by charities that were registered with the ACNC both in the AIS 2023 program dataset and the ACNC dataset (ACNC 2024a) used for the construction of the civic opportunity index.

### 3.3 Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeds in two parts. In the first part, we will analyse differences in civic opportunity provision at the charity level, focussing on differences across charities' charitable purposes and beneficiaries. In the second part, we will analyse spatial patterns in the distribution of civic opportunities across Australia. For these analyses, we will explore differences across metropolitan and non-metropolitan LGAs based on the ABS Greater Capital City Statistical Areas (GCCSA) classification as well as correlations of the civic opportunity index with the following variables:

- **number of registered charities per capita:** The number of charities registered with the ACNC in our ACNC dataset in an LGA per 1,000 people of the ERP at the 2021 Census
- **total number of businesses per capita:** The total number of businesses (as of 2024) in an LGA per 1,000 people of the ERP at the 2021 Census
- **proportion of people born overseas:** The proportion of people born outside of Australia of the ERP at the 2021 Census
- **proportion of people with tertiary education:** The proportion of people who had completed a bachelor's degree, graduate certificate or diploma, or a postgraduate degree of the ERP at the 2021 Census.

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<sup>5</sup> We also considered the approach to divide the LGAs into quintiles based on the distribution of cumulative percentages. However, we deemed group sizes for the top quintiles too small for the purposes of this analysis.

<sup>6</sup> The total number of LGAs in Australia is 566. Nineteen of these were not in scope for this project because they are not part of legally designated LGAs, for example, "No usual address (NSW)" (ABS, 2021). Although not presented in this paper, mapping charities currently registered with the ACNC in our dataset would have covered 502 LGAs.

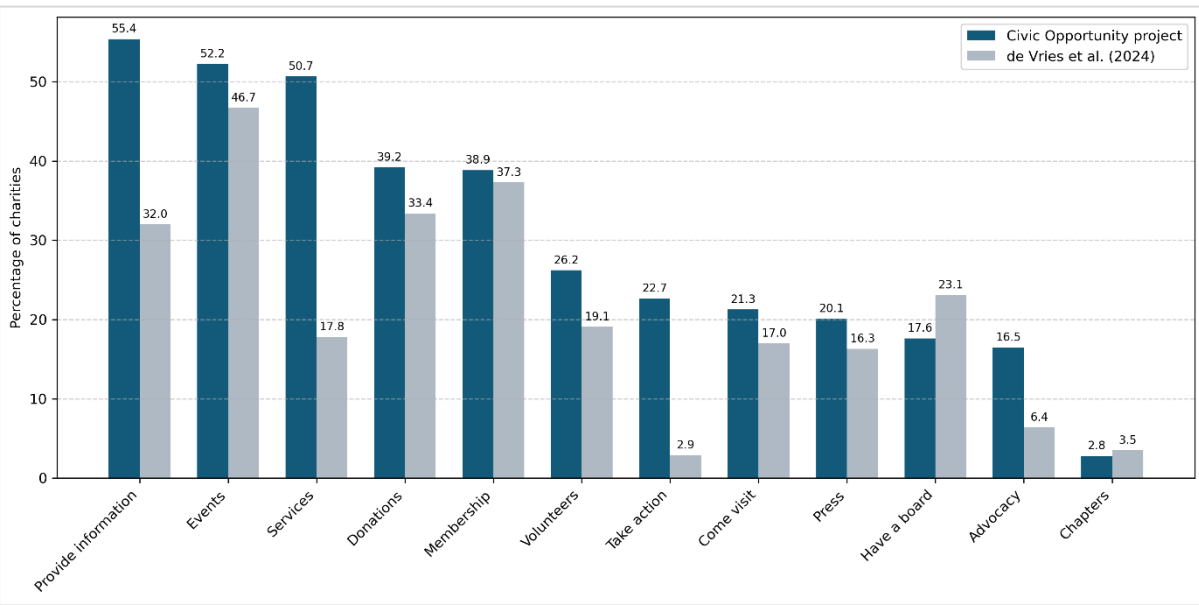


With the exception of total number of businesses per capita, variables were aggregated at 2022 LGA boundaries<sup>7</sup>.

## 4. Findings

Our distribution of civic activities differed from that in de Vries et al.'s (2024) study (see Figure 1). Proportionately, more Australian than US-based charities provided information, offered services, and opportunities to take action or to engage in advocacy. However, fewer Australian charities were governed by a board of directors. In terms of the activities that make up the civic opportunity index – membership, volunteers, advocacy and 'take action' – the differences between charities in our sample and in de Vries et al.'s (2024) study were small for membership and volunteering. About 17% of Australian charities offered opportunities for advocacy compared to 6% of US-based charities. The differences were largest for the activity of taking action. About 23% of Australian charities offered opportunities for people to take action compared to 3% of US-American charities. These differences may be in part the result of our amended matching rules and other methodological differences from de Vries et al.'s (2024) research. However, particularly in the case of taking action, they may reflect differences in organisational activities between Australia and the USA.

Figure 1: Comparison of distributions of civic activities



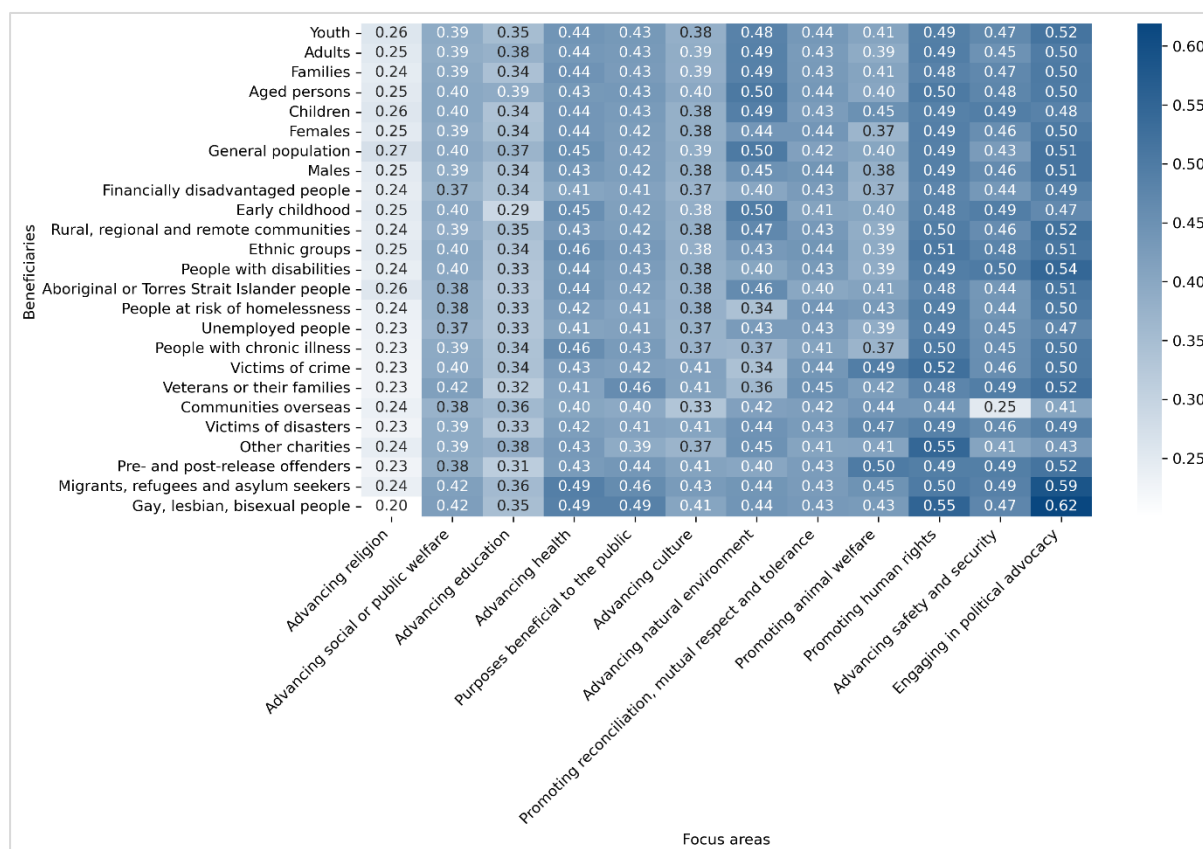
Note: Provide information combines the 'newsletter' and 'resources' categories. Comparisons of proportions are not like-for-like because of differences in matching rules and other methodological differences (see 3. Data & Methods).

We observed differences in the average number of civic activities across charity focus areas (Figure 2). We calculated mean civic activity as the average of the sum of the four civic activities that make up the civic opportunity index. Mean civic activity can vary between 0 (if a charity does not offer any of the four activities that make up the civic opportunity index) and 1 (if a charity offers all four activities). Charities dedicated to the most common charitable purpose, advancing religion, on average offered the lowest number of any of the four civic activities. In comparison, charities that seek to promote

<sup>7</sup> Data for total number of businesses at the LGA level is only available for 2021 boundaries. However, there was only one minor change to the LGA boundaries between 2021 and 2022, with the boundary of Palmerston expanding to include part of the Unincorporated NT area (ABS, 2021).

human rights, advance safety and security or engage in political reform processes – the three least common charitable purposes in our dataset – on average offered a higher number of the four civic activities. In contrast to focus areas, there were no clear differences in the mean civic activity of charities across beneficiaries. However, there were certain combinations of beneficiaries and focus areas that showed higher mean civic activity scores. For example, charities dedicated to advancing health for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and for gay, lesbian and bisexual people on average offered a higher number of civic activities than those advancing health for other groups. Similarly, charities advancing the natural environment and whose beneficiaries are defined in terms of age had a higher mean civic activity score than charities advancing the natural environment for the benefit of other beneficiary groups.

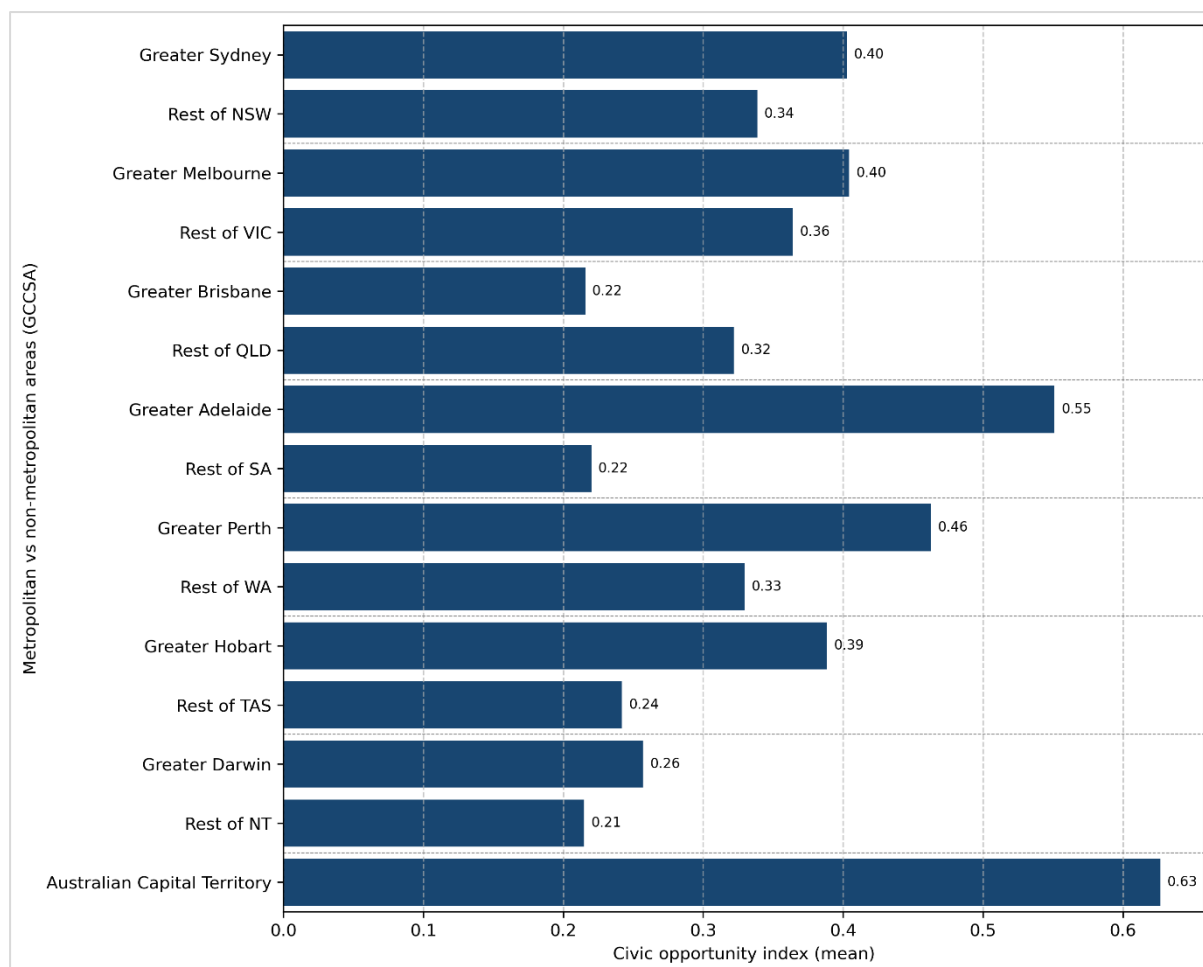
Figure 2: Mean civic activity by charity focus areas and beneficiaries



Note: Mean civic activity is the average of the number of civic activities Beneficiaries and focus areas are shown in descending order of their observed count from top to bottom and left to right, respectively.

Our mapping of civic opportunities across Australia showed a concentration of civic opportunities in metropolitan areas (Figure 3). Local Government Areas in the Australian Capital Territory had, on average, the highest civic opportunity index score. With the exception of LGAs in Greater Brisbane, metropolitan LGAs on average had a higher civic opportunity index score than non-metropolitan LGAs across Australia's states and territories. While the LGA of Brisbane had the largest number of charities offering civic opportunities, the LGA of Adelaide had the highest civic opportunity index score (4.82). In large part because of the LGA of Adelaide, differences in civic opportunities between metropolitan and non-metropolitan LGAs were particularly pronounced in South Australia. In Tasmania, civic opportunities were also noticeably more common on average in LGAs in Greater Hobart than in non-metropolitan LGAs.

Figure 3: Average civic opportunity index scores across metropolitan and non-metropolitan LGAs



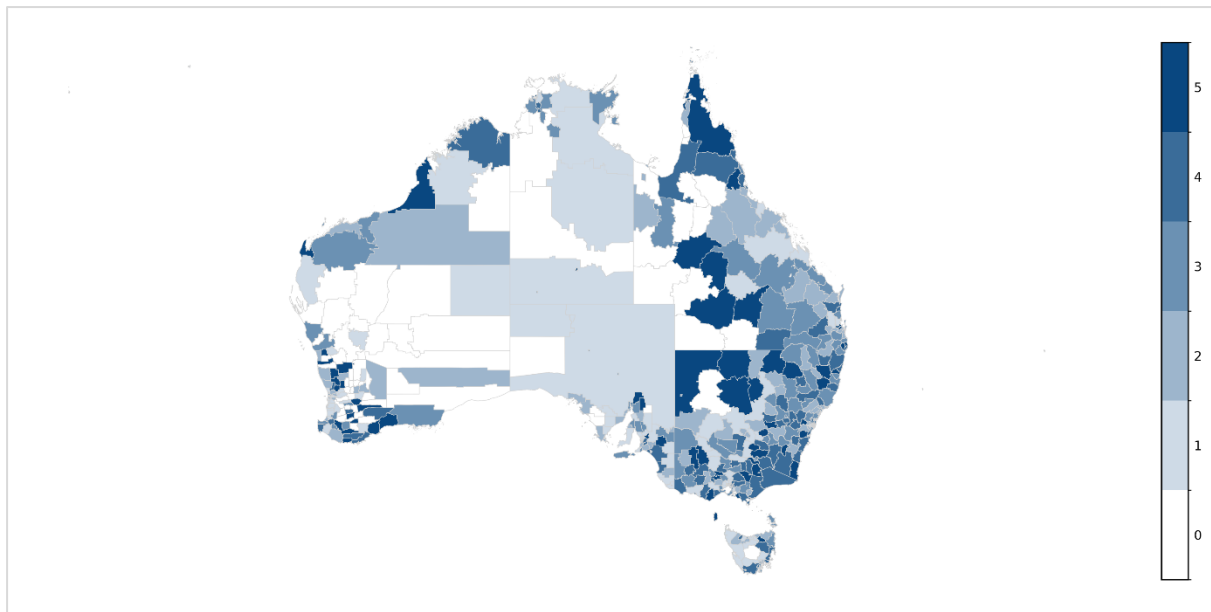
Mapping civic opportunities across Australia highlighted ‘civic deserts’ (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017), particularly in remote areas of central Australia (Figure 4). Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory in particular had a low degree of coverage, as indicated by the proportion of LGAs without civic opportunity index scores. In contrast, coverage of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania was high. Furthermore, we observed (clusters of) LGAs with high civic opportunity scores in

- far north and south-west Queensland (e.g., Cook and around Quilpie, respectively),
- central New South Wales (e.g., around Cobar),
- northeast of Perth (e.g., around Victoria Plains) and in southern Western Australia (e.g., around Cranbrook),
- as well as north of Adelaide (e.g., around Flinders Ranges Council).

To a large extent, these clusters could be explained by a relatively high number of in-scope charities alongside relatively small populations in those LGAs.

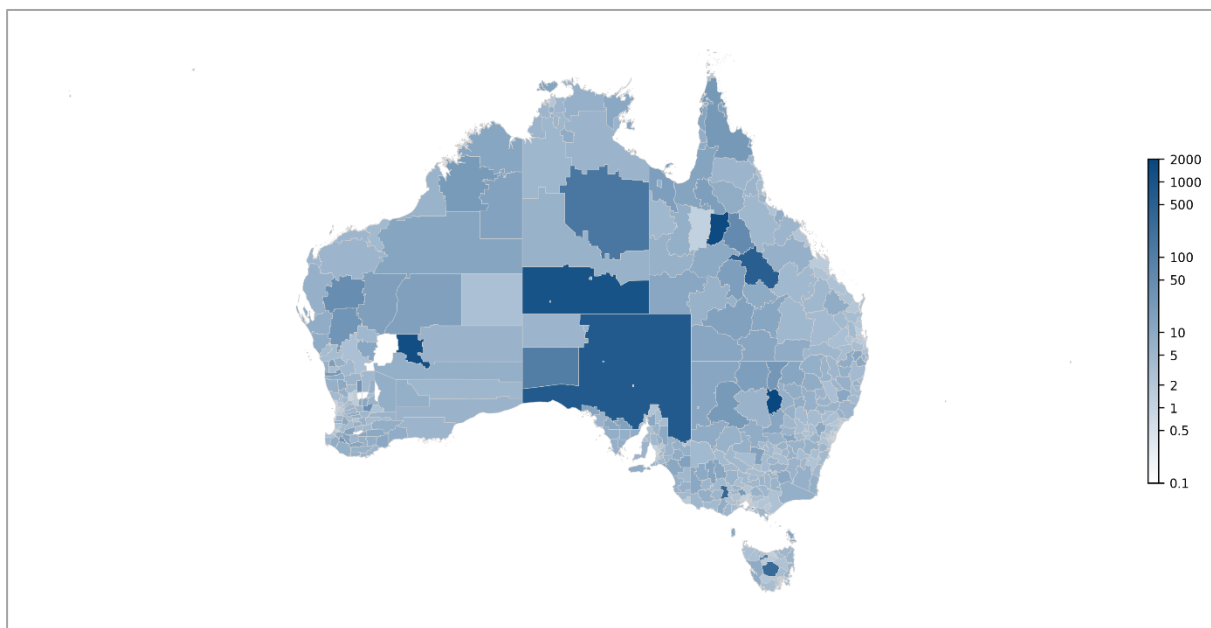
To assess the validity of the civic opportunity index, we also mapped the locations of charity-run programs across Australia (see Figure 5). Mapping program locations showed that many of the ‘civic deserts’ identified in Figure 4 had some of the highest rates of charity-run programs per capita, especially in central Australia. There were only five in-scope LGAs without any charity-run programs, all of them in Western Australia: Sandstone, Trayning, Westonia, Woodanilling and Wyalkatchem.

Figure 4: Map of civic opportunity index quintiles across Australia



Note: White areas represent Local Government Areas for which a civic opportunity index score could not be calculated.

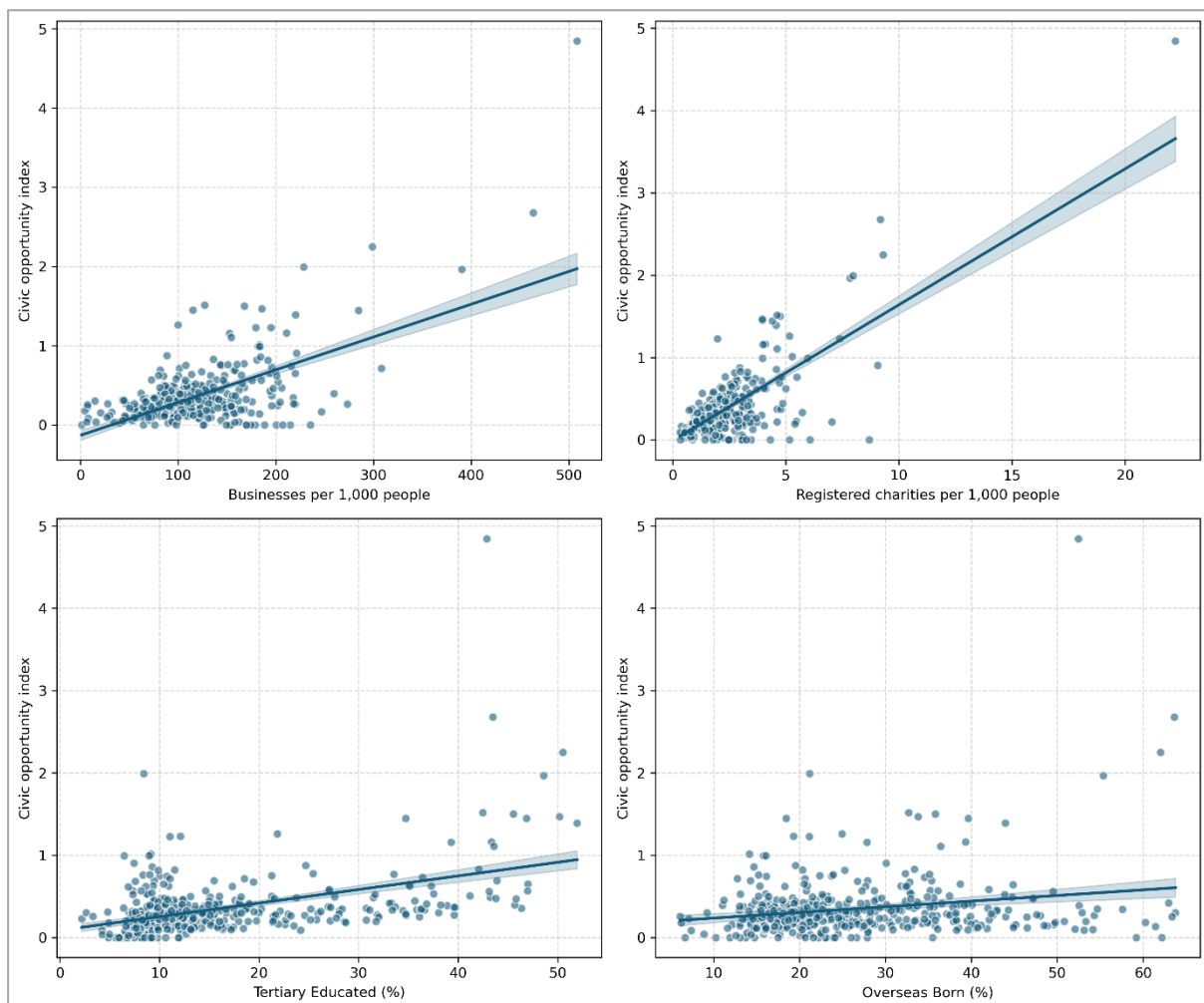
Figure 5: Map of charity-run programs per 1,000 people across Australia (log-scaled)



Mapping charity-run programs complements the civic opportunity index by showing how opportunities may extend beyond where charities are headquartered. As Figures 4 and 5 illustrate, some Local Government Areas (LGAs) that appear lower on the index nonetheless benefit from program delivery by charities based elsewhere. While we do not yet have a way to measure the scale of civic opportunities generated through these programs, combining both perspectives provides a richer understanding of where civic participation is fostered. For policymakers, this means the index can highlight areas with lower measured opportunities, while program mapping helps identify where charities are already investing to strengthen social, health, or economic outcomes—and where additional support could expand civic infrastructure further.

Finally, we tested to what extent civic opportunities correlated with the number of registered charities, the total number of business as well as, following de Vries et al. (2024), the proportions of tertiary educated and overseas-born people in an LGA (see Figure 6)<sup>8</sup>. There was a moderate positive correlation between the civic opportunity index and the total number of businesses per capita ( $r=0.60$ ), and a strong positive correlation with the number of registered charities per capita ( $r=0.74$ ). While this suggests that the civic opportunity index may measure something other than the locations of charity offices, the strength of the correlation with registered charities per capita indicates that future research should develop a measure based on the locations where charities offer opportunities for civic participation. Civic opportunities were more common in areas with a higher proportion of tertiary-educated people among the population ( $r=0.43$ ). In contrast to findings by de Vries et al. (2024), there were more civic opportunities in areas with a higher proportion of overseas-born people among the population, although the correlation was weak ( $r=0.22$ ).

Figure 6: Correlates of the civic opportunity index



## 5. Discussion

In this paper, we presented a mapping of civic opportunities across Australia, adapting the methodology from similar research by de Vries et al. (2024). Utilising publicly available data from the

<sup>8</sup> de Vries et al. (2024) used the proportion of non-Hispanic white people among the population.

Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) alongside charity websites, we recreated and contextualised the civic opportunity index originally applied in the US. Compared to the US-based findings, Australian charities more frequently emphasised service provision. Australian charities were also notably more active in advocacy and taking action, though methodological variations may partially explain these differences. Nonetheless, our findings underscore the importance of verifying the original civic opportunity index's validity within the Australian context. This is particularly the case because areas identified as 'civic deserts' based on the civic opportunity index were the location of charity-run programs. While these programs may not create civic opportunities, the differences between the spatial distributions of civic opportunities and charity-run programs illustrate a fundamental methodological issue of mapping civic opportunities based on the locations of the organisations that offer them rather than where the opportunities are actually created.

At the charity level, we identified significant differences in civic opportunity provision among various types of charities. Despite being the most prevalent, religious charities typically offered fewer civic opportunities. Conversely, charities focusing on human rights, promoting safety and security, or engaging in political reform processes provided the highest levels of civic activities, irrespective of their beneficiary groups. Future research could beneficially examine how charity-specific characteristics, such as revenue, staffing, and other operational metrics, influence civic opportunity provision. Insights from this research could directly inform targeted governmental support and resource allocation.

Our results reveal pronounced geographic inequalities, particularly favouring metropolitan regions. Substantial portions of Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory lacked sufficient data to compute civic opportunity index scores because of a lack of charities within the scope of this project. This scarcity could reflect limited resources among charities in those areas, manifesting as insufficient online presence or inadequate updates to online platforms. Moreover, because our index is based on charities' registered addresses, it potentially overlooks actual locations of civic opportunity delivery, highlighting a key methodological limitation.

These regional disparities point to structural barriers that restrict civic participation opportunities in rural and remote areas. Policymakers at all levels of government could address these gaps through targeted funding, infrastructural investments, and support initiatives directed specifically toward identified civic deserts, noting that future versions of the index could provide more comprehensive information on civic opportunity delivery. Additionally, enhancing data collection to incorporate the actual locations of organisational activities would significantly improve the precision and applicability of future civic opportunity mappings. Expanding data sources to include a broader array of community organisations beyond ACNC-registered charities, along with integrating datasets from governmental and non-governmental sources, would further enhance the relevance, accuracy, and actionable utility of this civic opportunity mapping approach.

## 6. Recommendations

- The strength of the approach to mapping civic opportunities presented in this paper is that it uses information that is publicly available—an organisational address and internet presence. However, one of the main limitations of accurately mapping civic opportunities across Australia is the lack of availability of comprehensive organisational datasets. Government agencies and statutory bodies that already hold data on specific organisation types—such as the Australian Sports Commission for sporting clubs—or government-funded programs delivered by external organisations—in the form of government contracts portals—should assess the feasibility of making parts of these datasets publicly available. Specifically, the

availability of comprehensive information about programs, including their location, needs to be improved to overcome methodological shortcomings of the current approach based on organisational address. Further collaboration with NGO data networks could further standardise or discover data on volunteering opportunities not currently shared on websites. Doing so would fill critical data gaps and enable more comprehensive and accurate mapping of civic opportunities.

- The civic opportunity index in its current form focuses on opportunities for civic participation generated by non-governmental organisations. Future versions of the index could incorporate information about the activities of government agencies across all levels of government to provide a more comprehensive indicator of what opportunities people have available to them, what these opportunities are and who is providing those opportunities.
- The approach to mapping civic opportunities developed by de Vries et al. (2024) provides an additional perspective on civic participation in Australia beyond population-wide trends and patterns (Cameron, 2025). Information on the spatial distribution of civic opportunities could be used by researchers and policymakers in various ways. First, the civic opportunity index could be used to identify contextual factors that influence how people participate in civil society, including local barriers to participation. For example, the civic opportunity index could be linked to measures of democratic resilience at the LGA and other geographical levels. Second, future research could combine information about the spatial distribution of civic opportunities with survey and other individual-level data to look at individual outcomes as a function of civic opportunities, including to test the theoretical claim that civic opportunities foster the individual dispositions required to live in pluralistic societies (de Vries et al., 2024). Third, the civic opportunity index could be used as an outcome variable in trials and evaluations to assess the effectiveness of interventions and programs aiming to improve civic infrastructure and participation. Along similar lines, future government grants to community groups, specifically those in geographic areas with low civic opportunity index scores, could include funding or outcome goals for civic participation. Fourth, governments could consider the civic opportunity index in the design and implementation of place-based initiatives, such as the Department of Social Services' *Stronger Places, Stronger People* initiative.
- To underscore the importance of civic infrastructure to Australia's democracy, the civic opportunity index could be incorporated into the federal *Measuring What Matters* framework.
- To strengthen and validate these findings, further collaboration across the Resilient Democracy Research and Data Network is recommended. This should include methodological reviews as well as engagement with Australian registered charities to identify additional data on volunteering programs not currently reported publicly. Working together, these groups and government agencies could identify ways to embed civic participation opportunities more broadly across service and program types.



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## Appendix

Table A1: Search terms used to detect organisational civic activities

Activity	Description	Revised search term
<b>donations</b>	Indicates presence of donation opportunities or requests	"donat(e ion)", "contribut(e ion)", "financial support", "support (us our cause)"
<b>events</b>	References to scheduled events, meetings, or calendars	"event(s)?", "calendar", "meeting(s)?", "seminar(s)?", "workshop(s)?", "conference(s)?", "fundraise?"
<b>membership</b>	Involvement or membership opportunities mentioned	"(?<![a-zA-Z])join", "member(ship)?", "sign up", "enroll", "registr(ation y)", "become a member"
<b>newsletter</b>	Presence of newsletters or bulletins for updates	"newsletter", "bulletin", "subscribe", "news update", "mailing list"
<b>volunteer</b>	Opportunities to volunteer or get involved with the organisation	"volunteer(ing)?", "get involved", "participate", "help out", "volunteering opportunities"
<b>chapters</b>	Mention of local or regional chapters or branches	"chapter(s)?", "branch(es)?", "local unit(s)?", "regional office(s)?"
<b>services</b>	Services offered by the organisation for community or members	"service(s)?", "get help", "support services", "assist(ance)?", "aid", "program(?)"
<b>take action</b>	Calls to action for justice, social change, or involvement in campaigns	"take action", "get involved", "campaign(s)?", "advocat(e ing)", "make a difference"
<b>advocacy</b>	Activities related to legislation, elections, endorsements, campaigns, issues, or petitions	"advocacy", "campaign(s)?", "petition(s)?", "raise awareness", "lobby(ing)?", "parliament", "MP", "senat?"
<b>visit</b>	Invitations or information for visiting the organisation's location	"visit (us)?", "location", "office", "headquarters", "come see"
<b>resources</b>	Educational or informational resources provided by the organisation	"resource(s)?", "educat(ion ional)?", "publication(s)?", "learning (materials)?", "report(s)?", "guide(s)?"
<b>board</b>	Information or mentions of the organisation's board	"board of directors", "governance", "committee(s)?", "trustee(s)?"
<b>press</b>	Press releases, media mentions, or social media activities	"press release(s)?", "media", "in the news", "announcement(s)?", "public relation(s)?", "(?<![a-zA-Z])press, "(?<!social(.?))media"